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Conservatism,
And American
Foreign Policy

By Kim R. Holmes



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The origins of my topic today are rooted in debate that began last year when Pat Buchanan ran for President. You will recall that many accused Buchanan of being an isolationist in foreign policy. His “America First” foreign policy conjured up images of a past isolationism rooted in American nativism and protectionism. While Buchanan himself claimed not to be isolationist, many of his opponents suggested that he spoke for many conservatives who supposedly wanted America to retreat from its many international commitments.

To counter this perception, The Heritage Foundation published two foreign policy “blueprints,” to put forward the conservative case for continued U.S. involvement in world affairs.¹ In short, we argued that international engagement was necessary to defend U.S. national interests in the post-Cold War era.

The case I wish to make today, however, is a different one. If the one extreme of isolationism is not the way for America to go, neither is its opposite—what I call the “Democracy First” school—whereby a fixation with spreading democracy becomes the main focal point of American foreign policy.

Let me start by conceding a critically important point: as with any American value, democracy is an important principle inspiring U.S. foreign policy. It has been so throughout American history. I do not want to underestimate the importance of it. The Founding Fathers of the United States saw America as a sort of democratic Eden—far away from the corrupting influences of monarchy and aristocracy in Europe—and as an entirely new and different sort of country based upon the secular, universal principles of the French, English, and Scottish Enlightenments.

Empire of Liberty. The American values of democracy and liberty were summed up very well in Thomas Jefferson’s notion of America being an Empire of Liberty. Jefferson saw the North American continent as a vast area for planting the ideas of democracy and liberty. These values would be institutionalized not only in the American social contract—in the U.S. Constitution—but in the very soil of the United States.

Later on, of course, in his famous book, *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville argued that what was happening in America was only the first step toward the inevitable triumph of equality and democracy around the world. America was merely the vanguard of a vast historical movement toward egalitarianism and democracy. Many variations on this theme have emerged today in the works of thinkers looking for a new American purpose in foreign policy now that

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¹ See *Making the World Safe for America: A U.S. Foreign Policy Blueprint* (Washington, D.C.: The Heritage Foundation, 1992), and Kim R. Holmes, ed., *A Safe and Prosperous America: A U.S. Foreign and Defense Policy Blueprint* (Washington, D.C.: The Heritage Foundation, 1993).

the Cold War is over. They seem to think that with the collapse of the Soviet Union, Tocqueville's vision can now come true—that America can complete the job of democratizing the world in its own image.

Wedding Power and Principle. However, before Americans succumb to this very tempting and gratifying vision of America's new purpose, they had best stop and ask themselves whether they fully understand the role democratic ideals have played in U.S. history. In the early part of this century, Woodrow Wilson justified our involvement in World War I as making the world safe for democracy. In other words, the moral justification for this war was supposedly idealistic, to safeguard the principle and practice of democracy in Europe and the U.S.

But, of course, this U.S. involvement in World War I had a more practical side. It was also to help prevent the domination of Europe by an authoritarian and expansionist Germany, which threatened to upset the balance of power in Europe. Not all of Germany's enemies were democracies—certainly Imperial Russia was not—so Wilson's moral justification for war as a crusade for democracy was only partly true. And history shows that the causes of World War I were more about rival nationalist, dynastic, and imperial ambitions than about democracy.

Nevertheless, Wilson's theme stuck in the American consciousness. Wilson had not only internationalized the American democratic ideal, he had, as Jefferson had done before him, wedded power and principle in American foreign policy. America would wage war abroad for an ideal. The power of the nation would be harnessed to defend America's form of government abroad—namely, democracy. Employing American power overseas was tantamount to defending America's ideals at home.

This mixing of power and principle happened again in World War II. The American ideal of democracy was mobilized against the totalitarian ideology of Nazism and fascism. Again, the crusading aspect of America's involvement masked some of the underlying practical and geopolitical considerations for the U.S. involvement in World War II. America could not afford to have a fascist Germany dominating all of Europe and Eurasia. Nazi Germany threatened American interests not so much because it was anti-democratic, but because it was expansionist. If Hitler had not been expansionist, America would have had no reason to go to war against him.

During the Cold War, of course, the Soviet Union replaced Germany as a threat to Europe, and indeed to the U.S. interests and values around the world. Thus, instead of anti-Nazism, the new campaign became anti-communism. And once again, power and principle mixed quite well in the discourse on American foreign policy.

Inheriting Britain's Role. In the First and Second World Wars, and in the Cold War as well, the United States had inherited the balance of power role of Britain. America was an offshore, non-continental power preventing the attempts of a continental power—be it Germany or the Soviet Union—to establish hegemony in Europe. This was the role Britain had played for nearly two hundred years in European history, in wars against the French, the Russians, and the Germans.

