

# The democracy tradition in US foreign policy and the Obama presidency

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President Barack Obama's second inauguration ceremony takes place almost exactly two years to the day after the fall of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's regime in Tunisia and the start of the Egyptian revolution that overthrew Hosni Mubarak. After Obama took office in 2009, commentators lamented or commended, depending on their persuasion, that he appeared to be turning his back on the idea of democracy promotion as a central element of US foreign policy. That was a mistaken reading of the President and of his administration, during its first year especially; but even had his critics been right, the Arab Spring would inevitably have returned the question of democracy to the forefront of America's debate about its international role. This is an issue that refuses to go away, and America's leaders cannot easily escape its pull as a fundamental narrative for thinking about, making and presenting foreign policy. The years since the end of the Cold War have epitomized the enduring influence of a historical democracy tradition on America's engagement with the world. More than ever, its leaders have tried to translate this tradition into a set of specific policies to promote democratization abroad. This was not in any way either a disinterested or a covert enterprise: democratization was overtly acknowledged to represent a strategic benefit for the United States, supposed to produce security and economic gains, and the American self-interest in democracy promotion has always been very explicit. Yet, ironically, it does not reflect any great democratic pressure from American voters. In the regular surveys of public opinion and foreign policy by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, the share of the American public that says that 'helping to bring a democratic form of government to other nations' is a 'very important' foreign policy goal has averaged 24 per cent since polling began in 1975, peaking at 34 per cent in 2002 and falling to its lowest point—14 per cent—in 2012.<sup>1</sup>

Obama's first term confirms that, for all the difficulties and contradictions it produces, US presidents persistently fall back on democracy as a theme and goal of their foreign policy. Predictions that the presidency of George W. Bush, with its 'Freedom Agenda' tied up with the controversial and unpopular wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, would inoculate American leaders against the urge to shape the

<sup>1</sup> Data compiled from Chicago Council surveys of American public opinion and US foreign policy, 1975 to 2012, reports available at [http://www.thechicagocouncil.org/files/Studies\\_Publications/POS/Prior\\_Public\\_Opinion\\_Surveys.aspx](http://www.thechicagocouncil.org/files/Studies_Publications/POS/Prior_Public_Opinion_Surveys.aspx), accessed 6 Dec. 2012.

political evolution of other countries, have proved wrong, just as similar predictions have done before. Bush's policies attracted heavy, often deserved criticism at home and abroad, and yet by the end of his presidency American analysts were busy producing volumes about why their country should keep engaging in democracy promotion.<sup>2</sup> Had he wanted to, Obama would have had a hard time breaking away from this bipartisan tradition, just as Bush did after criticizing Bill Clinton for his democracy promotion, or Ronald Reagan after attacking Jimmy Carter's human rights policy.<sup>3</sup> (If Mitt Romney had been elected, it is unlikely that he would have abandoned democracy promotion either. During his campaign, he extolled his belief in America's exceptionalism and mission to spread freedom abroad, criticized Obama for reacting too slowly to the Arab Spring, and pledged support for Middle Eastern governments and groups in advancing democracy, human rights and economic reforms.)

In a previous article reviewing the Obama administration's democracy promotion after his first two years in office, I argued this could best be done through an analytical framework within which the place of democracy in US foreign policy is understood as a phenomenon playing itself out at three levels: those of ideas, of strategy and of policy.<sup>4</sup> This approach aimed to overcome the problem, frequently encountered in both academic and policy debates, of defining exactly what is meant by 'democracy promotion'. Applying this framework showed that, contrary to what his critics said from the start of his presidency, Obama had given democracy promotion a clear place in his foreign policy—albeit couched in a deliberately much toned-down rhetoric compared to the Bush administration—from the perspective of building up and increasing the number of democratic states able to enter into partnership with the United States in solving global problems, as well as emphasizing the nexus between democracy and development. After two years in office, though, the Obama administration had not shown that it could accommodate democracy in the formulation of policy towards other countries on a case-by-case basis any better than its predecessors. This article elaborates further the three-level analytical framework for interpreting the democracy tradition in America's foreign policy and at each level reviews the main elements of Obama's democracy promotion during his first term to see how well they fit in.

## The democracy tradition: a three-level framework

The American notion that the spread of democracy is not just right *per se* but also good for the United States is as old as the republic. While John Quincy Adams's 1821 dictum that America was the 'champion and vindicator' of its own freedom

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. Morton Halperin and Michael Hochman Fuchs, *The survival and the success of liberty: a democracy agenda for U.S. foreign policy* (New York: Century Foundation Press, 2009); Michael McFaul, *Advancing democracy abroad: why we should and how we can* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> On the enduring pull of democracy for a succession of American presidents, see Michael Cox, Timothy Lynch and Nicolas Bouchet, eds, *Democracy promotion and US foreign policy: from Theodore Roosevelt to Barack Obama* (London: Routledge, forthcoming April 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Nicolas Bouchet, 'Barack Obama's democracy promotion at midterm', *International Journal of Human Rights* 15: 4, 2011, p. 573.

alone typifies a tradition of reluctance to become involved in the domestic affairs of others, Thomas Jefferson's vision of America as an expanding 'empire of liberty' reveals a competing tradition that pushes towards doing precisely that. Thus, from the Founding Fathers onwards, America's leaders have repeatedly expressed the belief that the country must embrace its 'mission' of promoting democracy, however much this has been subordinated to security and economic concerns in practice.<sup>5</sup> They have displayed an enduring belief in 'the utilitarian value of democracy'.<sup>6</sup> The idea that democracy abroad benefits the security and prosperity of the United States is at the heart of the liberal internationalist tendency in its foreign policy, and is closely linked to the idea of the 'unity of goodness', according to which 'all good things go together and ... the achievement of one desirable social goal aids in the achievement of others'.<sup>7</sup> The assumption that a variety of goals can be pursued simultaneously because they are mutually supporting is strongly reflected in the rationale for American democracy promotion.

