

## Democracy Is Now the Realistic Policy

By Victor Davis Hanson

“The policy of the United States is to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world.... All who live in tyranny and hopelessness can know: The United States will not ignore your oppression, or excuse your oppressors. When you stand for your liberty, we will stand with you.”

Those and other idealistic passages in President Bush's second inaugural address sparked criticism that he was biting off more than even a superpower could chew. Are such prescriptions realistic in the Middle East? Is it wise to demand that voting must follow economic liberalization in China, or is isolating an autocracy of a billion people too dangerous? Is an elected but increasingly authoritarian Russian president Putin a quasi-, pre-, or post-democrat?

The foreign policy Realists want nothing to do with George Bush's idealism. They rely exclusively on deterrence and balance of power to adjudicate relations abroad: We must deal with the world as it is, they say, rather than as we think it should be. Isolationists likewise bristle at the idea of expending blood or treasure in an open-ended commitment to spread our values. And don't expect liberals to applaud the new idealism, as if their 1960s vision of an ethical foreign policy has at last arrived. The Left's attachment to “multiculturalism” long ago ended the idea that the U.S. had any right to place Western ideas of politics over indigenous

practices. Other “progressives” are de facto pacifists; for them, any use of U.S. force is a betrayal of global diplomacy.

Old-style State Department officers, meanwhile, will resist formulating any typology of bad, worse, and worst regimes. Censuring Iran, Syria, North Korea, or Cuba is easy enough. But are nuclear China and Russia to be isolated or praised? Should mitigating factors temper our democratic crusade—the oil of a Wahabi Saudi Arabia or Castro-friendly Venezuela, a Mubarak dynasty that promises not to war against Israel, a Pakistan that offers sporadic help in rounding up terrorists?

Despite these many reservations and pitfalls, George Bush's new idealism may eventually make America's foreign initiatives more consistent and predictable to friend and enemy alike. Personalities and crises of the day may nuance the stance of the United States, but illiberal regimes will ultimately realize there will be no real friendship with the U.S. unless they reform their governments and free their peoples. Statesmen can haggle over protocols, but the main point is that in the future it will be principles of conduct that determine our relationships abroad—not oil, personal chemistry, or blackmail.

The previous “realpolitik,” when the United States cozied up to some unsavory authoritarians in order to thwart Soviet hegemony, is at an end. Franco, the Shah, Pinochet, Somoza, Papa Doc, and others were artifacts of the Cold War, when the aberrant condition of 7,000 nuclear missiles pointed at our cities reduced and warped our options. If

it was once hypocritical for the land of Jefferson and Madison to support dictators, then it is surely right to walk away from those earlier wrongs now that the Sword of Damocles has been removed.

And while promoting democracy is idealistic, it does not necessarily follow that it is naive. What, after all, prevents wars? Hardly the U.N.; and not just aircraft carriers either. The last half-century of peace in Europe and Japan, and the end of our old enmity of Russia, attest that the widest spread of democratic rule is the best guarantee against international aggression. Ballots substitute for bullets in venting internal frustrations.

And in today's Middle East, our new insistence on democracy is not our first but rather our last resort. We have already tried averting our eyes, subsidies, passive-aggressive lectures, outright hostility, everything but principled and consistent promotion of constitutional government. Despite varying degrees of American appeasement, monarchy, Baathism, Nasserism, pan-Arabism, and Islamic fundamentalism have all turned out to have intolerable spillover effects on the U.S. In contrast, the Muslims of democratic Indonesia, India, and Turkey do not threaten us.

Far from being impractical, naive, or dangerous, explaining to the world that America will from now on always encourage democratic rule is sober and in our own vital interest. With patience and persistence, it will turn out to be both the right and the smart thing to do.

