The Prospects for Expanding Democratic Governance

Robert A. Schadler
Denver German-American Conference
September 25, 2006

[Session: Established Democracies As the Purveyors of Emergent Democracy: Arguments for and Against Organic Growth or External Intervention in Democracy Promotion]

Exporting democracy has recently become the most reviled of ideas. Led by the U.S. venture into Iraq and recent electoral results the West Bank and elsewhere, some have soured on the thought never mind the cost of such a preposterous notion. In some ways, I find it easy to share this inclination. Immanuel Kant has not been my favorite philosopher. Woodrow Wilson is neither my favorite president nor my favorite political scientist. George W. Bush is neither my favorite president nor my favorite resident of West Texas.

Furthermore, if one looks at the powerful troika of the state, culture and religion, democratic theory is especially modest in arguing that the state, if democratic, does not impose its views on either the culture or religion but it respects both and generally takes its direction and mandate from the culture. It is the nation that shapes the boundaries of the state; it is the will of the people (through elections) that determines the policies of the state rather than the other way around by the state seeking to re-draw the borders or to refashion the culture to more securely provide the foundation for democratic governance. (Ironically, civic education, however, is an exception. It seeks to shape attitudes of the citizens precisely to more firmly secure the political institutions.) Democracy is, after all, about limiting coercion, not roaming the globe seeking to coerce for its own expansion and glory. Democracy, as one keen observer has said, is humility in the exercise of power, not hubris. How does one, with modesty and humility, persuade others not already convinced, that they should transform themselves in our image?

At least since Kant, however, the hope has been doggedly held that perpetual peace is possible — and that spreading democracy worldwide might well be the key to such a wonderful state. Woodrow Wilson made the expansion of democracy the cornerstone of his presidency. As the eminent historian Daniel Boorstin observed nearly half a century ago,

Wilson’s demand that the world be made safe for democracy expressed the nascent American belief that America should become the norm for the world.

[Daniel Boorstin, P. 25]

George W. Bush has pursued this same tradition. They are hardly alone. Academics, such as Frank Fukuyama, Joshua Muravchik and Michael
Mandelbaum — among many others — have argued similarly in recent academic circles. Why not export democracy? It may be both necessary and inevitable. To quote Michael Mandelbaum:

The events of September 11 therefore demonstrated that the dominant methods for organizing the universal tasks of political and economic organization have no serious rival in the world of the twenty-first century. . . .

The commanding position of free markets and, to a lesser extent, democracy, the dramatic devaluation of war, and the absence of a plausible alternative to the global order of which these are the main elements characterize the conduct of human affairs at the outset of the third millennium. [Mandelbaum, p. 5]

And Joshua Muravchik, (a decade earlier but writing only a few blocks from Mandelbaum):

We should concentrate on continuing to spread democracy in a post-Communist world for three good reasons. The first is empathy without fellow humans. . . .Second, the more democratic the world, the friendlier America's environment will be. . . .Third, the more democratic the world, the more peaceful it is like to be. [Muravchi, p. 8]

Even more succinctly, James Huntley:

To banish both war and democide by promoting democracy is the central task of the coming century, perhaps of the next millennium. [Huntley, p. 3]

By contrast, it should be noted, were towering academics who disagreed. Most notably, Samuel Huntington, writing about the same time as Muravchik:

At a superficial level much of Western culture has indeed permeated the rest of the world. At a more basic level, however, Western concepts differ fundamentally from those prevalent in other civilizations. Western ideas of individualism, liberalism, constitutionalism, human rights, equality, liberty, the rule of law, democracy, free markets, the separation of church and state, often have little resonance in Islamic, Confucian, Japanese, Hindu, Buddhist or Orthodox cultures. [Foreign Affairs, “Clash of Civilizations,” Vol. 72, No. 3, Summer, 1993, p. 40, further developed in a book by the same name in 1996]

And 172 years ago, John Quincy Adams spoke similarly and whose words continue to be quoted almost ad nauseam:

America goes not abroad, in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own. [John Quincy Adams in a Fourth of July speech, 7/4/1821]

How to negotiate between these views or to determine how best to expand democracy, if that indeed is the correct conclusion? Is there some combination of
tradition, interests and leadership that might point in a realistic and effective direction? In any case, taking the longer view, a post-Iraq and post-Bush, might be the more productive perspective.