For most of American history, however, the democracy tradition has operated at an abstract level more than anything else, especially while the country's power and international engagement were too limited for it to be translated into actions on the global stage. As the country grew into a world superpower in the twentieth century, though, the democracy tradition increasingly influenced its leaders as they elaborated strategy and set broad foreign policy goals. Even so, throughout the Cold War the United States, balanced by the Soviet Union and facing other strategic priorities, did relatively little exclusively and specifically to promote democracy abroad. In the 1990s, however, the removal of these constrictions, and a booming economy, gave America unprecedented freedom to project its political values onto the international system and other countries. At the same time, the disappearance of superpower competition helped produce worldwide the final swell of the 'third wave' of democratization that had begun in the 1970s. America's response was in part to set about promoting its model of democracy where the opportunity presented itself, on the basis of the belief that this would lead to favourable security and economic outcomes for itself, making the country safer and richer.

The argument here is not that the spread of democracy has been or is now the pre-eminent driver of US foreign policy, but rather that it is in its own right one influential, persistent strand within it—and one that contributes to shaping other strands, such as security and economics, by conditioning how policy-makers apprehend fundamental national interests. Of course, American history is replete with examples of other goals taking precedence over what is often a diffuse desire to see more democracy abroad, and this remains true today. As Thomas Carothers

<sup>5</sup> Robert Kagan, *Dangerous nation: America's place in the world from its earliest days to the dawn of the twentieth century* (New York: Knopf, 2006); Tony Smith, *America's mission: the United States and the worldwide struggle for democracy in the twentieth century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

<sup>6</sup> Smith, *America's mission*, p. 286.

<sup>7</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *Political order in changing societies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968), p. 5. The argument is elaborated further in relation to aid policy in Robert A. Packenham, *Liberal America and the Third World: political development ideas in foreign aid and social science* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973).

argues, US democracy promotion is 'semi-realist', that is, pursued only when it is consistent with major interests, but taking a back seat when it is not.<sup>8</sup> One could go further and say that when it is pursued it is 'semi-realist and semi-idealist', that is, conceived by policy-makers as being as much for US self-interest as for the general global good.

One can distinguish three levels at which the notion that democratization abroad is desirable for the United States exerts its influence on foreign policy. The *ideational* level locates the source of the democracy tradition in the relationships among deep-rooted American beliefs about political order, national identity, national interest and international relations. Over time, at the *strategic* level these beliefs have shaped American aspirations and influenced the setting of broad goals that include the spread of American political values abroad. However, it is mostly in the past 30 years or so that these strategic goals have been translated gradually into concrete actions designed to promote democracy in specific countries at the *policy* level. In a narrow sense, therefore, the concept of 'democracy promotion' may be best located at this policy level, where actions are taken to give flesh to the belief in the desirability of democratization abroad, though in practice it is widely used as an overall label for the range of ideas and arguments contained in the three levels presented here. While it is possible to analyse the democracy tradition at any of these levels alone, none is entirely self-contained, and a full understanding of American democracy promotion as a discrete policy field requires these three interconnected levels to be taken as elements of a larger whole.

The analytical framework applied here sets the developments of the post-Cold War democracy promotion 'boom' in a wider context. Its three levels can help to structure the study of this phenomenon across both space and time: that is, the role of democracy in foreign policy can be located principally at any one level either in relation to a country or region or in terms of global policy at any one point in history. Reviewing the historical development of US democracy promotion, Tony Smith argues that the American liberal internationalism from which it springs has gone through four phases: (1) a pre-classical phase, from the American revolution to the Spanish–American War of 1898; (2) a classical phase, from 1898 to 1945; (3) a hegemonic phase, from 1945 to 2000; and (4) a progressive imperialist phase since 2000.<sup>9</sup> Borrowing Smith's concept, the analysis presented here suggests a slightly different periodization, with a pre-classical phase of the democracy tradition from the Founding Fathers to the start of the twentieth century, during which it operated almost exclusively at the ideational level; a classical phase from Wilson to the 1980s, in which it operated increasingly at the strategic level; and a modern phase since the 1980s, in which it has slowly begun to operate more at the policy level.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Carothers, *The Clinton record on democracy promotion*, Carnegie Paper no. 16 (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2000), p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Tony Smith, 'Democracy promotion from Wilson to Obama', in Cox, Lynch and Bouchet, eds, *Democracy promotion and US foreign policy*.

## Democracy at the ideational level

American leaders and thinkers have long seen democracy—epitomized by the American liberal model of government—as an important link in a chain of mutually reinforcing ideas. The place they have given it in foreign policy rests on the interplay between their ideas about America's national identity, about the most desirable political order within states, about relations between states, and about what constitutes the national interest. The tendency of Americans to see their national identity in terms of liberal political values inherited at independence and forming an 'American Creed' has been well documented.<sup>10</sup> In Richard Hofstadter's famous formulation, America's fate as a nation has been not to *have* ideologies but to *be* one. The American sense of exceptionalism also rests heavily on the self-image of a state consciously founded on universal liberal democratic principles.<sup>11</sup> The very nature of these principles has caused leaders to define the national interest with a strong ideological dimension.<sup>12</sup> Their tendency to see America's identity as being 'about' its political order or model of government has thus led them historically to view other countries as being also 'about' their forms of government rather than just their actions in the international arena. The identification of the nation itself with democratic political principles and their spread also links the influences of the American Creed and nationalism to a civilizational sense of mission.<sup>13</sup>

Exceptionalism based on a politically defined national identity has also fed a mixed sense of ideological and physical vulnerability that has led American leaders to seek absolute security through interests defined at least in part in ideological terms.<sup>14</sup> It has provided the rationale for seeing any non-democratic regime—that is, any that does not share American political values and institutions—as a potential, perhaps even a mortal, threat to American democracy, and by extension to the country itself. 'Destroy the political system and you destroy the basis of community, eliminating the nation,' is how Samuel Huntington describes this fear.<sup>15</sup> As Michael Hunt points out, the seminal US strategic document of the Cold War, NSC-68, argues that the 'defeat of free institutions anywhere is defeat everywhere', including in the United States.<sup>16</sup> During the Vietnam War, similarly,

<sup>10</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *American politics: the promise of disharmony* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1981), pp. 16–30. See also Louis Hartz, *The liberal tradition in America: an interpretation of American political thought since the revolution* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1955).

