



# BACKGROUND

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## Cleaning Up the Mess: Renewing our Support for Democracy after George W. Bush

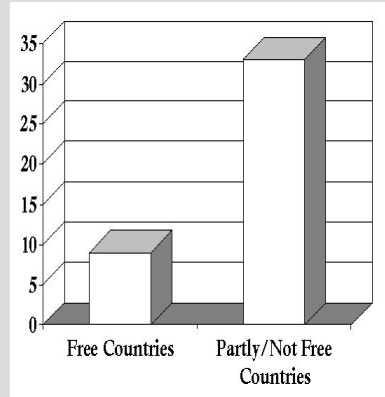
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The Bush administration has given democracy a bad name. After a steady fifty-year rise in the number of democracies worldwide, democratic progress in the world has ground to a halt. President Bush's policy of "democracy promotion" has done the opposite by rushing towards elections without building stable democratic foundations first. He has undermined American credibility by cynically justifying the war in Iraq on democratic grounds after the initial rationale for war - Saddam's alleged weapons of mass destruction - proved empty. He loudly proclaims the moral superiority of his "freedom agenda," while simultaneously supporting friendly autocrats and sanctioning the use of torture. In the eyes of the world, George W. Bush has turned the word democracy into a euphemism for hypocrisy and war.

America is better than that. Liberal democracy is too important to American security and values to let the Bush legacy undermine our traditional support for free institutions abroad. The next American president must take a radically different approach in order to restore the promise of democracy and rebuild America's reputation. Here are several essential steps Congress can take to do just that.

law, a free press and a strong civil society, fragile democracies risk backsliding when confronted with destabilizing political or economic challenges. We need a renewed focus on building democratic political cultures everywhere, not just in countries that are ready to hold elections. This will not only further the cause of freedom, but by delivering democracy in the form of free speech instead of mocking the cause as with war in Iraq, we will reclaim our image as the legitimate world champion of democratic values.



**Country Origins of Terrorist Organizations**

*State Department Foreign Terrorist Organizations List 2008, Freedom House Rankings 2007*

### Why should America support democracy in other countries?

#### Reason #1: Our Safety

Authoritarian countries breed terrorists and provide safe havens for global terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda.

A growing body of evidence suggests that democracies experience fewer civil wars than non-democracies.<sup>1</sup>

Democracies rarely, if ever, go to war with one another.<sup>2</sup>

**1.) Invest in democratic institutions.** Elections are only the tip of the iceberg. They rely on institutions such as a free press, civil liberties and the right to organize an opposition. We need to put our democracy dollars to work on behalf of free institutions. Without the rule of

**2.) Send clear signals in key elections.** When free and fair elections take place, the United States should support them. Conversely, when rigged elections are passed off as democracy, America must have the courage to set the record straight. The Bush administration came dan-

<sup>1</sup> Oneal and Russett. *Triangulating Peace*, Norton & Co. (2001).

<sup>2</sup> Charles Lipson. *Reliable Partners: How Democracies Have Made a Separate Peace*, Princeton (2005).



generously close to breaking this cardinal rule in Pakistan. Although 89% of Pakistanis believe their government should cooperate with the United States in the fight against terrorism, the Bush administration appeared to back strongman Pervez Musharraf for security reasons.<sup>3</sup> Although the administration eventually came around and stood up for Pakistani voters, its mixed signals made America's talk of democracy look half-hearted and opportunistic. We must understand that political "strongmen" provoke violent opposition, which does not help us create a stable world order - however it may appear to in the short-term.

**3.) Call a spade a spade.** We have no choice but to cooperate with authoritarian regimes from time to time, but that does not mean we have to call them democracies. Liberal democracy is a political system that values human rights and government accountability to the will of the people. It is not a catch phrase to be used for dictators that cooperate with us. During a trip to the Middle East in January 2008 President Bush praised Arab allies and security partners for their democratic progress. This is unacceptable pandering. There are no liberal democracies in the Arab world. There are some stable and

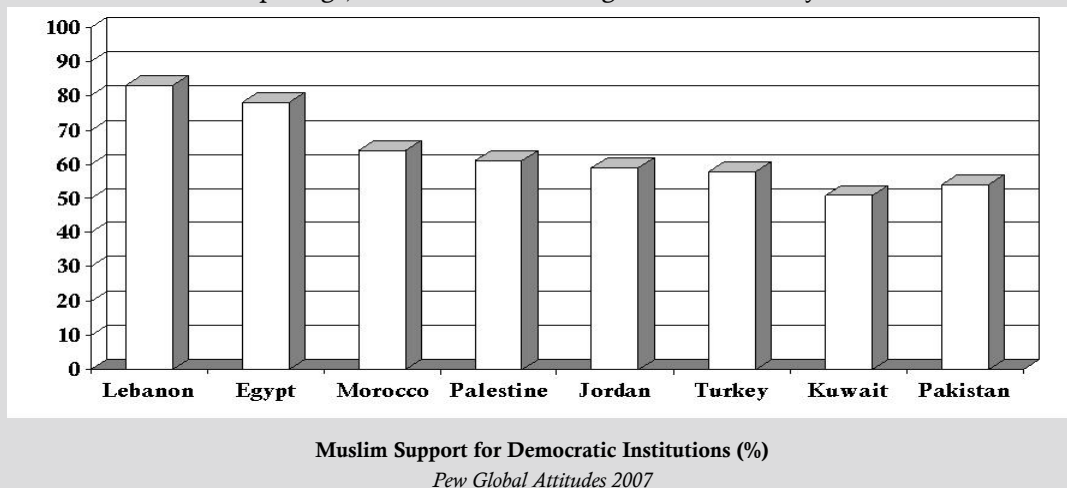
cooperative Arab governments, but they are not democratic. Instead of acknowledging this reality, President Bush commended Middle Eastern states on progress in human rights and civil liberties that had never taken place.<sup>4</sup> By referring to authoritarian strategic partners as democracies, we cheapen the meaning of democracy, set a bad example for other countries and open wide the doors of cynicism. Instead, the next administration should strike a balance between sticking to our principles and being realistic about U.S. strategic interests.