Finding the Right Metaphor and Analogy

Humans think through the use of metaphors and analogies. It’s not clear what they could think about without them. We think about the future through reference to the past. Often finding the right analogy is the key to understanding the problem, the purpose and the circumstances. It is interesting that the domestic debate about Iraq has been largely a war of which analogy to apply: Vietnam, World War II, World War I, the U.S. Civil War and even Napoleon’s invasion of Russia. Exporting democracy is a commonly used analogy. I will suggest that “importing” democracy is more instructive. Spreading democracy is also more common than “sharing democratic attitudes.” I’ll argue that exporting and spreading lead to distorted notions of what democracy is.

The Notion of Exporting Democracy

The notion of “exporting democracy” is surely an odd one. Who would even speak about exporting monarchy or autocracy? Rather, one exports bananas, iron ore, automobiles and even books. Exporting suggest that it can be wrapped or boxed, shipped and then opened and used. Implied is some kind of mutual benefit — why else bother to do it. And it suggests some level of receptivity on the part of the recipient, else this export might be returned with the stamp “package refused” or “no such addressee.” Exporting is an economic or commercial analogy and so presumes the lack of coercion, although not for all those most aggressive about democracy promotion.

President Bush, in his second Inaugural speech, spoke to this idea of self interest: "The survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands. The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world."

Curiously, Daniel Boorstin anticipated this approach half a century ago, while speaking in the Cold War context:

Recent developments in American thinking about herself, about Europe, and about the world show how fundamental is this simple polar framework. For we find it difficult to believe in the existence of more than one enemy at a time. Our naivete in this respect has never been more striking than during the Second World War, when we reassured ourselves by declaring that the Soviet Union shared our political ideals and international objectives....

The naïve view, fostered by Woodrow Wilson — that most of the ills of the world might be remedied if we bridged the antithesis by bringing American federalism,
representative government, and open diplomacy to countries unfamiliar with them — led us into blind optimism and a desire to embrace the world. That produced its inevitable consequence, a cynical pessimism and nostalgia to be insulated from the world. [P. 38] ....

There is a grave and frightening difference between the old naivete and the new. Today, we are in a position not only to believe in an oversimplified polarity, but to polarize the actual world. To tell ourselves that perpetual peace would be in sight if communism were only conquered, and that all nations are either “democratic” or “communist,” both expresses and reinforces the oversimplified antithesis. There could be no greater catastrophe for American power and diplomacy than success in imposing that misconception on the world. ....That process of sophistication must go on if we are to modify the equally simple, but vastly more dangerous, polarity which drives all who do not like us, and who do not wish to be like us, into the image and the camp of The Enemy. [Boorstin, Pp. 36-39]

A leading Social Democrat, Joshua Muravchik, anticipated Bush's views by a decade:

Although the United States cannot spread democracy through the world by conquest, these cases [Japan, West Germany, Austria, Italy, Grenada, the Dominican Republic and Panama] show that democracy implanted from without rather than grown organically from within, can take hold. In 1939 Assistant Secretary of State Adolph A. Berle declared that “a nation coerced into democracy is not a democratic country.” Although this makes sense intuitively, experience has proved it wrong....