<sup>11</sup> See e.g. Samuel P. Huntington, 'The West: unique, not universal', *Foreign Affairs* 75: 6, 1996; Seymour Martin Lipset, *American exceptionalism: a double-edged sword* (New York: Norton, 1996); John Gerard Ruggie, 'The past as prologue? Interests, identity, and American foreign policy', *International Security* 21: 4, 1997, pp. 89–125.

<sup>12</sup> For overviews of the historical-ideological roots of US foreign policy thinking, see Michael H. Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. foreign policy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987); Walter Russell Mead, *Special providence: American foreign policy and how it changed the world* (London: Routledge, 2002); Henry Nau, *At home abroad: identity and power in American foreign policy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002); Adam Quinn, *US foreign policy in context: national ideology from the founders to the Bush Doctrine* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>13</sup> Anatol Lieven, *America right or wrong: an anatomy of American nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 70. On American nationalism, see also Mead, *Special providence*, ch. 7.

<sup>14</sup> Christopher Layne, *The peace of illusions: American grand strategy from 1940 to the present* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), p. 119.

<sup>15</sup> Huntington, *American politics*, p. 30.

<sup>16</sup> Michael H. Hunt, *The American ascendancy: how the United States gained and wielded global dominance* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), p. 27. The full title of NSC-68, issued in April 1950, was *United States objectives and programs for national security*, National Security Council Report 68.

Secretary of State Dean Rusk claimed that the 'United States cannot be secure until the total international environment is ideologically safe'.<sup>17</sup>

A closely related world-view that sees a potential existential threat in instability and chaos anywhere keeps cropping up in US foreign policy. The historical experience with 'free' security provided by geography 'helped generate an exaggerated sense that the United States might be threatened by events anywhere'.<sup>18</sup> In recent times, neo-conservatives in particular have again demonstrated the reflexive definition of various security risks as existential threats. Here chaos and its consequences are understood by policy-makers of most stripes both as threatening America's inseparable interests and political values, and as resulting from the absence of these values abroad. In one recent example, former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, no neo-conservative, warned the Republican Convention that without American leadership 'the world is a chaotic and dangerous place' in which 'no one will lead and that will foster chaos—or others who do not share our values will fill the vacuum'.<sup>19</sup>

This ideational mix has consistently fuelled in American leaders a liberal universalist world-view and encouraged them to set strategic goals beyond narrow security and economic interests to include the adoption by other countries of America's political values. It has led them to believe that international order would be rendered more advantageous to their country through the adoption of its liberal principles. This pertained even when the nascent state had little ability or opportunity to shape much at all beyond its borders. For Jefferson, the United States was 'the sole depository of the sacred fire of freedom and self government', and it was from there that this 'sacred fire' was 'to be lighted up in other regions of the earth, if other regions of the earth shall ever become susceptible to its benign influence'.<sup>20</sup> Although it was in essence a proposition about spheres of influence, the Monroe Doctrine also envisaged for the United States in the western hemisphere 'a laboratory within which to develop the alternative ideas of international order that it would seek later—via Wilsonianism—to apply on a global level'.<sup>21</sup> In the late nineteenth century, liberal exceptionalism was shaped under the influence of various reform movements that produced a 'set of normative and instrumental beliefs about the nature of progress and the efficacy of U.S. power to create a more perfect social and political order', both at home and abroad.<sup>22</sup> As Louis Hartz argues, the same liberal exceptionalism that pushes the United States to withdraw from an international arena full of alien values also incites it for safety's sake 'to reconstruct the very alien things it tries to avoid ...

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Christopher Layne, 'Kant or cant: the myth of the democratic peace', *International Security* 19: 2, 1994, p. 46.

<sup>18</sup> Georges C. Herring, *From colony to superpower: U.S. foreign relations since 1776* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 6.

<sup>19</sup> Condoleezza Rice, address at the Republican Party Convention, Tampa, 29 Aug. 2012.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Robert W. Tucker and David C. Hendrickson, 'Thomas Jefferson and American foreign policy', *Foreign Affairs* 69: 2, 1990, pp. 135–56.

<sup>21</sup> Quinn, *US foreign policy in context*, p. 75.

<sup>22</sup> Jonathan Monten, 'The roots of the Bush Doctrine: power, nationalism, and democracy promotion in U.S. strategy', *International Security* 29: 4, 2005, p. 115.



it cannot live in comfort constantly by their side'.<sup>23</sup> The ambition to project the American domestic system internationally has not only been to create a liberal order *among* states but also to replicate its liberal model *within* states.