**4.) Commit to alternative energy.** Oil kills democracy. There are twenty-three countries in the world whose oil and gas products constitute more than 60% of their total exports. None of them are democracies. With massive energy revenues, governments do not need taxes, so they have no need to create accountable democratic structures. Corruption in oil and gas rich states gives a free hand to autocratic governments. Just as the addict has no power over the dealer, the deeper America's oil addiction becomes, the less freedom we have to encourage democratic reforms in such countries. Iran is a textbook example of how an oil state can stand against both domestic and international pressure. Reducing our

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#### Reason #2: Our Image in the World

People everywhere, including majorities in Muslim countries, desire democracy. Working to promote free institutions - not farcical elections or controversial wars - would ingratiate us worldwide, improving our prestige, our international image and our security.



<sup>3</sup> Polling on support for the war against terror and party support was conducted Jan. 19-29, 2008 by the International Republican Institute.

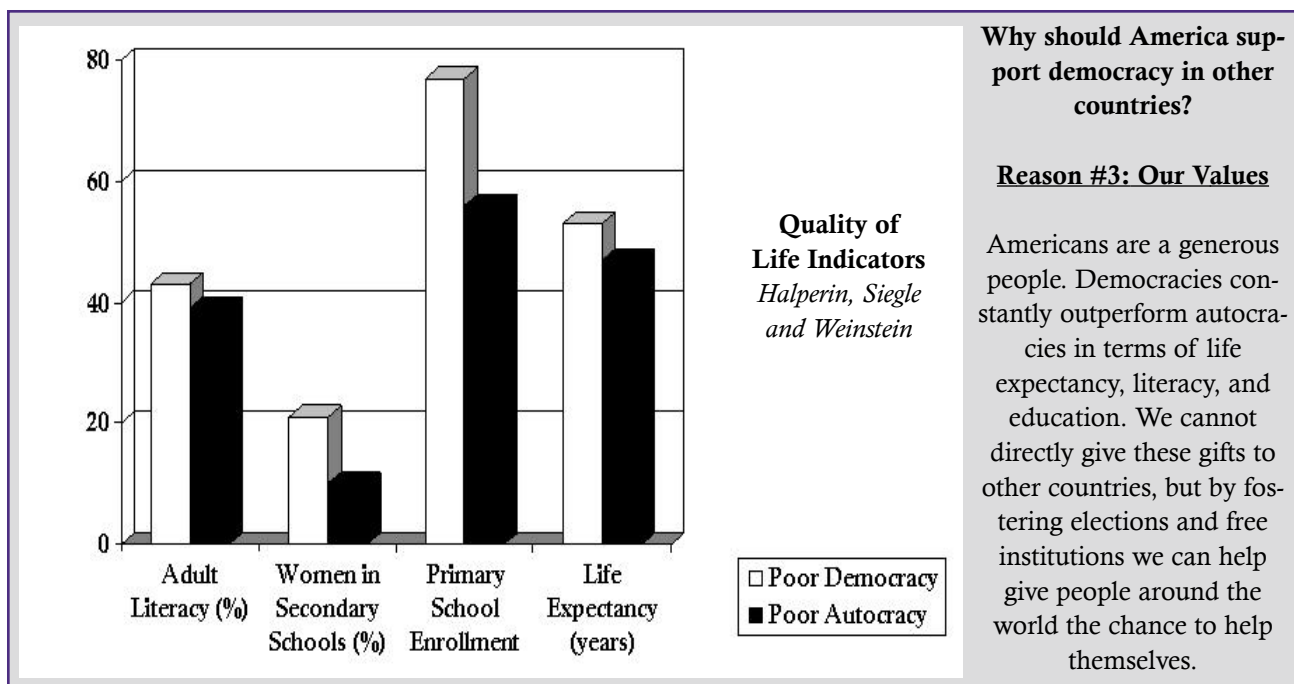
<sup>4</sup> According to Freedom House Freedom in the World surveys (2002 and 2008 Reports), of all the countries visited on the tour, only the United Arab Emirates was actually perceived as less corrupt than it was 6 years ago.

dependence on oil would give us the freedom to push for reforms in authoritarian countries - whether they are strategic allies or rivals - and increase the number of democratic alliances we can enjoy.