Even though these cases prove that democracy can be fostered from abroad, the question remains how such influence can be exerted without conquest.... America has influenced other countries in the direction of democracy by methods less intrusive than military intervention, such as diplomatic representations, foreign aid, education, propaganda, and even nonaction. The sheer force of its example has been a powerful prod to the rest of the world. [Muravchik, p. 82]

While there does seem nothing in his argument that democracy could not be spread by conquest, since it has already done so, all these examples strike me as rather weak and unimpressive even though one can concede that military force can play a role in restoring democratic governance and in fostering the democratic forces extant already in a country. Muravchik is a good example of those who feel a secular zeal for the spread of democracy:

[W]hat is good for democracy is good for America...[W]e ought never to forget the general rule that the more democratic the world becomes, the more likely it is to be both peaceful and friendly to America. [p. 222] He stands with the Francis Fukuyama when he first gained a certain celebrity when he posited the “end of history.” “With the collapse of communism, liberal democracy now stands alone on the battlefield of ideas.” [Muravchik, p. 201]
He then advocates the exporting of democracy by covert action, foreign aid, propaganda, diplomacy, etc.

The Notion of Importing Democracy

Force can certainly affect the political circumstances, but it is designed essentially to destroy things and kill people. The threat to do this may, on occasion, cause a change in attitude; more often, it changes behavior and a feigned change in attitude.

More interesting and serious examples than those Muravchik suggests might be India and Turkey. They are not, of course, examples of America’s exporting democracy. India, like much of the legacy of British rule, is interesting because it was not primarily a country nor was it colonized by people from the British Isles, bringing their culture and inclinations with them. It was less a case of “exporting” than a legacy that took reasonable hold in a culture where it might not have been obvious or even likely. The process took many decades, grew somewhat haphazardly, involved force and ideas, example and education, and much in between. The colonial India fractured into three parts after independence due to subsequent violence. One can focus on the current India’s many lapses, flaws and limitations, but there is little doubt that it is, in the end, best described as a democracy in contrast to any other type of regime.

Turkey merits consideration since its road was very different and even more surprising. It was not the result of a lengthy occupation by the British, or even a case of particularly strong French or American influence although there is a little of that. It is, in short, not an example of “export” but of “import.” It’s worth pausing to reflect on the contrast of the images of export and import. In the material world, what one exports another must import. They are two sides of the same act. Exporting democracy, however, does not mean that democracy is as eagerly imported by the receiving country. It shows the analogy distorts our understanding.

Ideas, and the attitudes they engender, are among those things are most difficult to contain within the borders of a nation-state. While ideas travel globally, and they can be “broadcast,” they are not really exported. Yet one can visualize ideas as being imported, copied, or taken to heart. This does indeed move us closer to an understanding of how democratic governance spreads. Not by bayonets and force, occupation and coerced democratization, but the subtle power of example, education and hoped-for results.

The great historian Arnold Toynbee (and his co-author) had this to say in 1926 when the dictator and national icon, Kemal Ataturk, was laying the groundwork for a constitutional republic in Turkey. I quote at length because it shows that the
Turks chose from strength, self-respect and with some discrimination from the components of governance that they found adaptable to their culture:

The Turkish Republic which was called into existence on 29 October 1923, … is a monument to the ascendancy which the modern civilization of the West has established in the contemporary world. Had our Western civilization not developed on certain lines, and had it not impressed those peculiar lines of development on non-Western minds by expanding far and wide beyond its first narrow borders, it is inconceivable that a Turkish Republic, equipped with a constitution like that of 20 April 1924, and governed by policies like those of Turkish statesmen in 1925, should ever have come into existence in the interior of Anatolia.

Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that everything in contemporary Turkey which has life in itself or interest for a foreign observer can be traced back to some Western stimulus and will be found to be a reaction against Western influence when not an emanation from it. The Turkish Army, whose prowess enabled the founders of the Republic to secure Turkish independence within the frontiers to which they laid claim, has been equipped and organized on Western models under the menace of conquest by Western (or Westernized) Powers. Turkish agriculture — the basic industry of the country — derives its chief profits by exporting its produce to Western markets, and is beginning to carry on its operations with Western-made agricultural machinery. The political idea on which the Turkish state is constructed — the conception of a nationally homogenous, administratively centralized, absolutely sovereign state which must be served by its citizens as a jealous god, intolerant of variety or autonomy in any form — has been taken over bodily from that idea of the state which took shape in modern France. The education and emancipation of women, which has proceeded perhaps more rapidly than any other change in the changing Turkey of the last few years, has been inspired in a general way by the feminist movement in the English-speaking communities of the West, and in some measure can be traced directly to the influence of one American education institution in Constantinople. Turkish education in every branch, the form and content of Turkish literature, and even the evolution of the language (which, next to the relation between the sexes, is perhaps the most intimate feature in the life of a community) at present display unmistakably the all-pervasive influence of this current setting in from the Western world.

