

Text of Ken Wollack's Presentation to UAA/DACOR, February 4, 2019

I confess to be an incurable optimist who for 32 years has worked in the optimism business. Given negative trends over the last decade, I remain an optimist, but an optimist who worries a lot. It was Mark Salter, John McCain's long-time aide, who best described this ailment when he wrote that the "most marvelous of human achievements is not to lose hope when experience has taught you hope is for fools."

Democracy promotion, long a pillar of America's foreign policy framework, has, in recent years and in certain circles, become an issue of some debate. Paradoxically, and wrongly in my view, democracy assistance is viewed either as too soft or idealistic as a response to serious security threats facing the nation; or it is seen as too bellicose -- conflated with regime change and the use of military force. The question, however, is not whether democracy promotion is "hard" or "soft" or whether it fits neatly into the "realism" or "idealism" paradigms. The issue, rather, is whether advancing democracy reflects our values and is an important means of advancing America's interests and protecting our national security in a turbulent and often violent world. I think the answer is clearly "yes."

The notion that there should be a dichotomy between our moral preferences and our strategic interests is a false one. Our ultimate foreign policy goal is a world that is secure, stable, humane, and safe, where the risk of war is minimal. Yet, the reality is that hotspots most likely to erupt into violence are found, for the most part, in areas of the world that are nondemocratic -- places that have been defined by the Defense Department as the "arc of instability." These are places that experience ethnic conflict and civil war; they generate refugee flows across borders; they are places where terrorists are harbored and illegal drugs are produced. The international community has rightly worked to restore order by helping to establish a democratic framework for governance in a number of these countries. The response has not always been entirely successful, but on the whole, the introduction of democratic processes and citizen engagement have made these countries less dangerous than they had been.

Moreover, the 2018 National Security Strategy, National Defense Strategy and the 2018 and 2019 Worldwide Threat Assessment by the U.S.

intelligence community all point to efforts by Russia and China to propagate their authoritarian models as a direct threat to our interests. Clearly, therefore, these threats, require renewed efforts by the U.S. -- in fact, a democratic stimulus -- not retreat.

The cost for the U.S. has been relatively inexpensive; foreign assistance is only about 1 percent of the total U.S. budget; democracy assistance represents just 4 percent of our foreign aid.

There are those who have argued that the Arab Spring unleashed a new area of instability in the Middle East by toppling repressive, but so-called "stable" regimes. However, this idea that autocracy equals stability collapses under scrutiny as the remaining supposedly stable regimes are increasingly the locus of conflict; while those places that are going through either a democratic transition or are engaged in either political reforms or liberalization are better able to address economic challenges or threats from extremist ideologies and groups.

Even from the traditional foreign aid perspective, economic assistance alone cannot achieve sustained economic growth and social stability. Political systems that lack accountability mechanisms or sufficient political and social inclusion are usually plagued by corruption or conflict, both of which undermine the objectives of economic development aid to achieve self-sustaining growth and poverty reduction. Deforestation, rural dislocation, environmental degradation, and agricultural policies that lead to famine all trace to political systems in which the victims have no political voice; in which government institutions feel no obligation to answer to the people; and in which special interests feel free to exploit the resources, land and people without fear of oversight or the need to account. In short, authoritarian regimes create the illusion of stability but, in reality, they fuel instability. That is because autocrats who arrogate power to themselves by claiming to have all the answers are bound to fail. The late and highly respected diplomat and USAID alum, Princeton Lyman, reminded his colleagues in a 1998 cable that the problem with even an enlightened authoritarian leader is that "blinded by economic success, hubris takes over along with greed: his or her rule is

perpetuated, and corruption grows." He urged policymakers at that time to judge trends, rather than the snapshot of the day.

During the 1980s, an important lesson was learned about political transformations in countries like the Philippines and Chile: that forces on the political fringes enjoy a mutually reinforcing relationship, drawing strength from each other and, in the process, marginalizing a democratic center. Prospects for peace and stability only emerged once democratic political parties and civil society were able to offer a viable alternative to the extremes. These democratic forces benefited from the solidarity and support they received from the international community and, in the United States, Republicans and Democrats joined together to champion their cause. Today, these conditions find their parallel in other countries around the world.