The seemingly paradoxical idea of a state being exceptional by virtue of *uniquely* being built on *universal* principles is central to understanding the idealist tendency in US foreign policy, as the urge to reconstruct international order and other states is usually labelled. At the same time, it blurs the idealist/realist dividing line by connecting America's domestic political values and how it conceives of its national interest. In this the American case chimes with liberal International Relations theory arguments that 'societal ideas, interests, and institutions influence state behavior by shaping state preferences'.<sup>24</sup> It also reflects the constructivist argument that 'identities are the basis of interests',<sup>25</sup> since 'ideas not only shaped how interests were pursued, but in some cases helped define the interests the United States did pursue'.<sup>26</sup> Joseph Nye argues further that in a democracy the national interest can include intangibles such as political values if the people feel they are important enough to national identity to have equal importance with more tangible interests (although the survey data cited above challenge this argument).<sup>27</sup> Realists deplore the tendency for the politically defined national identity of the United States and its sense of exceptionalism to make liberalism the ideational default setting in foreign affairs for its leaders.<sup>28</sup> However, in classical and neo-classical realism, ideology does play a significant role in how states conceive of their national interests and international role, and states can have a national character in foreign policy.<sup>29</sup> The neo-realist Robert Jervis points out that a hegemon will feel threatened by and react to ideological challenges that lie outside its sphere of influence.<sup>30</sup> 'Motivational' realists also imply a role for political values in assuming that democratic states are more transparent, making it easier to determine whether they are security-seeking or aggressive.<sup>31</sup> The compatibility of ideational factors with realism is also highlighted in the literature on strategic culture.<sup>32</sup> Meanwhile, neo-conservatives claim to reconcile realism with the importance of ideas and values to the national interest, with a clear focus on concepts of national identity.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Hartz, *The liberal tradition*, p. 286.

<sup>24</sup> Andrew Moravcsik, 'Taking preferences seriously: a liberal theory of international politics', *International Organization* 51: 4, 1997, pp. 513–53.

<sup>25</sup> Ruggie, 'The past as prologue?', p. 120.

<sup>26</sup> Alexander Wendt, 'Anarchy is what states make of it: the social construction of power politics', *International Organization* 46: 2, 1992, p. 398.

<sup>27</sup> Joseph S. Nye, 'The American national interest and global public goods', *International Affairs* 78: 2, March 2002, p. 237.

<sup>28</sup> See e.g. Layne, *The peace of illusions*.

<sup>29</sup> On realism, national identity and national ideology, see Nau, *At home abroad*, ch. 1; Quinn, *US foreign policy in context*, ch. 2.

<sup>30</sup> Robert Jervis, 'The remaking of a unipolar world', *Washington Quarterly* 29: 3, 2006, p. 13.

<sup>31</sup> Randall Schweller, 'U.S. democracy promotion: realist reflections', in Michael Cox, G. John Ikenberry and Takashi Inoguchi, eds, *American democracy promotion: impulses, strategies, and impacts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 41–3.

<sup>32</sup> See Peter J. Katzenstein, ed., *The culture of national security: norms and identity in world politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

<sup>33</sup> See e.g. Michael C. Williams, 'What is the national interest? The neoconservative challenge in IR theory', *European Journal of International Relations* 11: 3, 2005, pp. 307–37.

In sum, at the ideational level of the democracy tradition the interplay of these factors has repeatedly driven how Americans conceive what the country should seek in international affairs. National identity, liberalism, exceptionalism and universalism have shaped how America has seen itself as a democracy and, accordingly, what its role in the world should be. Nothing Obama (or any leading figure in his administration) has said suggests a rejection of this ideational mix. In April 2009, when asked whether he subscribed to the notion of American exceptionalism, the new President replied: 'I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism.'<sup>34</sup> The critics who pilloried him for this apparently un-American thought chose to ignore that he continued his answer by speaking of America's 'continued extraordinary role in leading the world towards peace and prosperity'. This emphasis has been echoed many times by others in the administration, not least Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who, for example, has said that 'American leadership also continues to be a uniquely powerful force for advancing human freedom and universal rights around the world'.<sup>35</sup> In fact, Obama has spoken explicitly about American exceptionalism to a remarkable extent.<sup>36</sup> In his 2012 State of the Union address, returning to a famous 1990s trope, he asserted that 'America remains the one indispensable nation in world affairs—and as long as I'm President, I intend to keep it that way.'<sup>37</sup> Where he departs from many of his predecessors, though, is in avoiding the kind of missionary fervour about America's role in spreading human rights and democracy that coloured the language of, say, Reagan, Clinton or Bush. This may be tactical—part of the effort to tone down American rhetoric after the Bush years—but it also clearly aligns with the President's general moderation and with his wider beliefs.

By contrast to some of his predecessors, though, Obama has tended to downplay the American model as the one ideal of democracy to be aspired to, as well as refraining from the liberal democratic triumphalism that dominated American discourse for years after the collapse of the Soviet Union and communism. Whenever he has addressed democracy in his major speeches, he has stressed that the United States would respect the right of others to choose their own path in political development, a message that has been consistent across the other senior members of his team. In his 2009 Cairo speech, Obama said that 'America does not presume to know what is best for everyone'.<sup>38</sup> Later that year, in his Nobel Lecture, he emphasized respect for different cultures and traditions.<sup>39</sup> And two years on, at the UN in 2011, Obama returned to this theme: 'We believe that each nation must chart its own course to fulfill the aspirations of its people, and America does not

<sup>34</sup> The White House, 'News conference by President Obama', Palais de la Musique et des Congrès, Strasbourg, France, 4 April 2009.

<sup>35</sup> Hillary Clinton, 'American global leadership', remarks at the Center for American Progress, Washington DC, 12 Oct. 2011.

<sup>36</sup> Robert Schlesinger, 'Obama has mentioned "American exceptionalism" more than Bush', *US News and World Report*, 31 Jan. 2011.

<sup>37</sup> Barack Obama, State of the Union address, 24 Jan. 2012.

<sup>38</sup> Barack Obama, 'A new beginning', remarks at Cairo University, Cairo, 4 June 2009.