In A.D. 1774, it would have seemed fantastic to prophesy that the [Ottoman] Empire would survive, truncated, for another hundred-and-fifty years, and that when it fell to pieces there would emerge from it, as from a chrysalis, a Turkish nation, capable of holding its own against the nations of the West and ambitious to gain admittance to their society on a footing of equality by adapting itself to their way of life. [Turkey by Arnold Toynbee and Kenneth Kirkwood (Charles Scribners: New York, 1927, pp. 2-4]

They go on to note:

The fundamental fact in modern Turkish history is that the Turks, starting from an historical background and a social system far removed from ours, have latterly been coming on to our ground as fast as it has been humanly possible for them to travel over the rough country that intervenes … [ p. 8]
As an aside, it is interesting that he also notes: “Incidentally, the Turks, White Men though they are, do not feel that repugnance towards associating on a footing of moral equality with Coloured People which is so pronounced among the Protestant ‘Nordic’ peoples of the Western world — particularly those which speak the English language.”]

They cite a Count Ostrorog on the Islamic dimension of the constitution showing a shrewd blending of ideas with due attention to ground what Westerners would not see as a likely approach:

... the new Constitution ... is quite distinctly Muslim in spirit.

“...In the Mohammedan conception the rights of individual liberty and property do not merely represent axioms of human psychology and economic common sense. They have their foundation in the tenets of orthodox faith, the rights of individual liberty and property being described in the Mohammedan creed as forming part of the rights originally given by God to Man to enable him to accomplish his duties on earth. Consequently, they cannot be abolished in a Mohammedan country unless the Mohammedan creed itself be previously abolished.”

Finally, writing in their own voice they observe;

Thus it will be seen that the Constitution is in strict conformity with traditional Islamic law and customs, and also that it is a distinct denial of any form of Marxism or communism which recognizes no rights of private property. Indeed, the tenor of the Constitution reflects a general national attitude which has no sympathy whatever for Bolshevik ideals. The foreign political ideas by which the Constitution is inspired are not of Bolshevik but of Western origin. For example, the sovereignty of Parliament ... is here erected into a constitutional theory. ...

In addition to the Constitution, which states, in simple and concise fashion, the principles upon which the new Republican State is built, and its machinery of operation, a whole new fabric of state law and legislation has been adopted or is being prepared with as much speed as is expedient, together with administrative reforms. A great step in advance had previously been taken by the supersession of those religious courts in which the Qur’anic laws of the Sheri’ah were administered, often very badly....Much of this old-fashioned body of Ottoman law was discarded and replaced by new codes and legal reforms which in themselves are remarkable evidence of the distance which the Turkish mind has advanced along the road of Westernization. Early in the year 1926 the Minister of Justice, Mahmud Es‘ad Bey, brought before the Assembly a new penal code of 700 articles, adapted from the Italian Code, a new civil code of 1.800 articles taken from Switzerland, and a new commercial code of 700 articles borrowed from Germany....The training of qualified judges and of advocates well grounded in the new legislation and procedure is a wise measure, and shows how well Mustafa Kemal Pasha understands that none of his revolutionary reforms can be made lasting without a widespread educational activity for disseminating and inculcating the new institutions and ideas. Education and reform must march hand in hand; and, in the fields of technology, agriculture, law, dress and other
social customs, religion, and indeed in all departments of life, the schools —
general and specialized — are to be organized with a view to teaching the new
revolutionary principles. [pp./ 201-202]

In short, Turkey provides a powerful case study of a country having defined itself,
in no small part by defeating Western powers, then having the strength and self-
respect to import what it thought valuable from the West and making it their own
through adaptation. It is perhaps both remarkable and tragic that Turkey remains,
nearly a century later, and with all its flaws, the most notable example of an
Islamic country’s path toward democracy.

