

Varieties of democracy

By Sarah L. Gildea / F. Andy Messing

The Washington Times

September 25, 2006

"The advancement of freedom is the calling of our time; it is the calling of our country." These words, spoken by President Bush nearly three years ago, set out to define U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East.

Hence, freedom becomes America's mission. However, promoting it has become characterized as our excessive burden in terms of lives, fortune and political capital, to the point where the rhetorical push and pull in Congress pits the interests of American citizens against one another. Yet, lost in the mainly partisan scuffle is the recognition of the realities of protracted warfare as it relates to cultivation of democracy. Most Americans have an unrealistic memory of their own history; of the resolve, understanding and effort required to advance freedom.

The United States suffered through a divisive and brutal Revolution to begin governing itself democratically. Following this, five long years spanned before the Articles of Confederation were introduced. Their failure led to a further seven years of deliberation before the U.S. Constitution was instituted.

Decades of postwar disorganization and struggle resulted in the eventual success of this republic. This ideological commitment has been lost on our instant gratification society. Few of us can imagine a deliberative process of government lasting longer than an episode of the television program "West Wing," let alone numerous presidential administrations.

In relation to these facts, Sun Tzu, in "Art of War," articulated the knowledge and endurance required of wartime leaders. He contended that, "An able military commander strengthens his forces, makes the enemy's strengths his own, has a profound understanding of the dangers of protracted war, and aims at ending a military action as soon as possible. Therefore, the general who understands warfare is the key to peace in a country."

Accordingly, the general's strategies in a contested country have a direct bearing on whether a democracy can even be instituted. This requires a subtle and very focused approach to warfare to reach the point where theoretical democratic processes can be addressed. In the case of Iraq, ending our conventional military presence as soon as possible means terminating it when most appropriate. It requires us to remain proactive through alternative strategies; by first and foremost setting a democratic example worthy of emulation within our own country, offering selective security, sociopolitical and economic advice, and fostering a fledgling civil society with developmental aid.

As a nation uncomfortable with intervention, and averse to becoming a warrior state, our impulse to cut and run as soon as elections are held is unfaithful to our own state-building experience. Elections do not guarantee a perfect democracy. The governments of Vladimir Putin, Robert Mugabe, Hugo Chavez, Fidel Castro and possibly elected Daniel Ortega, are testaments to this truth.

This does not mean democracy does not exist in these countries. Instead, it points to the multifaceted nature of democracy; its ability to be molded and used by the leaders and societies it serves.

We need to reorganize our expectations based upon that fact. Fully functioning democracies take time to grow. Commitment transcends timelines, and we must continually remember the difference between forced regime change and the amenable installation of democracy.

Our military operations in Iraq seem feckless and continually morph in their mission. As this insurgency increases, some foreign leaders claim policies designed to promote freedom in the Middle East are themselves a hindrance to it. In response to the recent attempted attack on the U.S. Embassy in Damascus, a representative of the Syrian Embassy in Washington crystallized this view by saying, "It is regrettable that U.S. policies in the Middle East have fueled extremism, terrorism and anti-U.S. sentiment."

These types of seemingly off-the-wall comments are to be expected in war. What is truly regrettable is that this perception thwarts our ability to have a unified mandate to promote freedom and democracy worldwide.

Notably, every country is not designed for the same form of democracy. However, every country's citizens should have the same freedom to choose their governing format for themselves. As Thomas Jefferson treasonously wrote to the British, "Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just Powers from the Consent of the Governed."

Providing this governance is a long, arduous undertaking. It is time for Americans to be patient. We must recognize the multitude of global democratic experiments, even on our own soil, and resist hypocrisy. Our experience with democracy is relatively successful, but we must be wary of forcing our brand of freedom and democracy on others, or risk disillusionment and failure.

Sarah L. Gildea is a graduate student at Germany's Erfurt School of Public Policy and is now a research fellow at the National Defense Council Foundation. F. Andy Messing is NDCF's executive director and is a retired special forces major.