When World War II ended, fewer than a dozen democracies stood as the Iron Curtain rose, military dictatorships proliferated, and colonialism sought to regain its footing. Major breakthroughs against those trends began with the so-called third wave of democratization which, since the 1970s, impacted more than 100 countries where people in every region of the world struggled against oppression and for government based on popular will.

Freedom House, the Economist, the Bertelsmann Foundation and others, however, have now chronicled 12 years of decline in political rights, civil liberties, and global freedom. They point to a retreat by the U.S. of its traditional role as a champion of democracy, the expansion of China's and Russia's anti-democratic influence, a rise in right wing populism in traditional democracies and continued repression in nondemocratic places. In fact, today's autocrats no longer operate in isolation -- they communicate with, and learn from each other, across borders and regions. Autocrats have become more aggressive and sophisticated in stifling the voices of civil society and political opponents, undercutting independent media and judicial independence and manipulating elections.

We now know that initial views about the impact of technological change were incomplete. There were those who had presented a cyber-utopian view of the impact of social media on democracy, whereby increased

internet access would inevitably lead to more open societies. This has now given way to a more realistic, if not darker view. As Wael Ghonim, the democratic activist whose Facebook posts helped ignite the Egyptian revolution now warns: "Social media was once seen as a liberating means to speak truth to power. Now the issue is how to speak truth to social media."

Authoritarian regimes are also using a broader and more aggressive set of tools to advance their interests, including various forms of electoral espionage, the hacking of politicians and political parties, and the dissemination of misinformation and fake news -- all designed to skew electoral outcomes and to discredit democratic systems. Repressive regimes are using what NDI has called "distributed denial of democracy" (DDoD) attacks to pollute new media channels with disinformation, making new media less useful as a mechanism for legitimate democratic discourse. This hybrid warfare uses troll farms and botnets to amplify certain new media stories. Such efforts also aim to create a false equivalency between legitimate international democracy assistance and foreign interference that subverts democratic dialogue, practices, and elections.

At the same time, new, fragile democracies are struggling to meet rising expectations of their citizens, particularly with regard to efforts that would combat corruption and improve standards of living. Democratic transitions have been stymied or reversed by violence and terrorism by non-state actors, or by the inability of democratic movements to move from "protest to politics" and to challenge the resiliency of the so-called "deep state" -- the elites and institutions that benefited from years of corruption and impunity afforded by entrenched autocracy. And even established democracies have been beset by political polarization and growing citizen discontent with the performance of democratic institutions and elected leaders.

While women have made significant political gains in the last several decades, they remain woefully underrepresented in political parties, parliaments, and government, at both the national and local levels. Moreover, with the advent of the internet, women face a growing threat against their active participation in politics -- psychological along with physical violence. Cyber bullying not only impacts women who are

targeted but also has a chilling effect on others who may want to enter the political arena.

I don't want to dismiss these negative developments because they are real but, as an optimist, I would prefer to view the past decade as a snapshot and offer a degree of perspective -- another picture that includes a slightly longer sweep of history. But it is not the distant past. Four years after President Reagan delivered his landmark democracy speech before the British parliament in 1982 and less than three years after Congress established the National Endowment for Democracy. Freedom House scored only 52 countries as "free" as compared to 88 in 2018. The countries of Latin America were largely run by military regimes, as were the Asian countries of South Korea, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Burma. Dictators were in power in Indonesia and the Philippines; martial rule was in place in Taiwan; the communists ruled Mongolia; and the monarchy enjoyed absolute power in Nepal.

On the African continent, only four leaders between 1960 and 1990 had retired voluntarily or left office after losing an election -- since 1990, that figure stands at more than 50. Democracy, freedom and dignity were not even part of the lexicon of the Middle East. And Soviet communism, which extended to the borders of Western Europe, seemed deeply embedded. Only Senator Moynihan and a few others at the time were naive enough to predict its demise. Meanwhile, intergovernmental groups like the Organization of American States and the Organization of African Unity -- the predecessor to the African Union -- operated on the principle of "nonintervention" into the affairs of member states. They routinely turned a blind eye to military coups and other abuses. Today, both organizations and others like them have adopted democratic charters and have intervened, albeit sporadically, to defend democratic rule.