Safety First: The Lesson of Hobbes

At some basic level, we all understand what Hobbes became so notable for
teaching: a basic sense of security is the first order of any political regime.
Security is what makes other political arrangements and objectives possible. We
know this walking alone down a dark street when a suspicious person appears or
when a riot breaks out in our neighborhood.

Yet, those most enthusiastic about democracy reversed the order of things, in
their minds, at the macro level. Democracy is the source of stability, peace and
prosperity. Democracy first and security will surely follow. Alas, no one else was
convinced. At least a basic, low-level of order needs to be achieved before more
noble goals, such as peace, democracy, and prosperity can be contemplated. In
this sense, making the world safe for democracy had a grain of truth that making
the world safe through democracy expansion did not. To cite the noted
communitarian advocate Amitai Etzioni:

[O]ne can be fully committed to promoting democracy on a worldwide scale
(albeit with democratic means and not at the point of a tank, bayonets, or cruise
missiles) and still realize that, in the short run, security is needed first. I cannot
stress enough that I am not opposed to the promotion of democracy (and other
elements of autonomy) across national borders; on the contrary, I am all in favor.
However, I argue that democratic developments cannot be rushed, while
rudimentary safety cannot wait.

Aside from short-order democratization being unable to deliver on a strategy
that seeks to establish world peace, it also provides a poor source of
legitimacy. ...

Non-safety missions — democratization included — must wait until there is
basic security. To try to build democratic institutions in short order in a newly
freed nation that lacks sociological elements of modernity is a violation of the
principle of self-restraint. More importantly, such a policy flies in the face of major
social forces, and it is as likely succeed as pilots who pay no mind to gravity.
[Amitai Etzioni. Pp. 34-35]

The Predicates that Make Democracy a Poor Export but a possible Import
Etzioni is also interesting in stressing not democratic institutions and procedures, but a communitarian approach to find common values first upon which democracy might be built.

While there are many formulas used to define democracy, I would suggest that democracy can be seen as the combination of four necessary elements:

1. Attitudes 
2. Institutions 
3. Procedures 
4. Results

The enthusiasts for the exporting of democracy tend to emphasize institutions and procedures in service of the results that they understand derive from the former two. Institutions, or a semblance of them, can, with some difficulty, be created where they have not existed previously, in a kind of tabula rasa imposition. A constitution can be written, legislative bodies and courts established, parties founded and elections held. Those who receive a majority (or whatever else the rules may requires) can take office.

The attitudes of the public, the citizens, are too often overlooked. Were it not so, the notion of “exporting” would not occur. How does one “export” attitudes? One would be hard pressed, introspectively, to clearly designate how any one attitude one has was shaped and rooted in one’s personality.

Those wishing to expand the scope of democratic governance might then think in terms of three dimensions: time, space and mind. Expanding democracy through time, over space and into a more democratic awareness or consciousness. We know well the “march of democracy” through history. That is generally how civics is taught. We now want to see democratic governance expand geographically into other nation-states. To do so, we need to concentrate on those qualities of mind or attitudes that make such geographical expansion possible. Delineating progress in these two non-historical dimensions is far more difficult.

Let me outline seven crucial attitudes that need to be present for democratic institutions and procedures to achieve democratic results.

1. Respect. This is different than “equality” and rights but clearly similar. It may, indeed, see people in different orders or classes; even tribes and ethnic groups.
2. Responsibility. There is a standard of what is good for the group and an awareness that those who have power need to use it toward that end.
3. Responsiveness. Those with power take into consideration, even if they do not follow it precisely, what the larger public wants.
4. Restraint. Wielding power, even if the goal is the highest, must not be without a humility and cautiousness.
5. Rule of Law. The ordering of society is not simply through personal exercise of will, however benign, but through stable, recognizable rules that continue from one ruler to the next.
6. Reasonableness. Reason and deliberation are a way of sharing power and persuading others to join in the political order.
7. Participation. While there are clearly those who exercise power, citizens generally are acknowledged to have a role in exercising power as well and thereby have a sense of citizenship.

