

Democratization in the 21st Century: What Can the United States Do?

by Arthur A. Goldsmith

The Winter/Spring 2005 issue of this journal was devoted to “Democratization in the 21st Century” in which the general consensus was that the United States should assist the unfolding worldwide trend toward democracy. The president of the National Endowment for Democracy, Carl Gershman argued, “that it is appropriate and desirable for the United States to provide moral, political, technical, and financial support to people who are striving to achieve democracy.”¹ Furthermore, Alan W. Dowd of the Sagamore Institute for Policy Research wrote of “America’s unique role” in the world and its “natural inclination to promote free government.”² Although the United States seems encouraged to promote democracy worldwide, left largely unsaid by many are the specific means available to the United States for promoting democracy. Transitions from authoritarian rule are driven by internal forces, and the United States should not take for granted that an external actor may not be capable of significantly influencing internal forces within another state. How large an influence the United States can have is an empirical question. The democratization forum in the *Whitehead Journal* mostly cited small-N case studies, but these studies have contrary implications depending on the cases one selects.³ Large-N quantitative studies paint a generally more pessimistic picture of externally generated democracy. Had the large-N literature been consulted, the democratization forum might have paid greater attention to the practical difficulty of changing repressive states from the outside-in.

This essay synthesizes the latest cross-national academic research to highlight how problematic it is for one country to promote open government in another country. It needs to be understood, however, that although the evidence challenges naïve, favorable assumptions, this article is not implying the international community should reject all efforts to promote democracy as futile or counterproductive. Certain external activities may prove effective where conditions are ripe, but the data suggest we keep our expectations modest and be prepared to learn from setbacks.

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UNIVERSAL DEMOCRACY?

Democracy exists in many varieties. At the most general level, it is a form of government characterized by participation and contestation. Citizens take part in selecting their rulers, and rulers periodically vie for support from the majority of citizens. For participation and contestation to last and produce a workable government, they must be tempered by the right institutions. As stated by one of the world's leading democratic theorists, Yale University's Robert Dahl, essential institutional guarantees include: the freedom to form and join organizations; freedom of expression; the right to vote; the right to run for office; freedom of political leaders to compete for votes; alternative sources of information; free and fair elections; and dependence of government on votes and other expressions of society's preferences.⁴

According to Freedom House, a think tank that monitors democracy around the world, systems that approximate Dahl's criteria are now the prevailing form of government, which Freedom House classifies as an electoral democracy. In 2006, 123 countries, representing nearly two-thirds of the world's countries, were categorized as electoral democracies.⁵

While elections reveal an important aspect about democratization, they are not the final determinant. The most important piece of additional information is whether the political system guarantees civil liberties and protects individuals by law against unwarranted government interference. Freedom House counts only ninety countries as "free" in 2006, with high degrees of both political rights *and* civil liberties.⁶ This is still a large numerical increase over earlier decades. It is likely the ranks of free nation states will continue to grow, if Stanford University's Larry Diamond is correct.⁷

Allowing that universal democracy and the rule of law may be inevitable over the long run, the question arises whether or not the United States and its allies have the capability for accelerating or consolidating that trend. Four overlapping approaches to democracy promotion will be considered in this respect: a) using military intervention to install a democratic regime; b) applying economic sanctions to compel democratic reforms; c) offering financial and military aid in exchange for democratic concessions; and d) employing targeted technical assistance to help a state implement democratic practices.

MILITARY INTERVENTIONS

Alan Dowd argued, in the Winter/Spring 2005 issue of this journal, that democratic transitions often begin with the threat or application of force.⁸ Conversely, The University of Aalborg's Trine Flockhart wrote that force rarely works.⁹ The following cross-national data confirm her doubts.

In a recent paper from the International Peace Research Institute in Oslo, a large number of military interventions between 1960 and 1996 were investigated. These were defined as the purposeful dispatch of national military personnel into another

sovereign state. Not every dispatch of military personnel the study considered was meant specifically to promote democracy, but many of them might have had this unintended effect nevertheless. Whatever the objectives, military interventions often did initially result in democratization in the target countries. Unfortunately, the target countries later tended to deteriorate into unstable semi-democracies. The Norwegian team concluded that forced democratization is a very unsure path to political freedom and self-determination.¹⁰

Other Norway-based researchers concur that democracies imposed by outsiders are by and large unstable regimes that do not last long. The results of panel analyses (covering the period 1946 to 1996) indicated that military interventions did have a positive effect on democratization in target states. However, if the intervention caused military defeat, the successor regime was markedly less likely to survive, all other things being equal. The implication is that major military interventions are so politically destabilizing they counteract democratic progress.¹¹