<sup>39</sup> Barack Obama, 'A just and lasting peace', Nobel Lecture, Oslo, 10 Dec. 2009.



expect to agree with every party or person who expresses themselves politically.<sup>40</sup> However, every time the President and others have spoken of respecting the specificity and choices of other countries and cultures, they have coupled this assertion with the standard proclamation that the United States believes in universal liberal rights and values that are, effectively, non-negotiable. Hence the 2010 National Security Strategy (NSS) states that 'America will not impose any system of government on another country, but our long-term security and prosperity depends on our steady support for universal values.'<sup>41</sup> The bottom line, for this administration too, is ultimately that the acceptance of alternative paths to democracy remains within the limits of what is acceptable to the liberal universalist world-view. The 'own path' that other countries follow must still eventually lead to a destination that is recognizable as liberal democratic to the United States.

Like their predecessors, again, Obama and his administration take chaos abroad as a threat to America's security and interests. Stability is a recurring theme throughout their NSS, for example. But the more realist side of the administration has also meant a greater degree of recognition that not all instances of instability around the world are equally threatening to fundamental US interests, and thus requiring intervention and the remedial promotion of American political values. With regard to this aspect of the democracy tradition, however, it is interesting to note that, since the start of the Arab Spring in particular, the Obama administration has occasionally articulated the argument that chaos and instability can also be caused by the refusal of America's autocratic allies to reform. Secretary of State Clinton has voiced this point most clearly and publicly. As the protests that would topple Mubarak intensified in Egypt, she argued that 'governments who consistently deny their people freedom and opportunity are the ones who will, in the end, open the door to instability'.<sup>42</sup> A few months later, she returned to the theme:

For years, dictators told their people they had to accept the autocrats they knew to avoid the extremists they feared. And too often, we accepted that narrative ourselves ... today, we recognize that the real choice is between reform and unrest ... the greatest single source of instability in today's Middle East is not the demand for change. It is the refusal to change.<sup>43</sup>

This may represent a tentative step in departing from the decades-old double standard of standing by autocratic allies seen as unsavoury but necessary guarantors of stability. But it has certainly not meant the abandonment of America's reliance on them either in principle or in practice, of which more below.

Finally, the Obama administration has also displayed a classical liberal understanding of domestic and international politics by conceptualizing democracy promotion with a particular stress on the fundamental rights of individuals against

<sup>40</sup> Barack Obama, remarks to the United Nations General Assembly, New York, 21 Sept. 2011.

<sup>41</sup> The White House, *National Security Strategy*, May 2010, p. 36.

<sup>42</sup> Hillary Clinton, plenary session remarks, Munich Security Conference, Munich, 5 Feb. 2011.

<sup>43</sup> Hillary Clinton, keynote address at the National Democratic Institute Democracy Awards dinner, Washington DC, 7 Nov. 2011.

those of states. 'We believe not simply in the rights of nations; we believe in the rights of citizens,' the President has argued.<sup>44</sup> That was in the context of the start of the Arab Spring; a few days earlier, in his first major address on these events, Obama had phrased the distinction in a slightly different way, saying: 'The nations of the Middle East and North Africa won their independence long ago, but in too many places their people did not.'<sup>45</sup> But this was no simple reaction to the changes in the Middle East; in Indonesia in November 2010, for example, Obama said: 'The nations of Southeast Asia must have the right to determine their own destiny ... But the people of Southeast Asia must have the right to determine their own destiny as well.'<sup>46</sup> This perspective has led to the attempt to engage simultaneously the governments—allied or antagonistic alike—of other states and their populations. (See below.)

## Democracy at the strategic level

Over time the ideational mix described above has influenced the framing of US grand strategy, in which, as many have noted, much continuity has been obscured by the realism–idealism debate. Where it concerns democracy, the case for continuity rests on two arguments: first, that the projection of liberal values has traditionally been one central element of American strategic thinking; second, that this has rarely been the uppermost priority, nor has it generally been allowed to supersede vital economic and security interests where they have clashed. In short, democracy along liberal lines is one fundamental national interest that the United States traditionally has pursued abroad *after or alongside* security and economic interests.

Particularly since the end of the nineteenth century, liberal internationalism has influenced American grand strategy.<sup>47</sup> It has been argued repeatedly that the combined pursuit of free trade and free markets (at least for American goods and investment), as expressed in the Open Door Notes of 1899, and a concern with seeing the American political model replicated abroad contribute to national security by fostering international stability. According to John Lewis Gaddis, sympathy or support for democracies because they are less threatening to the balance of power is one of the fundamental national interests that America historically has pursued abroad.<sup>48</sup> Woodrow Wilson's 'Fourteen Points' speech of 1918 is generally taken to be the foundational strategic statement, based on the idea that democracy abroad is good for American interests as much as for the countries that would embrace it, but his quintessential vision for rearranging international affairs at the conclusion of the First World War coalesced long-established strands of American political

<sup>44</sup> Barack Obama, remarks to Parliament, London, 25 May 2011.

<sup>45</sup> Barack Obama, 'A moment of opportunity', remarks at the Department of State, Washington DC, 19 May 2011.

<sup>46</sup> Barack Obama, remarks at the University of Indonesia, Jakarta, 9 Nov. 2010.

<sup>47</sup> See e.g. Colin Dueck, *Reluctant crusaders: power, culture, and change in American grand strategy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: the origins, crisis, and transformation of the American world order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011); Layne, *The peace of illusions*.

