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The ADVANCE Democracy Act: A Dose of Realism Needed

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A wave of democratic change is spreading around the world, from Afghanistan to Iraq to Ukraine, from Lebanon to Kyrgyzstan. These historic events demonstrate that we live in a truly interconnected world. President George W. Bush's words, spoken in his second inaugural address and State of the Union speech, are resonating around the world and moving crowds.

The promotion of democracy remains an important goal of U.S. foreign policy. The ADVANCE Democracy Act (S. 516 and H.R. 1133), currently being considered by the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations and House Committee on International Relations, is intended to further this goal but could actually hinder it. The U.S. should continue its tradition of aiding burgeoning democracies around the world, but it should do so in a way that also takes into account U.S. vital interests, especially national security.

Equally important, the U.S. should promote democracy without limiting the executive branch's ability to conduct foreign policy. Formulating and conducting diplomacy is an exercise in balancing U.S. interests abroad, including America's relations with its allies in the war on terrorism and other military and business priorities. Diplomacy should be conducted with a dose of healthy realism. It cannot ultimately serve U.S. interests if it blindly pursues ideology.

A good example to follow is Ronald Reagan's focus on the "evil empire" of the Soviet Union and his Administration's championing of democracy promotion as a foreign policy priority in the USSR, Eastern Europe, and Latin America. Reagan eventually succeeded and tossed communism into the dustbin of

history. Similarly, the soaring rhetoric of President Bush's second inaugural address will require practical and realistic implementation. Learning from Reagan's example, this means making strategic decisions about which regions of the world to prioritize as the focus of American resources and involve-

ment. It also means that democracy promotion is only one tool in the foreign policy toolbox, which also includes free trade promotion, economic development, multilateral cooperation, and, in some rare cases, the use of force.

More Work Needed. The ADVANCE Democracy Act serves the American public by emphasizing the role of democracy in U.S. foreign policy in general and at the State Department in particular. The bill reaffirms

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- U.S. support for democratic governance should be pursued after a full assessment of this policy and its value to U.S. vital national interests, including the war on terrorism.
 - U.S. promotion of democracy should focus on the Muslim world.
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U.S. political support for democracy and allocates funds to support the Community of Democracies, an international forum of democratic nations.

However, Congress should avoid the temptation to micromanage U.S. foreign policy. Democracy overseas, in particular, does not lend itself to management by foreign officials, especially diplomats, who are trained to interact with host governments and report back home.

The bill sets out to spread “universal democracy” worldwide, but its expansive legislative language sacrifices foreign policy flexibility and agility. Simply put, it is written too broadly. In particular, the ADVANCE Democracy Act dilutes the executive branch’s constitutional role in conducting foreign policy by over-prescribing analytical frameworks and tools. It assumes that *all* non-democratic states are *de facto* hostile to U.S. security. This is simply not the case.

The bill’s language requires mechanically classifying every state as “democratic,” “partially democratic,” or “non-democratic,” ignoring any nuances or differences. In fact, the State Department may wind up fighting not to place states in “negative” categories in order to preserve good relations with host governments in pursuing other U.S. interests, such as trade and security.

Terrorist Threat Ignored. The bill ignores the war on terrorism as the main imperative of U.S. foreign policy. Instead, it should explicitly target countries that allow terrorist organizations to function within their territories or otherwise support terrorism. It should also focus on repressive regimes that ban political opposition, thus breeding terrorism.

The proposed legislation also ignores the organic nature of democracy by not acknowledging the importance of culture and history to the development of democracy in a country. It *de facto* imposes Western concepts of democracy instead of allowing it to grow locally. The bill ignores the fact that democracy is a process, not an event, and substitutes elections for democracy.

The act also disregards the possibility of electoral outcomes inimical to U.S. foreign policy goals, such as Islamists seizing power through elections in the Middle East, as could happen with the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria and Egypt or Jamaat Islamiya in Pakistan. Elections are not a cure-all for dictator-

ship. If democracy does not take root, it can open the door to totalitarianism, as Weimar Germany demonstrated in 1933.

Finally, this bill could alienate regimes that remain supportive of U.S. policies and are gradually evolving into democracies, such as Jordan and Morocco.

What Congress Should Do. To advance democracy, Congress should:

- **Keep** the language reaffirming U.S. political support for democratic governance.
- **Add** a clause specifying that support for democratic governance should be pursued after a full assessment of this policy and its value to U.S. vital national interests, including security priorities in the war on terrorism, through an interagency process led by the National Security Council.
- **Recommend** a comprehensive review of financial assistance for the promotion of democracy to ensure efficiency and effectiveness.
- **Target** funds for implementation of democracy programs to the National Endowment for Democracy and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) rather than expand the State Department bureaucracy.
- **Specify** the intelligence community’s role in engaging in political warfare and promoting democracy in countries where U.S. diplomats and NGOs cannot operate.
- **Focus** U.S. promotion of democracy on the Muslim world without harming America’s vital interests in the war on terrorism.

Conclusion. Democracy varies from country to country. It is not “one-size-fits-all.” In helping freedom to blossom and take root, the U.S. should do what is possible and necessary, taking into account U.S. national interests while avoiding what is unrealistic.

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