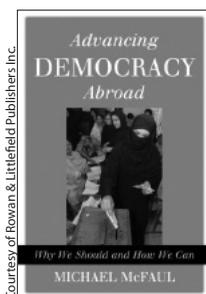


Book Reviews



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Advancing Democracy Abroad: Why We Should and How We Can

by Michael McFaul

Reviewed by John Coffey, retired Foreign Affairs Officer
at the US State Department

Michael McFaul, Stanford professor of political science currently serving as Senior Director for Russian and Eurasian affairs at the National Security Council, has written a cogent case for the proposition that people around the world would be better off under democracy and that promoting democracy serves American interests. In lucid prose free of social science jargon, McFaul aims to rescue democracy promotion from the disrepute it incurred under George W. Bush's Administration, arguing that with the right policies the United State should and can make democracy promotion a cardinal principle of our foreign policy.

McFaul puts forward a minimalist definition of democracy as "electoral democracy," that is, a system where leaders are chosen by all citizens in competitive elections. Yet democracy, simply, merely allows majority rule over the minority. McFaul concedes that head-counting alone will not secure the political components of the "liberal democracy" he intends (e.g., constraints on executive power by other independent branches of government, freedom for all groups to express their interests and contest elections, independent associations and channels of expression, equality under the rule of law, an autonomous judiciary). McFaul seems to presume that "electoral democracy" will produce the blessings of "liberal democracy" instead of the ability of 51 percent of the people to eat the other 49 percent, a point to which we shall return.

The utilitarian standard of the greatest good for the greatest number underpins McFaul's brief for democracy. Democratic government, he maintains, "benefits the populace more than any other system." It is accountable, correctible, more conducive to individual freedoms, and more apt to produce competent leaders than autocracy. Moreover, democracies better foster economic growth, stability, and peace (at least with other democracies) than autocracies.

Expanding democracy would make the world a better place, McFaul believes; that, however, is not America's purpose. The author contends that enlightened self-interest commends democracy promotion because it serves US security and prosperity. History demonstrates that the internal character of foreign regimes affects American interests; all our enemies have been autocracies. Conversely, not all autocracies have been enemies of the United States; yet McFaul judges that the long-term liabilities outweigh the short-term security gains made by collaborating with autocracies (e.g., Iran, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan). No democracy has been our enemy, on the other hand, and

democracy's expansion has enriched us. Promoting its spread would strengthen America and put us on the right side of world opinion. In a flight of fancy, the author envisions democratization extending to the Middle East and Asia, including Russia, China, even the Hermit Kingdom of North Korea. "Sound fanciful?" McFaul asks, "No crazier than dreaming the same for Europe in 1948." This, despite the fact that not a shred of the liberal-democratic tradition has marked the political cultures and histories of those countries.

If the goal of global democracy is grandiose, the practical measures McFaul sets forth to implement it are limited and achievable. America should eschew "regime change," encouraging instead incremental political liberalization and helping to consolidate democracy where it has already taken root. The United States should support civil society nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), condition US aid on domestic reforms, promote trade liberalization, and work with multinational organizations committed to democratic norms. McFaul's policy agenda is similar to the "neoliberal foreign policy" advocated by Ambassador Dennis Ross, currently Senior Director for the Central Region at the National Security Council (NSC), in his book, *Statecraft*. Ross proposes that the United States assist gradual political liberalization without forcing premature democratic processes. Ross would avoid the now-jaded term "democracy" altogether in favor of modest reforms in good governance, combating corruption, and respect for minority and women's rights.

This meliorist approach was taken by Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton during her July trip to Ukraine, Poland, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia. The theme of Clinton's trip was democratic promotion, and in a speech (crafted, we can assume, by McFaul) to the Community of Democracies in Krakow, Clinton stressed the importance of civil society in building the sinews of representative government and free markets. Noting the recent assault on NGOs by autocratic regimes, Clinton offered cooperative steps and US financial support for embattled NGOs. "Democratic values," she proclaimed, "are a cornerstone of our foreign policy."