**5.) Work with allies.** Supporting democracy is not and should not be a solo U.S. endeavor. We have allies all around the world who share our desire to support the spread of democracy, many of which have knowledge and pull that we lack. Especially in countries where the U.S. has had a checkered history, the support of better-trusted allies is indispensable. Greater numbers also imply greater credibility. By stonewalling our closest democratic allies and invading oil-rich Iraq with little international support, George Bush's claim to be promoting democracy in the Middle East is dismissed as a farce in every corner of the globe. This is a tragedy for America's reputation and for the advance of democratic freedoms. We must not repeat this mistake.

move which has rightly been supported by the State Department. President Bush, along with Congress, should support international efforts to allow the true victors of Zimbabwe's elections to take power. Democracy in Zimbabwe will not only free its people from unimaginable 100,000% inflation, but it is crucial to preventing the implosion of a major African country, with the security threats such a failed state implies.

**7.) Set an example at home.** We cannot preach what we do not practice. America is under worldwide scrutiny after the abuses of Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay. Not only do our detainee policies endanger our troops, they give the impression that Americans believe torture works. George Kennan, the father of the bipartisan Cold War containment strategy, realized that our ability to beat out the Soviets depended largely on the "health and vigor of our own society." In order to beat the Communists we had to be better than them. The same lesson applies today. In order to beat the terrorists and



**6.) Set an Example Abroad.** By acting now we can begin restoring our tattered reputation. As you read this, the corrupt regime of Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe is arresting, torturing and murdering members of the democratic opposition. Mugabe has refused to publish the results of the presidential election that, according to the local NGO consortium and the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, he lost. Zimbabwe's neighbors have bravely refused to allow a shipment of weapons from China to enter the landlocked country, a

discredit despotic regimes, we cannot resort to their tactics. American ideals can be no more attractive than the America that espouses them. By taking a definitive stand against torture and human rights abuses, it will not be necessary to convince people abroad that democracy is the handmaiden of freedom. They will already believe it.



## Good Answers to Tough Questions

**Q: Elections brought the terrorist group Hamas to power in Palestine. Doesn't that prove the dangers of democracy in the Middle East?** A: It only proves the foolishness of President Bush's policy of rushing towards elections in a place where the foundations of liberal democracy do not exist. Hamas refused to relinquish the use of force and its most extreme elements call for the destruction of Israel. This stance is not allowed in any other democratic system and it makes a mockery of the democratic commitment to liberty and the dignity of human life. Hamas should not have been allowed to run until it renounced violence.

**Q: How do we reconcile our support for Saudi Arabia with our belief in democracy and our fight against terrorists?** A: Saudi Arabia is the greatest source of terrorism in the Middle East today. Corrupt secular leaders have spent decades buying off the more conservative population, but this policy is becoming less and less effective. The disenchanted populace lacks the political freedom to voice its concerns, and violence in prisons leads to violent radicalization. This is not a stable situation and if it does not evolve it will explode. Although Saudi Arabia is also a long-standing ally whose oil is absolutely essential to the world economy, it must be asked to change. Supporting the development of free institutions - such as freedom of speech and the press - will give the people of Saudi Arabia a voice and a chance for different opinions to temper growing extremism, creating the conditions in which liberal democratic elections can one day take place.

**Q: What about cultures that have no history of democracy? Isn't it possible that some cultures just can't handle it?** A: People have said the same thing about many cultures that are firmly democratic today. The English said it about the Irish. Americans said it about Italians. Europeans said it about every country they colonized - including India, now the world's largest democracy. It used to be an article of faith that Asian and Islamic cultures would be completely incapable of democracy, but Japan, Indonesia, and Turkey have proved them wrong. Nurturing democracy where it has little history is difficult, but not impossible. The key is giving the initiative to local democrats who are more sensitive to their own cultural traditions than we could ever be. In doing so, we can foster the development of the free institutions that act as the building blocks of democracy.

**Q: Some of our most steadfast allies in the War on al-Qaeda are autocrats. Are we just supposed to stop working with them and push for democracy instead? Isn't al-Qaeda the real enemy?** A: Al-Qaeda is indeed the real enemy, which is all the more reason to push for democratic reform in authoritarian countries. Majorities of Muslims throughout the world yearn for the free institutions that al-Qaeda despises. Supporting the creation of those institutions must be part of a long-term strategy to bury terrorists under a growing tide of liberal values. In the short-term, we have no choice but to cooperate with anti-terrorist autocrats. But autocratic countries are never as stable as they seem. The rapid demise of the Soviet Union proves that even the strongest of repressive governments can fall at a moment's notice. It is in the interest of the United States and our autocratic allies to work towards democratic reform and free institutions, lest discontent fester into open revolution. We cannot foist democracy on authoritarian countries overnight. But we can and must encourage their evolution towards a democratic dawn.

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