In 1986, there was minuscule if any democracy and governance funding by USAID, the State Department, the UNDP or by the OECD donor aid agencies. The traditional socioeconomic development community ignored, if not rejected, the linkages between economic and political change, positing instead that economic and social development must come first and democracy must evolve over time from the creation of a

middle class. Compare those views to the UNDP's landmark Human Development Report in 2002 which concluded that democratic politics is not only a critical end of human development, but the best means of achieving it. Or Sweden's development cooperation policy which now asserts that poverty is not only about inadequate socioeconomic development but also the lack of political power at the individual level.

Aside from the German party foundations, which played such an important role in the democratic transitions of Spain and Portugal during the 1970s, there were no democracy support NGOs; and contentious debates in the U.S. Senate and House in the mid-1980s over a \$30 million appropriations for the National Endowment for Democracy were commonplace -- and the debates went on for hours. I know because I sat through most of them. In fact, funding for NDI and its Republican counterpart we eliminated in 1985 and were only restored a year later by a one vote margin in the Senate -- and that was because a Senator from a northwest state had mistakenly voted in favor of the institutes.

U.S. ambassadors stationed abroad during the Cold War had little interest in raising democracy issues with friendly authoritarian leaders or even to be seen meeting with opposition forces. Democracy advocates like Ambassadors Harry Barnes in Chile, Steve Bosworth in the Philippines and Mark Palmer in Hungary were a rarity and their pro-democracy efforts may have done little to enhance their diplomatic careers. I remember when NDI first entered Mexico, the then-Ambassador asked me what I was doing in "his" country and warned me against importing the Philippine "people power" revolution. He not only misunderstood our mission but he had little interest in democratic reforms even after nearly 60 years of PRI rule. Ironically, reform efforts had already begun by elements of the ruling party, led by Luis Donaldo Colosio -- and NDI was there at his invitation.

Now, in contrast, every ambassador today has democracy and human rights as part of her or her portfolio, even if these issues may not be item number one on the bi-lateral agenda. And USAID missions dispense millions of dollars in democracy assistance even in places where democracy may be a lower priority by the USG.

During the past decade, there is another, more positive story -- a story that should remind us about the universal demand for democracy and progress being made, sometimes in the most challenging of environments. Public opinion polls from countries in every region of the world have shown that vast majorities agree that democracy, despite its problems, is the best political system. One recent study of more than 800 protest movements around the world show that they are not driven primarily by a desire for better economic conditions, but rather by demands for democracy or for a better democracy, which the protesters believe can better address economic issues. This shows that the desire for improved economic opportunities often coexists with the demand for a political voice. And in today's interdependent world, citizens will not indefinitely postpone the latter for the former. Recent democratic change, or rising citizen demands for democracy in such diverse places as Venezuela, Ethiopia, Armenia, Malaysia, Burkina Faso, The Gambia, Guatemala, Slovakia and Nicaragua are but a few recent examples. Admittedly, there have been times when many citizens seemingly abandoned democratic aspirations because of instability, insecurity, or the performance of government. This was the case in Pakistan, Côte d'Ivoire, Egypt, Chile and Venezuela where Hugo Chavez once quipped that he was the result, not the cause -- the result of failed politicians and political institutions; but broad support for authoritarian rule in these places were short lived.

Then there are countries where active civil societies and reform-minded political leadership have maintained positive democratic trajectories. Nascent African democracies of Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, Mozambique, and Sierra Leone are among the world's fastest growing economies, while many countries -- including Indonesia, Mongolia, Chile, Colombia, Georgia, South Korea and Mexico -- have continued to make strides in both consolidating their democracies and maintaining steady economic growth.

We have learned a great deal about democratic change, along with appropriate and effective ways to nurture and support democracy. I would like to share some fundamental lessons.