One can, of course, fashion a somewhat different list and emphasize words that don’t begin with an “r” but whatever the listing, it defies the use of language to thinking of “exporting” any of these. One can demonstrate them. One can explain them. One might devise exercises to make them better understood on a more practical level. But these are not “things” which some people have and can then be sent to those who do not. Rather, one fosters these “habits of the heart” as well as the mind. It also allows for what Seymour Martin Lipset called that “absurd fact” a disproportionate number of the world’s democracies are monarchies. And, one might add, the path toward democracy is often paved by dictators.

On the more positive side, it is not naïve or jejeune to argue that these are qualities or attitudes present in every culture, at least at the family level, to some degree and in some fashion. Those who want to shape democratic institutions and procedures need to look to where these attitudes are in a particular culture and innovatively build toward political institutions and procedures.

The Problem of Competence; The Problem of Assumed Omnicompetence

The problem, as Frank Knight, a legendary economist at the University of Chicago, was fond of saying: It’s not so much what we don’t know, but that we know so much that ain’t so. Robert Dahl argues that in a democracy authority derives from choice, competence and economy. One might well ask if any of these three are operative in expanding democratic governance, but especially the middle one — competence. Does a country that has enjoyed a relative distance from other countries, allowing it to know relatively little and be modestly engaged in other cultures, the competence to engender democratic attitudes and thereby shape democratic institutions in far-flung countries. It often seems that a strong history of being democratic may cloud the understanding of how one becomes democratic.

In arguing that “global meliorism” has become an eighth tradition in American foreign policy, a shrewd scholar of the United States and its foreign policy, Walter
McDougall describes this tendency in the following manner (and well before the presidency of George W. Bush):

Global Meliorism is simply the socio-economic and politico-cultural expression of an American mission to make the world a better place. It is based on the assumption that the United States can, should, and must reach out to help other nations share in the American dream. The modal verbs “can, should, and must” in turn imply the assumptions that the American model is universally valid, that morality enjoins the United States to help others emulate it, and that the success of the American experiment itself ultimately depends on other nations escaping from dearth and oppressions....Wilson just hoped to make the world safe for democracy; Global Meliorists aim to make the world democratic. [McDougall, pp 173-174.]

And later in the same work he is even more direct in elaborating and then critically examining the point:

On what principle is Global Meliorism based? It rests on the conviction that most of the phenomena that threaten us in this century — aggressive powers, “crazy” regimes, revolution terrorism, and ethnic, racial, and religious hatred — are in great part the products of oppression and poverty. From that principles it follows that a wise foreign policy will attack the causes rather than symptoms of discord by promoting democracy, defending human rights, and fostering economic growth. Meliorism assumes that the United States alone possesses the power, prestige, technology, wealth, and altruism needed to reform whole nations. It assumes that the U.S. government, having tamed its frontier and helped its people achieve unprecedented wealth and freedom, having democratized Germany and Japan and rebuilt Europe, having led the free world to victory over fascism and communism, knows how to deploy its assets to lift up the poor and oppressed. Finally, it assumes that Americans want their government to dedicate their lives, fortunes, and sacred honor to that purpose.

None of these postulates is proven; in fact, every one may be false.... Yet, however well meant, Global Meliorism is the least effective and in some ways the most arrogant of all our diplomatic traditions. [pp. 208-209]

Even an enthusiast for global democracy, Michael Mandelbaum voices remarkable caution about hubris and government competence to promote democracy:

So while cultures do change and have always changed, and while they have changed more rapidly and broadly in the modern period than ever before, they cannot readily be changed by acts of official policy. Liberal political systems require the rule of law, liberal economics a financial system and private property, liberal security policies a commitment to warlessness. All involve values and all have evolved, where they exist, over the course of generations. Establishing liberal political and economic institutions and embracing liberal security policies is less like architecture than like horticulture.