A different study by American political scientists Jeffrey Pickering and Mark Peceny confirms the Norwegian researchers' conclusions concerning unilateral military interventions. Pickering and Peceny's multivariate analysis of over 200 events involving the United States, Britain, France, and the United Nations since the Second World War, found little evidence that interventions by democratic nation-states help foster democracy. While a few countries have become more participatory and inclusive following hostile US military interventions, the small number of cases makes it difficult to draw conclusions. Pickering and Peceny found some evidence, however, that interventions involving the UN may have a favorable impact on democratization, possibly due to the fact that the UN often engages in peacekeeping missions at the request of the warring parties themselves.¹²

Thus, the consensus is that "democracy at gunpoint" may produce temporary regime improvements, but it usually lacks lasting positive effects; unilateral interventions fare the worst. Part of the reason is the inherent conflict between the interests of the intervening power and the stake the local population has in self-rule. To freeze out uncooperative political actors, the intervening power may try to manipulate post-conflict politics, obtaining the "right" results but sacrificing freedom of choice and democratic means. Such regimes are likely to be illegitimate and transitory.

ECONOMIC SANCTIONS

Even when "democracy at gunpoint" does work, it is costly. An apparently less expensive alternative may be to impose international trade and finance restrictions on the target country. Economic sanctions also have the advantage of being popular with domestic constituencies in the source country—certain business groups excepted. The problem is, sanctions do not appear to have any better results than military interventions do.

The most comprehensive and widely cited report on economic sanctions is sponsored by the Peterson Institute for International Economics, now in its third

edition.¹³ Of all cases examined starting in World War I, only about one third were judged to be even partly successful. These cases included multilateral sanctions and unilateral embargos and boycotts by the United States and other countries, aimed at a variety of economic and political objectives. Unilateral pressure had the worst record of success. Only one in ten US sanctions were deemed to have succeeded in the 1990s.

Since many cases in the Peterson Institute dataset had little to do with democratization per se, the sanctions (ending no earlier than 1972, when the Freedom House time series began) where the policy goal was listed specifically as achieving democracy, human rights, destabilization of a dictatorship, or a similar political objective, were separated for this essay. According to this count, there were sixty-seven democratically oriented sanctions imposed through 2006 (combining overlapping and concurrent incidents). Sixteen of these sanctions are ongoing or too recently finished to evaluate. Of the remaining cases, only thirteen of the target countries remained democratic (that is, rated “free” by Freedom House) five years after the end of the sanctions. Moreover, most of the newly democratic target countries had already been ranked “partly free” at the time the sanctions were imposed. The success rate in pressuring “not free” countries to become democratic is even lower.

However, economic sanctions may be more effective if they are evaluated from a regional perspective, according to Nikolay Marinov, a junior faculty member at Yale University. Working with a different cross-section time-series dataset of 137 countries observed between 1977 and 2000, Marinov finds greater democratization in regions (such as Eastern Europe) where the international community has been more willing to apply economic pressure for achieving democracy. As autocratic states in a given region are subjected to greater outside pressure, the likelihood of an individual country moving toward an open government increases. This correlation holds true even after controlling for national income, prior experience with democracy, and other factors.¹⁴ Of course, there could be reverse causality; rather than region-wide economic sanctions producing reform, countries might be more willing to impose economic sanctions in regions that have the most promising environment for political reform. It is notable that neither sanctions nor democratization are common in the Middle East and North Africa, precisely the areas where dictatorship is of greatest strategic concern.

FOREIGN AID

To different degrees, both military intervention and economic sanctions are hostile actions. A more cooperative approach is to induce dictatorial regimes to change, using development aid as the enticing factor. Foreign aid potentially hastens democratization through aid conditionality by rewarding a dictator who undertakes government reforms, but whether or not leaders are persuaded ultimately depends on the value of the aid to the recipient.

Developing countries received some \$87.3 billion in official development

assistance in 2004, as indicated by World Bank figures; however, the distribution of aid varies widely. Among Muslim countries, for instance, only 4 recipient states received more than \$100 in aid per capita in 2004 (excluding Afghanistan and Iraq, for which the per capita numbers are not available). At the other end of the distribution, 10 Muslim nations received less than \$5 in aid per capita in 2004. Viewed as a percent of gross national income, the amounts also diverge from a high of 37 percent in Afghanistan to under 1 percent in twelve countries.¹⁵ The huge disparities in development assistance suggest that aid offers little leverage in many nations.

Military interventions and economic pressure offer bleak prospects for democratization.