First, in contrast to those realists who have long argued that we should care more about what countries do outside their borders, in this interconnected and interdependent world, what happens for good or for bad within borders of has regional and, sometimes, global impact. Contrary to that famous tagline in tourism marketing, what happens, let's say, in Kiev or Kinshasa, doesn't stay there. Therefore, at a basic level, we have a direct interest in how people live and how they are treated by their governments.

Second, the credibility of a democracy ultimately depends on how it works in practice and on what it delivers. Democracies must be able to hold credible elections so that the institutions that emerge from those polls enjoy legitimacy. But those institutions must be built and strengthened between elections, and citizen engagement must be developed and sustained. Nascent democratic regimes often inherit the legacies of their nondemocratic predecessors -- poverty, corruption and political exclusion. And when those institutions fail to meet public expectations, opportunities are created for populist, often nondemocratic leaders who will roll back hard-won democratic gains.

The once rapid pace of democratic change had led many in the democracy community to hope, if not expect, that progress toward fuller democracy would be more linear than has been the case. As the late Polish historian and politician Bronislaw Geremek warned, "Democracy is by no means a process that goes from triumph to triumph nor is it exempt from creating the very conditions that undermine it." This means long-term commitments are necessary to support a culture of transparency, participation, and accountability.

Sustaining socioeconomic development over the long term requires a political system whose incentive structures make it more likely that responsive, reform-minded, and accountable politicians will emerge at all levels of government. It requires governments that have the popular support and legitimacy to sustain development policies. It also requires mechanisms for orderly alternation of power in order to reduce the incentives for corruption that inevitably affect governments with no fear of losing office. It requires strengthened policy development and capacity within political parties in order to help raise the level of political discourse. It requires effective legislatures --

with significant roles for opposition voices and the means to build broader consensus on public policy issues -- in order to avoid policy reversals when governments turn over. It requires greater voice and power for citizens, particularly women and youth, along with historically marginalized communities, in order to complement increased economic empowerment with increased political participation.

Third, while citizens around the world have begun to harness the benefits of information and communication technology to amplify their voices, their political institutions have often been slower to respond. As one tech leader explained via Twitter, "Citizens use 21st cent tools to communicate, while gov'ts use 20th cent tools to listen, and 19th century processes to respond." As technology innovation amplifies the voices of desegregated citizen interests, fledgling democratic institutions -- governments, parliaments, and political parties -- must harness innovation to strengthen deliberative discourse, broker compromise, and respond in a timely and effective manner.

New responses are also needed as authoritarian regimes have become more aggressive in utilizing technology to subvert democracy and to project their interests internationally. These responses include: cyber security support; media literacy training with respect to disinformation spread through new media; assistance to civic, media, and political groups that can expose and combat misinformation; and policy advocacy with technology firms to help them understand the impact of their policies on democratic discourse and to help them prevent their platforms from being used in distributed denial of democracy (DDoS) attacks. NDI for one is helping to launch this last effort by working with a global grouping of democracy groups, civil society organizations, civic tech partners, associations of political parties and a global network of 4 million citizen election monitors to interact with major technology companies. This so-called Design for Democracy Coalition will identify incidents of disinformation that are designed to subvert democratic processes, including elections, and bring them directly to the attention of the tech companies for speedy resolution. The Coalition will also provide a vehicle in which to coordinate research, monitor and investigate trends concerning the abuse of technology in efforts to impair democratic discourse, processes and institutions.

Fourth, for those of us in this country who are engaged in assisting democratic development overseas, we have been most successful when we have joined with others in the international community, including governments, parliaments, political parties, intergovernmental organizations, and other non-governmental groups. Today, these groups make up an international democratic architecture that did not exist some 30 years ago. As a practical matter, people making a democratic transition require diverse experiences and expertise, along with broad peer support. Cooperative approaches also convey a deeper truth: that democrats are joining a community of nations which have traversed the same course, that they can count on natural allies and an active support structure because other nations are concerned and are watching.