This means that, at the outset of the twenty-first century, deliberate, organized collective action had less potential to achieve major political goals than
had been the case in the preceding two hundred years....The diffusion of liberal values, practices, and institutions, the crucial feature of international life at the outset of the twenty-first century, cannot be summoned and controlled in the same way. It is not readily initiated or targeted. In this case history is not made; it happens.

.... The achievement of their [the liberal world powers] supreme international goal, the creation of a fully liberal world, depended less on what other countries did beyond their borders than on how those countries evolved within them....A version of a venerated American joke illustrates the point: “How many psychiatrists does it take to change a light bulb? None. The light bulb must want to change itself. [Mandelbaum, pp. 380-381]

Indeed, it points to a modern-day John Quincy Adams formulation by the renowned analyst George Kennan who argued that a proper foreign policy

...would restrict our undertakings to the limits established by our own traditions and resources. It would see virtue in our minding our own business wherever there is not some overwhelming reason for minding the business of others. [Kennan, p. 221]

Perhaps we will also come to this conclusion by a preeminent historian and former Librarian on Congress, writing 46 years ago:

In recent years, as we have become conscious of our great role on the world stage, we have read and written a lot about American life and the American destiny. Much of it expresses the callowness of our not yet having discovered the range of our national incompetence. Most of it expresses the malaise that comes from continuing to judge our culture by irrelevant European standards. All of it expresses the confusion that comes from our pretending to be a World Capital before we have quite ceased to be a province of Europe.

Our attitude toward our own culture has recently been characterized by two qualities, braggadocio and petulance. Braggadocio — empty boasting of American power, American virtue, American know-how — has dominated our foreign relations now for some decades. It is the spirit of making the world safe for democracy, of unconditional surrender, of crusading for the American way of life — in a word, of belief in American omnicompetence. [Boorstin, pp. 13-14]

....What both the braggadocio spirit and the petulant spirit have in common is that they both overestimate our national capacity. They both assume that a great nation like us can do whatever it wishes. They share the illusion of omnicompetence, which has haunted every world power. [P. 15]

A Return to Civic Education

A conclusion would be a hoped-for confident modesty about what can be done and what cannot be achieved. Self-improvement is always hard, for individuals and societies. Greater attention to improve what we know best — ourselves. That might well need to be coupled with a greater interest in the rest of the world
followed by an improved understanding. From that we might facilitate civics education where people elsewhere indicate an interest in both learning about the values, institutions, and processes of democratic governance and for outside assistance in gaining this understanding. That is not messianic or grandly satisfying emotionally, but it is practical and I believe realistic. My impression, based on over a decade of working at the U.S. Information Agency, an even longer observation of the work of the Center for Civic Education and, more recently, becoming active in another organization, the Center for Civic Education is rather optimistic.

Even with major disagreements over policy and a dislike if not a loathing of current political leadership, people almost everywhere in the world respond to sincere and reasonable efforts to be helpful. Translating books, conducting workshops, writing essays, and providing practical exercises in democratic governance at the local level, is rarely resented because it is so deeply desired. Books rather than bayonets, teachers rather than tanks and classes rather than convoys. American impatience will find this slow, gradual process highly unsatisfactory. So be it. Rome wasn't built in a day. The perfect system of governing, providing permanent peace and prosperity may never be developed.

In short, the expansion of democratic governance, over time, space and consciousness is slow and difficult. Fostering attitudes of respect, responsibility, responsiveness, restraint, rule of law, reasonableness and citizenship is slow, hard, sometimes obscure work. It is hard enough to deepen these attitudes in ourselves. Harder yet to inculcate and develop them in others. The less we know of these others, the harder it is. Humility in the exercise of power and in the effort to spread democracy should infuse both.

Bibliography

@ Robert A. Schadler