Considering countries that do receive significant development assistance, it remains doubtful that even large volumes of aid positively affect their political evolution. Stephen Knack, an economist with the World Bank, performed a multivariate analysis of aid's impact on political change in a large sample of recipient nations over 1975–2000. He found no support for the proposition that aid promotes democracy.¹⁶ Using alternative data for 108 recipient countries from 1960 to 1999, other World Bank researchers concluded that foreign aid has a negative impact on democracy.¹⁷

Could military assistance and arms agreements, as opposed to financial and economic aid, be an effective means for rewarding democratic reformers? The University of Arizona's Edward Muller looked at this question in a study published twenty years ago. Using a time-lagged linear regression, he found that US military aid has a *detrimental* effect on democratic transitions.¹⁸ A more recent paper by Shannon Lindsey Blanton of the University of Memphis indicates the situation has not changed over the years. Employing a pooled time-series cross-sectional design, she examined the patterns of arms acquisitions behavior for 1981 through 1995 and found that arms imports are significantly and negatively related to democracy. Blanton suggests that in many developing countries, arms imports strengthen the military's capacity for using force and enhance its political position in relation to civilian authorities. As a consequence, political reform is inhibited.¹⁹ Looking just at Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s, Peter Sanchez of Loyola University Chicago, also suggests that high volumes of aid to the armed forces systematically undermined democratic governments in that region.²⁰

An exception to the harmful effect of military aid may be military exchange and training programs. Using hazard models and an original data set covering over 160 states during 1972–2000, Carol Atkinson of the University of Southern California finds that US military educational exchanges are positively associated with liberalizing trends. She contends that this confirms a process of democratic socialization of political and military elites.²¹ One can speculate, however, about how long it takes for person-to-person social and professional interactions to have

positive influence on a nation-state's political institutions. Is one generation too soon?

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

A final way outsiders can possibly encourage democratization is through technical assistance focusing on electoral processes, rule of law, and related activities. Democracy assistance is difficult to identify because it coincides with other types of development aid, but reported amounts, specifically intended for democratization, are modest but rising. According to the European Council, the total value of Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) country support for democracy, human rights, judicial reform, governance, and civil society was \$9.9 billion in 2004, with about half the amount coming from the United States. This is almost four times the level of democracy assistance in 2000.²² Another source using different criteria comes in with a lower figure for the United States of \$2 billion in democracy assistance in 2004, not counting Afghanistan and Iraq.²³ The previous year's spending was only half as much.

These small amounts of targeted aid may have disproportionate benefits. The US Agency for International Development (USAID) has sponsored a thorough study of the efficacy of its democracy assistance, conducted by a research team at the University of Pittsburgh and Vanderbilt University. The study isolated USAID spending on democracy and governance activities between 1990 and 2003. These outlays were significantly related to Freedom House democracy ranking scores. The Pittsburgh/Vanderbilt team concluded that specialized USAID technical assistance has played a positive, though minor role in promoting democracy in eligible countries.²⁴

To further validate the findings of the USAID-funded study, James Scott of Oklahoma State University and Carrie Steele of the University of Illinois confirmed its general results. Scott and Steele used a different indicator of the level of democratization, covering US democracy assistance from 1988 to 2002. Like the USAID sponsored study, their data reveal a positive relationship between specific democracy promotion assistance packages and advancement in the direction of democracy.²⁵ A third paper by Sarantis Kalyvitis and Irene Vlachaki at Athens University extends the analysis to include government and civil society aid provided by all donor countries over an even longer period of three decades. Looking at five-year time horizons, they likewise report that democracy assistance is positively associated with democratic transitions in recipient countries.²⁶

Only if the relationship between democracy aid and democratic reform is linear would additional technical assistance help displace autocratic regimes more quickly, but linearity is unlikely. More likely are declining returns to technical assistance, or even negative returns in some countries once the donors' visibility exceeds some threshold level. At the current level, the United States has already lost credibility as a pro-democracy actor in many corners of the globe.²⁷ Should low-key advising and training become more ambitious, it might trigger a political backlash that would

impede rather than help democratization.

Democracy and governance technical assistance is also much less effective depending on where it is going. The Pittsburgh/Vanderbilt team considered regional influences in its model. The coefficients suggest democracy and governance aid lacked a discernible effect in southwest Asia and northeast Africa—precisely where the democracy deficit is largest.²⁸ Similar results were found in the Athens University research paper, which controlled for Muslim countries. The coefficient for this variable was negative and statistically significant, confirming the broad view that Middle Eastern countries are particularly resistant to reform.²⁹

CONCLUSIONS

Democracy promotion is not simple. As this brief review of recent large-N comparative politics and international relations studies shows, military interventions and economic pressure offer bleak prospects—especially when they lack the imprimatur of an international organization such as the UN. Financial and military aid do not appear to be very useful in democratization either, at least over the short and medium term. Targeted technical assistance seems to have the greatest beneficial effect on democratic transitions, though not in the Greater Middle East. Any democracy promotion initiative can backfire and possibly hold back the spread of democracy. Good intentions aside, changing political systems from the outside is a more imperfect science than generally acknowledged.