<sup>48</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *The United States and the end of the Cold War: implications, reconsiderations, provocations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 194–5.

and strategic thought.<sup>49</sup> This helps explain why his ideas survived and eventually thrived despite their rejection by Congress and their failure to prevent another global conflict. With Wilson, America's strategic outlook shifted to one in which it 'agreed to be globally engaged only on the condition that it could legitimately demand from the world the universal liberal democracy upon which the new global order was to be founded'.<sup>50</sup> This liberal internationalism later proved more influential, as reflected in the international order built by the United States after 1945.<sup>51</sup> The experience of two world wars and the Cold War confirmed American liberals in their belief that the political disposition of other states is a legitimate security concern. As a result, most presidents since Franklin D. Roosevelt have been Wilsonian to some degree inasmuch as they have tried, in different ways, to varying extents and often with questionable success, to accommodate a concern with democracy in their grand strategy.<sup>52</sup>

The end of the Cold War confronted the United States with the replacement of the Soviet Union and its communist allies by states no longer antagonistic and apparently willing to adopt a more congenial political system, as well as with democratic transitions in various other countries. Contemporary democratic optimism was reflected in Francis Fukuyama's 'end of history' thesis, in which the world had reached 'the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government'.<sup>53</sup> At the same time, the democratic peace theory—the idea that liberal or democratic states share a propensity to peaceful interactions with other states—was the subject of a vigorous academic debate that to some extent influenced the foreign policy community.<sup>54</sup> For those who accepted the validity of these arguments, the end of history and the democratic peace clearly implied that the time was ripe for the United States to act more explicitly on its ideational and strategic democracy tradition. Yet basing strategy on such arguments was simultaneously criticized not only by those who questioned their validity, but also by those who doubted the ability of any state, however powerful, to determine the democratization of another and who warned it would be imprudent for America to do so.<sup>55</sup>

Facing a seemingly blank international canvas, the United States could more than ever give free expression to its liberal impulses. In this situation it proved

<sup>49</sup> On Wilson's legacy in foreign policy, see the essays in G. John Ikenberry, Thomas J. Knock, Anne-Marie Slaughter and Tony Smith, *The crisis of American foreign policy: Wilsonianism in the twenty-first century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

<sup>50</sup> Quinn, *US foreign policy in context*, p. 113.

<sup>51</sup> See G. John Ikenberry, *After victory: institutions, strategic restraint, and the rebuilding of order after major wars* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), ch. 6.

<sup>52</sup> See Ruggie, 'The past as prologue?', p. 108; Smith, *America's mission*; and the case studies in Cox, Lynch and Bouchet, eds, *Democracy promotion and US foreign policy*.

<sup>53</sup> Francis Fukuyama, 'The end of history?', *The National Interest*, Summer 1989.

<sup>54</sup> On the early democratic peace debates, see Michael E. Brown, Sean M. Lynn-Jones and Steven E. Miller, eds, *Debating the democratic peace* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996). On the theory's influence on policy-makers, see Tony Smith, *A pact with the devil: Washington's bid for world supremacy and the betrayal of American promise* (New York: Routledge, 2007), ch. 4; Inderjeet Parmar, *Foundations of the American century: the Ford, Carnegie, and Rockefeller Foundations in the rise of American power* (New York: Columbia University Press), ch. 8.

<sup>55</sup> See e.g. Samuel P. Huntington, *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), pp. 92, 194–7; Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder, *Electing to fight: why emerging democracies go to war* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005); Schweller, 'U.S. democracy promotion'.

difficult to separate considerations of entrenching America's power from those of remaking the world in its ideological image. The country appeared to have achieved primacy in all dimensions of power simultaneously.<sup>56</sup> The 'greatest superpower ever' was enjoying a 'unipolar' moment.<sup>57</sup> The debate on unipolarity was less about the fact of its existence than about its durability and the desirability of attempting to prolong it.<sup>58</sup> Only the precise extent of America's might and the need for a new grand strategy reflecting it appeared to be at issue. Some, mostly realists, argued that trying to 'freeze' unipolarity would be risky and costly, would lead to excessive interventionism abroad and ultimately would be self-defeating.<sup>59</sup> But many others, not exclusively liberals, claimed that unipolarity based on American hegemony was somehow unique and that the new international circumstances made its endurance likely.<sup>60</sup> And even if unipolarity was not to last, America could still use the moment to its advantage.<sup>61</sup> Meanwhile, neo-conservatives called for a strategy that would reflect the inseparability of American values, national security and international order.<sup>62</sup>

Several strategic alternatives were available to the United States after the end of the Cold War, under such labels as neo-isolationism, selective engagement, offshore balancing, cooperative security, primacy and hegemony.<sup>63</sup> The deep influence of liberal ideas ensured that, as Christopher Layne puts it, 'preserving the United States' hegemonic role in a unipolar world has been the overriding grand strategic objective of every post-Cold War administration'.<sup>64</sup> In practice the strategic alternatives boiled down to liberal or imperial hegemony.<sup>65</sup> Both paths have a central concern for the democratic or undemocratic nature of other states, and their respective proponents took the worldwide spread of democracy to be a win-win development—that is, a normatively pleasing outcome that would also produce tangible benefits for the United States. This was not so much about

<sup>56</sup> Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, 'American primacy in perspective', *Foreign Affairs* 81: 4, 2002, pp. 20–33.

<sup>57</sup> Paul Kennedy, 'The greatest superpower ever', *New Perspectives Quarterly* 19: 2, 2002, pp. 8–18; Charles Krauthammer, 'The unipolar moment', *Foreign Affairs* 70: 1, 1990, pp. 23–33.

<sup>58</sup> On the unipolarity debates, see G. John Ikenberry, Michael Mastanduno and William C. Wohlforth, eds, *International Relations theory and the consequences of unipolarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

<sup>59</sup> See Layne, *The peace of illusions*, p. 203; Dimitri K. Simes, 'America's imperial dilemma', *Foreign Affairs* 82: 6, 2003, pp. 91–102; Kenneth Waltz, 'Structural realism after the Cold War', *International Security* 25: 1, 2000, pp. 5–41.