And yet, America was not Britain. Americans were not as cynical as the British in pursuing power politics on the world stage. America's self-consciousness and its definitions of national interests were steeped in its philosophy of governance. Not so Britain. Britain did not need the high-powered moralism of America to justify the defense of its interests in Europe. Closer to Europe than America, and with a long history of monarchy and aristocracy, Britain needed only the principle of self-defense.

America, of course, needed more. It needed to know that the exercise of power had some moral foundation other than self-interest. Lacking any prolonged and serious threat from a foreign power for a good part of its history, the U.S. had not developed a political tradition of *raison d'être*. Instead, it had elevated its form of government to a universal principle which should inspire its foreign policy.

This need for something more is still with us today. Americans rightly want to know their place in the world. They want to know what America's moral purpose is. Yet, at the same time, they do not want America to become the world's policeman. They want a foreign policy that not only defends and promotes their interests abroad, but avoids unnecessary wars.

Seeking a Moral Purpose. The problem today is that it is more difficult for us as Americans, now that the Cold War is over, to find a moral purpose for American foreign policy. It is more difficult to mix power and principle, to see idealism and reasons of state as two sides of the same coin. The great crusades of anti-fascism and anti-communism are over. The only great causes existing today are democracy and a vague humanitarianism pursued in conjunction with the United Nations.

Let me quote you some examples of this drive to make democracy and humanitarianism the centerpiece of American foreign policy. I will start with quotation from Will Marshall, the Director of the Progressive Policy Institute, a think tank associated with the Democratic Leadership Council. In the PPI's *Mandate For Change*, a compilation of policy recommendations for the Clinton Administration, Marshall writes, "We propose that support for democracy and free markets replaces anti-communism as the conceptual basis for U.S. security policy in the 1990's and beyond."

Also there is Joshua Muravchik, a Resident Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, who said in his book, *Exporting Democracy*, "Democracy is the centerpiece of American foreign policy." And he adds, "What is good for democracy is good for America."

Bill Clinton, during the presidential campaign, told an audience at Georgetown University, "The defense of freedom and the promotion of democracy around the world are not merely a reflection of our deepest values, they are vital to our national interest."

The last quote I would like to give you is from a very good friend—a highly respected scholar and diplomat—Robert Strausz-Hupé. He says that "the U.S. cannot compromise the solidarity of all democratic peoples. That solidarity is indivisible. An attack against any democratic people is an attack against all democratic peoples."

This desire to make the promotion of democracy the centerpiece of American foreign policy exists on the left and the right. Conservatives like Strausz-Hupé as well as liberals like Clinton make the case for replacing anti-communism with pro-democratism.

Fundamental Problems. Yet, there are some fundamental problems with the Democracy First school of thought. However well-intentioned its proponents may be, they nevertheless find it difficult to articulate a workable and consistent national strategy for America.

Let me give you an example. There obviously will be times when the U.S. will have to sacrifice the principle of democracy for the sake of the national interest—when standing up for others is not standing up for us. We had to choose the national interest over democracy all the time during the Cold War, in supporting Turkey, South Vietnam, South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, Iran under the Shah, even Kuwait. The list could go on.

I think that even though we will have to make that choice less now that the Cold War is over, it is still a choice that occasionally we will have to make. For example, we do not (nor should we) champion democracy in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, or Kuwait. That is because, as we learned with

vilifying the Shah of Iran in the name of human rights, we could end up not only with more repressive regimes, but with more anti-American ones. Nor should we forget that Syria was an ally of the U.S. during the Persian Gulf War. For tactical and practical reasons, we refuse to give allies and friends democratic litmus tests when some overriding national interest requires it.

Necessary Exceptions. Moreover, sometimes there is a clash between tactics and long-term goals in championing democracy abroad. While a case can be made that Russian president Boris Yeltsin is pro-American because he is a democrat, some Democracy Firsters might be faced with a dilemma if he were to use some decidedly undemocratic measures—like suspending the anti-democratic and sometimes anti-American Russian parliament—as a way of continuing his pro-reform and pro-Western course. You have to break some eggs to make an omelette; and sometimes you have to take an indirect route to democracy and reform.

This may be the case in China as well. Perhaps the best way to bring democracy to China is not by slapping trade sanctions on it, but by expanding trade relations. China's growing trade and commercial relations with Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the outside world may be slowly eating away at its totalitarian political structure. If that is so, then cutting off most-favored-nation trading status for China could be tantamount to slowing the long-run process of democratization.

These examples show that there is no easy and consistent way to apply the principle of democracy to the practice of American foreign policy. Democracy cannot be an “animating principle” if it provides no real guidance for our foreign policy, if, in fact, it does not tell us how to act in places like the Middle East, China, and possibly even Russia—three vitally important areas to U.S. interest. What is, indeed, the point of having a foreign policy principle that has so many exceptions? We say, “Yes, we support democracy around the world as a principle, except of course in the Middle East, or parts of Asia, and possibly even in Russia.” In other words, except when it is inconvenient.