Notes

¹ Carl Gershman, “Democracy as Policy Goal and Universal Value,” *Whitehead Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations* 6, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2005), 20.

² Alan W. Dowd, “The Exertions of Better Men: The Role of the US Military in Planting, Protecting, and Nurturing Free Government,” *Whitehead Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations* 6, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2005), 39.

³ An exception is John A. Tures, “Operation Exporting Freedom: The Quest for Democratization via United States Military Operations,” *Whitehead Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations* 6, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2005), 97–111.

⁴ Robert Dahl, *Polyarchy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), 3.

⁵ Arch Puddington, “Global Survey 2007: Freedom Stagnation amid Pushback against Democracy” (New York: Freedom House, 2006), 2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁷ Larry Diamond, “The State of Democratization at the Beginning of the 21st Century,” *Whitehead Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations* 6, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2005), 18.

⁸ Dowd, “The Exertions of Better Men,” 50.

⁹ Trine Flockhart, “A Mission Bound to Fail? The United States as Socializer of Democratic Norms in Post-War Iraq,” *Whitehead Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations* 6, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2005): 53–68.

¹⁰ Nils Gleditsch et al., “Democratic Jihad? Military Intervention and Democracy” (Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association, Montreal, March 17, 2004).

¹¹ See Scott G. Gates and Håvard Strand, “Military Intervention, Democratization, and Post-Conflict Political Stability” (Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association, Montreal, March 17, 2004).

¹² Jeffrey Pickering and Mark Peceny, “Forging Democracy at Gunpoint,” *International Studies Quarterly* 50 (September 2006): 539–560.

¹³ Kimberly Ann Elliott et al., *Economic Sanctions Reconsidered: History and Current Policy*, 3rd edition (Washington, DC: Peterson Institute for International Economics, forthcoming).

¹⁴ Nikolay Marinov, “Do Sanctions Help Democracy? The US and EU’s Record, 1977–2004” (Center on

Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law, Stanford Institute for International Studies, Working Paper No. 28, November 2, 2004).

¹⁵ World Bank, *World Development Indicators On-line* (Washington, DC, 2006)

¹⁶ Stephen Knack, "Does Foreign Aid Promote Democracy?" *International Studies Quarterly* 48 (March 2004): 251–266.

¹⁷ Simeon Djankov et al., "The Curse of Aid" (March 2006): Available at Social Science Research Network.

¹⁸ Edward Muller, "Dependent Economic Development, Aid Dependence on the United States, and Democratic Breakdown in the Third World," *International Studies Quarterly* 29 (December 1985): 445–469.

¹⁹ Shannon Lindsey Blanton, "The Role of Arms Transfers in the Quest for Human Security," *Journal of Political and Military Sociology* 29 (Winter 2001): 240–258.

²⁰ Peter M. Sanchez, "Bringing the International Back In: US Hegemonic Maintenance and Latin America's Democratic Breakdown in the 1960s and 1970s," *International Politics* 40 (2003): 223–247.

²¹ Carol Atkinson, "Constructivist Implications of Material Power: Military Engagement and the Socialization of States, 1972–2000," *International Studies Quarterly* 50 (September 2006): 509–537.

²² European Council, "First Council Paper on European Democracy Promotion" (The Hague: June 21, 2006): 12. Available at: <http://www.democracyagenda.org/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=8> (accessed January 19, 2007).

²³ Thomas O. Melia, "The Democracy Bureaucracy: The Infrastructure of American Democracy Promotion" (Discussion paper for the Princeton Project on National Security, 2005), 14.

²⁴ Steven Finkel et al., *Effects of US Foreign Assistance on Democracy Building* (Final Report to US Agency for International Development, January 12, 2006).

²⁵ James M. Scott and Carie A. Steele, "The Democracy Mission? Democratic Sponsor States and the Extension of the Third Wave, 1988–2003" (Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association, San Diego, March 23, 2006).

²⁶ Sarantis Kalyvitis and Irene Vlachaki, "Democracy Assistance and the Democratization of Recipients" (November 2006): Available at Social Science Research Network.

²⁷ Thomas Carothers and Marina Ottaway, eds., *Uncharted Journey: Promoting Democracy in the Middle East* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2005), 252.

²⁸ Finkel et al., *Effects of US Foreign Assistance*, 80.

²⁹ Kalyvitis and Vlachaki, "Democracy Assistance and the Democratization of Recipients."