Fifth, the U.S. government -- including the White House, State Department, Congress, and overseas embassies -- can set the tone and foreign aid can provide needed resources. Yet, much of the day-to-day democratic development work should be carried out, with proper oversight, by nongovernmental organizations that operate in the realm of people-to-people relations. Such mission-driven groups often have pre-existing, global relationships and are not constrained by the stringent rules of formal diplomacy. Most important, in countries where a primary issue is the paucity of autonomous civic and political institutions, the very idea that government ought not control all aspects of society can be undermined by a too visible and too direct donor government hand. This is borne out by the results of a new type of opinion research being carried out by NDI in Ukraine to determine populations that are most vulnerable to Russian disinformation campaigns and how best to respond with messages that build resilience. One result shows that such counter messages delivered by government are not seen as credible and may, in fact, lead people to more readily believe in the original disinformation message.

Ultimately, it is the nature of relationships with local partners that matter the most. In a recent New York Times op-ed, David Brooks asked a veteran youth activist in this country about which programs "turn around" the lives of young people living in poverty. "I still haven't seen one program change one kid's life," he replied. "What changes people is

relationships." The same can be said about successful democracy efforts overseas. How positive relationships with local partners are established, developed, and evolve will ultimately determine the success or failure of any and all interventions.

Sixth, pluralism in democracy assistance has served the United States well, allowing for diverse yet complementary programming that, over the long term, could not be sustained by a highly static and centralized system. Funding by the NED has allowed the Endowment and its four core institutes to plan strategically, yet respond quickly and flexibly to emerging opportunities and sudden problems in rapidly shifting political environments. In addition, the NED has been able to operate effectively in closed societies where direct government engagement is more difficult. USAID has provided the basis for longer-term commitments in helping to develop a country's democratic institutions. The State Department's Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, have given the U.S. government the capacity to support -- without cumbersome regulations -- cutting edge and highly focused democracy initiatives for individual countries, as well for regional and global initiatives. It would not be advantageous to try to create a centralized structure, or a highly coordinated approach for the design and implementation of these initiatives, but rather to promote ongoing cooperation and open lines of communication. Already, much of this cooperation and communication is taking place, particularly in the field.

Seventh, and finally, democracy assistance can best be delivered in four ways: 1) through direct, in-country presence where long term, day-to-day relationships can be established and nurtured. (in non-democratic places that prohibit such engagement, long distance learning using information technology and offshore programs can maintain solidarity and provide more limited but critical outside support to groups and individuals); 2) through targeted financial support to governments, election commissions, civil society groups, and parliaments; 3) through international and regional networks that can offer peer support; and 4) through the development and application of international norms and standards. The latter two approaches are designed to provide external incentives for reform, particularly in places where local organizations, leaders, and institutions seek to become members of a global community -- whether a community of civic groups, political parties, parliaments, or

governments. Examples of these communities include the Open Government Partnership, the four major international groupings of political parties, the Community of Democracies, the Global Network of Domestic Election Monitors, and the World Movement for Democracy.

I will end as I began -- as an optimist. There is widespread concern in the democracy and human rights communities about the Administration's seeming retreat from America's traditional role in advancing global democracy. As evidence of this retreat, Freedom House's *Freedom in the World* report points to the Administration's America First foreign policy, its skepticism toward international alliances with other democracies, the absence of democracy rhetoric in the president's public speeches, and his stated admiration for some of the world's strongmen. These actions and words generate understandable concern, but predictions of the death of America's role in promoting and supporting democracy maybe exaggerated. As it did in the previous Administration, the U.S. Congress has already stepped in to restore all proposed cuts in democracy assistance. When it comes to democracy funding, Congress has strongly, and across party lines, asserted its Article 1 prerogatives and the Congressional debate is much different than it was some 30 years ago. America First has come to frame the Administration's overall foreign policy. Those words are jarring for many of us but it need not be inconsistent with our efforts to advance democracy. Our government has continued to use pro-democracy tools -- diplomatic, security, and economic -- in places as diverse as Ukraine, Cambodia, Venezuela, Cuba and Iran. And the National Security Strategy provides a framework and rationale for maintaining the U.S. commitment to democracy. Moreover, the NSS, along with the companion National Defense Strategy and the Worldwide Threat Assessments all point to the efforts by China and Russia to advance their authoritarian model. This may inevitably lead the U.S. to counter with stronger democracy policies.