I really believe that principles, particularly operating ones, should apply in all (or certainly most) cases. And frankly, the democracy principle does not cut it as a principle at all. All the necessary exceptions you need to explain it only demonstrate its weakness as a principle. It is one thing to say that democracy is a core value of the United States; it is quite another to say that this core value self-evidently reveals a practical strategy for American statecraft.

The problem arises in confusing ends and means. Broad utopian statements about “what is good for democracy is good for America” can only lead to confusion and even hypocrisy. Frankly, sometimes supporting democratic movements abroad is not good for America, or even necessary. But this is a question of tactics, not goals or principles. The U.S. does not violate its own ideals by pursuing its own interests.

Moral Constant. I believe that the moral constant of American foreign policy is not some concept or ideology. Rather it is to promote and defend the life, liberty, and prosperity of the American people. Fulfilling these goals is the moral obligation of the federal government to its citizens. That is, in fact, the moral essence of the social contract we call the U.S. Constitution.

That being the case, American foreign policy does not have to be infused with some higher moral purpose—whether it be promoting democracy or any other principle or ideology abroad. So long as the U.S. government protects and promotes U.S. interests within the bounds of the Constitution and the values of the American people, no higher moral appeal need be made. That does not mean that American values do not shape and influence American policy. Rather, it means only that spreading those values abroad is not the primary purpose of U.S. foreign policy.

The way around this problem is to view supporting democracy abroad as part of an American foreign policy strategy, and not as a goal or end in itself. Put simply: We should support democracy abroad when it is in our interest to do so, which fortunately is more often than not. But I see no point in making the promotion of democracy an American foreign policy ideology when, in fact, there may be times when supporting despots or even undemocratic rulers may be necessary.

The difference is in seeing democracy as one of many moral principles inspiring and influencing American foreign policy—which I contend is the proper perspective—or in pretending that democracy as an ideology is itself the object of American foreign policy. Promoting an ideology abroad cannot completely capture the full range of American interests. American interests actually transcend the cause of promoting democracy around the globe. Supporting democracy may be often in the national interest, but it alone is not enough.

Larger National Strategy. The key is putting support for democracy in the context of a larger national strategy. For example, promoting democracy in Russia is a good idea because democratic reformers like Yeltsin also are more or less friendly to the U.S. In other words, democratization of Russia will produce a benign Russian foreign policy. In other places, it may not. There may be no Western-style democratic forces to support, or we may mistake populist movements for democratic ones (as we did with the Ayatollah Khomeini). There may even be some cases where the legitimate democratic forces are too weak, and an authoritarian regime provides a stronger bulwark against some more powerful, anti-democratic, and anti-American political group.

Another example of putting a democracy strategy in a larger context can be seen in U.S. Latin American policy. Spreading democracy in Latin America not only creates stability in this hemisphere, it also can be tied to promoting free trade relations, which will create economic growth and markets for American goods. U.S. jobs will be created and U.S. defense spending can be reduced as stability accompanies economic growth in Latin America.

There are, however, limits to making democracy part of American strategy. Democracy means different things to different people. Frankly, elections are not enough. The American and Western notion of democracy also requires limitations on state power, as well as economic freedom, independent judiciaries, and political pluralism. Try as we may, these things are hard to influence and manipulate with the tools of foreign policy—diplomacy and foreign aid, primarily. It is always tempting to take the simple way out, to say that a country is democratic if it has free and fair elections. However, there are places on earth (Iran is one of them) where free and fair elections would not produce a Western-style democracy favorably disposed toward the U.S.

The Democracy First crowd may think that they are the best (and possibly only) alternative to the America First school of isolationism. In fact, I would contend that these two schools of thought are opposite extremes of the same phenomenon: a propensity toward utopian thinking. It should not be too difficult to make intelligent statements about the role of democracy in American foreign policy without making hopelessly unrealistic claims about democratizing the globe.

America indeed needs a new foreign policy strategy. And it certainly needs a debate on its most fundamental purposes abroad. But neither isolationism nor democratic crusaderism will fit the bill. A country must mean what it says, particularly the United States. We have no intention of promoting democracy everywhere around the globe. Therefore, I think we should cool the rhetoric a bit. Otherwise we will raise expectations in the rest of the world that we cannot possibly fulfill, and we will confuse our own people about what America can and cannot do to change the world.

After all is said and done, dedication to America and dedication to the principles of democracy are really one and the same. I think that is the way the Founding Fathers saw democracy in America, and that is the way that I think we conservatives should see it as well.