<sup>60</sup> See e.g. Brooks and Wohlforth, 'American primacy in perspective'; Robert Jervis, 'International primacy: is the game worth the candle?', *International Security* 17: 4, 1993, pp. 52–67; William C. Wohlforth, 'The stability of a unipolar world', *International Security* 24: 1, 1999, pp. 5–41.

<sup>61</sup> Charles Kupchan, *The end of the American era: U.S. foreign policy and the geopolitics of the twenty-first century* (New York: Knopf, 2002); Michael Mastanduno, 'Preserving the unipolar moment: realist theories and U.S. grand strategy after the Cold War', *International Security* 21: 4, 1997, pp. 49–88.

<sup>62</sup> See e.g. William Kristol and Robert Kagan, 'Toward a neo-Reaganite foreign policy', *Foreign Affairs* 75: 4, 1996, pp. 18–32.

<sup>63</sup> See e.g. Layne, *The peace of illusions*, pp. 159–60; Barry R. Posen and Andrew L. Ross, 'Competing visions for U.S. grand strategy', *International Security* 21: 3, 1996–7, pp. 5–53.

<sup>64</sup> Christopher Layne, 'This time it's real: the end of unipolarity and the Pax Americana', *International Studies Quarterly* 56: 1, 2012, p. 204.

<sup>65</sup> See Max Boot, 'The case for an American empire', *The Weekly Standard*, 15 Oct. 2001; G. John Ikenberry, 'America's imperial ambition', *Foreign Affairs* 81: 5, 2002, pp. 44–60, and 'Liberalism and empire: logics of order in the American unipolar age', *Review of International Studies* 30: 4, 2004, pp. 609–30; Charles Krauthammer, 'In defense of democratic realism', *The National Interest*, Fall 2004.

a Wilsonian ambition to make the world safe for democracy as about making America safe in a world with the potential to be wholly democratic. In the words of John Owen, American hegemony 'is extended in time by the extension in space of democracy. Democracy is not just a consequence of American primacy, it is also a cause of it.'<sup>66</sup> George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush certainly tapped into the liberal tradition as they sought a grand strategy, and it can be argued that Clinton pursued liberal hegemony in the 1990s and the second Bush imperial hegemony in the 2000s. For each of them, democracy was an essential component of international peace and therefore of American security. It had to be one of America's strategic end-goals.

While there is still considerable debate as to how Obama's grand strategy can be summed up—or, indeed, whether he has one at all—the current crop of decision-makers in Washington have certainly operated on a strongly liberal understanding of international politics in which the goals the United States must pursue to be safe and prosperous include the promotion of its political values. The NSS states up front that America's 'efforts to advance security and prosperity are enhanced by our support for certain values that are universal'.<sup>67</sup> Speaking about the US strategy for the Asia-Pacific, the region to which Washington's prime focus is said to have pivoted, Clinton has argued that it 'incorporates three broad dimensions of America's engagement—security, economic, and common values. [And] in many ways, the heart of our strategy, the piece that binds all the rest of it together, is our support for democracy and human rights'.<sup>68</sup> For the Obama administration as for its predecessors, America's security, prosperity and predominant international status are all viewed as going hand in hand with democratization abroad, even if it frames this more in collective terms of global problems and shared interests with other states. Recognizing the limits of US power in the evolving international system, it has also couched the desire to maintain primacy in the language of leadership and partnership rather than that of hegemony, consonant with its general disposition towards multilateralism. When Obama spoke of America's 'extraordinary role in leading the world towards peace and prosperity' in April 2009, he went on to say that this did not preclude 'recognizing that that leadership is incumbent, depends on, our ability to create partnerships because we create partnerships because we can't solve these problems alone'.<sup>69</sup> Similarly, Clinton has stated: 'We lead with partnership, based on a principle of mutual responsibility, mutual respect, and mutual interest. Because leadership does not have to mean shouldering the burden alone'.<sup>70</sup>

According to the NSS, therefore, the purpose of America's engagement abroad—and democracy promotion within it—is to 'strengthen the regional partners we need to help us stop conflicts and counter global criminal networks;

<sup>66</sup> John Owen, 'Democracy, realistically', *The National Interest*, Spring 2006, p. 37.

<sup>67</sup> The White House, *National Security Strategy*, May 2010, p. 5.

<sup>68</sup> Hillary Clinton, remarks to the International Women's Leadership Forum, Ulaanbaatar, 9 July 2012.

<sup>69</sup> The White House, 'News conference by President Obama', Palais de la Musique et des Congrès, Strasbourg, France, 4 April 2009.

<sup>70</sup> Clinton, 'American global leadership'.

... advance democracy and human rights; and ultimately position ourselves to better address key global challenges by growing the ranks of prosperous, capable, and democratic states that can be our partners in the decades ahead'.<sup>71</sup> This viewpoint has been reflected in efforts to integrate further development aid, tied in more closely with democracy promotion, as an element of US strategy. In September 2010, Obama signed a Policy Directive on Global Development calling for 'the elevation of development as a core pillar of American power'.<sup>72</sup> Clinton has described development as 'a strategic, economic and moral imperative'—a recurring phrase in the rhetoric of officials in the last four years—'as central to advancing American interests and solving global problems as diplomacy and defense'.<sup>73</sup> Therefore, US strategy should include helping developing countries and fragile democracies to build democratic institutions. According to the NSS, 'The United States must support democracy, human rights, and development together, as they are mutually reinforcing [and because] democracies without development rarely survive.'<sup>74</sup> The integration of the democracy–development nexus into the foreign policy apparatus was further fleshed out in the State Department's first Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review (QDDR), released in December 2010.<sup>75</sup> The more multilateral approach has been reflected in greater engagement in international bodies dealing with democracy issues, including an attempt to re-energize the Community of Democracies, which since its launch in 2000 had at times seemed to be destined for irrelevance and American neglect, and the launch of the Open Government Partnership in September 2011 alongside Brazil, Indonesia, Mexico, Norway, the Philippines, South Africa and the United Kingdom. Bilaterally, the administration has also welcomed and encouraged democratic emerging powers, such as Brazil, Indonesia and Turkey, taking a greater democracy promotion role internationally and especially within their respective regions. Addressing India's parliament in 2010, Obama reproached the country's leaders for letting their dedication to non-interference stand in the way of denouncing violations of democracy in states such as Burma (Myanmar), arguing that this was not fitting for an aspiring international power. He told his audience that 'with increased power comes increased responsibility [and that the United States and India could partner in] strengthening the foundations of democratic governance, not only at home but abroad'.<sup>76</sup>