"In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men," James Madison wrote, "the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself. A dependence on the people is, no doubt, the primary control on the government; but experience has taught mankind the necessity of auxiliary precautions." McFaul's minimalist "electoral democracy" will not create the "liberal democracy" he desires. For that "auxiliary precautions" are necessary. Popular rule, the Founders understood, offers no guarantee of decent, stable, effective self-government. McFaul wants to give voice to the people of the world. Our Founders sought to temper and refine the peoples' voice. Majority rule by itself provides no check on a bad or foolish majority. To secure that end the Framers devised a democratic-republic with an elaborate system of checks and balances to divide and limit power to safeguard individual liberty. McFaul rightly warns that the Anglo-American concern with individual liberty may not

be suitable for different political cultures. He does not draw the implication that decent, stable, effective self-government may not be feasible for most peoples.

Political culture matters above all else. Missing from McFaul's account of democracy's prospects is recognition of how the vastly different political cultures of peoples—their collective beliefs, values, habits—shape the kind of polity they are capable of. McFaul claims the argument that certain prerequisites (e.g., liberal institutions, the rule of law, literacy, absence of widespread poverty) are necessary for successful democratic development is true only “in the extreme” without explaining why. He states the people of the world want democracy now, bringing to mind H. L. Mencken's quip that “democracy is the theory that the common people know what they want and deserve to get it good and hard.” Nearly all the democracies in the world cited by McFaul lack a track-record. The Anglo-American community represents the only long-standing success of liberal-democracy in the world, a long, arduous struggle beginning with the Magna Carta. When the Americans made their revolution, they did so in the name of the traditional rights of British citizens, who had the benefit of a century and a half of practical self-government during a period of benign imperial neglect. McFaul dismisses Hong Kong and Singapore as exceptions to the rule that liberalism does not evolve from autocracy, alluding to the fact that those policies were the legatees of a British colonial tradition that bequeathed to them a legacy of the rule of law, civil liberties, and honest administration.

In an insightful essay explaining the connection between culture and the values and habits conducive to democratic governance, Lawrence Harrison shows that not all cultures are equal and that few, least of all in the Muslim world, match the Anglo-Protestant culture for fostering viable self-government. Reflecting on the causes which maintain the American democratic-republic, Alexis deTocqueville cited, in addition to material factors such as general prosperity, above all the political culture of the Anglo-Americans: “The laws and customs of the Anglo-Americans are therefore that special and predominant cause of their greatness which is the object of my inquiry.” Beyond the good fortune of physical circumstances and well-adapted laws, Americans' customs accounted for their success: “Almost all the inhabitants of the territory of the Union are the descendants of a common stock; they speak the same language, they worship God in the same manner, they are affected by the same physical causes, and they obey the same laws.”

Global democracy promotion underestimates the uniqueness of the Anglo-American experience and lacks a sense of limits essential to a prudent American foreign policy. McFaul is at pains to distinguish his policy from that of the George W. Bush Administration; nonetheless, McFaul's project shares the missionary zeal of Secretary Condoleezza Rice's “transformational diplomacy,” a grand design to “change the world itself” by constructing an international order reflecting American values. Secretary of State James Baker's table of “Ten Commandments” reminds us that values are not the only thing in foreign policy and that “stability” is “not a dirty word.” Foreign policy cannot be conducted according to the principles of Mother Teresa. “Foreign policy

is not social work,” Baker notes. In the lives of nations nothing is forever; national interests, however, must be secured in the present and near-term, inevitably requiring compromise and trade-offs. Secretary Clinton recognized this in her visit to Azerbaijan, where she muted her democratic reform message in deference to Azerbaijan’s strategic importance as a transit route to Afghanistan.

If the spread of democracy is unlikely to cast autocracies into the dustbin of history along with slavery and imperialism, as McFaul hopes, assisting gradual political liberalization abroad could ameliorate the lot of peoples in developing countries. McFaul sometimes conveys the impression that shoving bad autocracies off the path of history is all that needs to be done to let a thousand democratic flowers bloom. Responsible self-government, though, is hard to establish, harder still to maintain. The story goes that a lady approached Ben Franklin on a Philadelphia street outside the Constitutional Convention, asking, “Mr. Franklin, what have you given us?” Franklin replied, “a republic, madam, if you can keep it.” When Tocqueville surveyed the American scene, he was struck by the wide array of private associations and groups that supplied the life-blood of the democratic-republic. What do Americans typically do when confronting a problem? They form a group to solve it! Quietly and unobtrusively supporting the elements of civil society abroad—labor unions, consumer and environmental groups, women’s and human rights groups, business associations, media outlets, government watch-groups, and the like—not only can improve peoples’ lives, but, most crucially, give them practice in the art of self-government. Lincoln thought the capacity of men to govern themselves “a problematical proposition.” It remains so today.

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