Very much in line with the democracy tradition, the Obama administration has made democracy promotion one of its strategic goals while very rarely making it the top goal in any given situation. From the President's inauguration in 2009, he and his team have repeated ad nauseam that to put America's interests and ideals in opposition is a 'false choice'. Yet at the same time, unexpectedly but

<sup>71</sup> The White House, *National Security Strategy*, May 2010, p. 15.

<sup>72</sup> The White House, 'Fact sheet: U.S. Global Development Policy', 22 Sept. 2010.

<sup>73</sup> Hillary Clinton, remarks on development in the twenty-first century, Peterson Institute for International Economics, Washington DC, 8 Jan. 2010.

<sup>74</sup> The White House, *National Security Strategy*, May 2010, pp. 37–8.

<sup>75</sup> Department of State and USAID, *Leading through civilian power: the first Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review* (Washington DC, 2010).

<sup>76</sup> Barack Obama, remarks to the joint session of the Indian Parliament, New Delhi, 8 Nov. 2010.



also problematically, they have been very frank in public about making choices between democracy and other interests in their dealings with other countries. In December 2009, Clinton defended what she called the administration's policy of 'principled pragmatism' in engaging the regimes in Russia, China and Iran over a range of interests and the resulting need for flexible, case-by-case tactics over democracy and human rights. Two years later, speaking about US policy in the Middle East, she enunciated this argument even more explicitly:

Why does America promote democracy one way in some countries and another way in others? Well, the answer starts with a very practical point: situations vary dramatically from country to country. It would be foolish to take a one-size-fits-all approach and barrel forward regardless of circumstances on the ground ... But that's just part of the answer. Our choices also reflect other interests in the region with a real impact on Americans' lives—including our fight against al-Qaida, defense of our allies, and a secure supply of energy. Over time, a more democratic Middle East and North Africa can provide a more sustainable basis for addressing all three of those challenges. But there will be times when not all of our interests align. We work to align them, but that is just reality.<sup>77</sup>

Thus the strategic playing up or down of democracy depending on the balance of US interests in relation to any other country has continued unabated under Obama, as has been evident both in Washington's dealings with major powers and in its reactions to different democratization crises in the Middle East and elsewhere.

## **Democracy at the policy level**

As noted above, the American concern for the spread of democracy remained for a long time confined to the broader ideational or strategic levels. For most of America's history its leaders made little or no effort to fashion actual democracy promotion policies. Only relatively recently did the democracy tradition percolate to the level of shaping concrete policy instruments that could be directed towards other countries; this really began in the 1980s and burgeoned after the end of the Cold War.

Early US actions towards making the political systems of other states more akin to the American one, all the while juggling competing and usually superior foreign policy interests, are confined to a small number of high-profile cases. American sovereignty over the Philippines between 1898 and 1948 saw perhaps 'the world's first self-conscious exercise in democracy promotion, and in democratic nation-building'.<sup>78</sup> This was highly controversial, however, in the context of a war against Filipino nationalists and amid accusations of American colonialism. The post-1945 reconstruction efforts in Germany and Japan were landmarks of country-scale socio-political engineering, with America imposing a liberal democratic political order during its military occupation.<sup>79</sup> Success in these two countries provided

<sup>77</sup> Clinton, keynote address at the National Democratic Institute Democracy Awards dinner, Washington DC, 7 Nov. 2011.

<sup>78</sup> James Traub, *The Freedom Agenda: why America must spread democracy (just not the way George Bush did)* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2008), p. 98 (see also ch. 1).

<sup>79</sup> Joshua Muravchik, *Exporting democracy: fulfilling America's destiny* (Washington DC: AEI Press, 1991), ch. 8.

influential precedents for later American efforts in post-conflict nation-building, in which democratization has been seen as necessary for creating the most favourable and durable solution for the local population as well as for the United States. These two precedents have arguably been misleading, however, and the US record in democratic nation-building is very mixed.<sup>80</sup> Starting in the presidency of John F. Kennedy, under the influence of modernization theory, the promotion of democratic values began to appear in aid policy in the 1960s, with the aim of preventing nationalist and independence movements in the Third World from falling under communist influence. The emerging desire to promote economic development and democracy together was reflected in the creation of the Peace Corps, the passage of the Foreign Assistance Act, the creation of the Agency for International Development (USAID), and the launch of the Alliance for Progress into Latin America, even if in practice the volume of actions that could be labelled as democracy promotion proper remained low.

The emergence of democracy promotion as a discrete foreign policy field is strongly rooted in the human rights debates of the 1970s, which were in great part a result of congressional efforts to legislate conditionality to foreign assistance.<sup>81</sup> A position of coordinator for human rights and humanitarian affairs was created in the State Department in 1975. Taking presidential office soon after, Jimmy Carter tried to institutionalize human rights further in the foreign policy bureaucracy, entrenching the new human rights reporting processes in the State Department and elevating the coordinator post to that of Assistant Secretary of State at the head of a Bureau of Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs (which over time has evolved into the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor).<sup>82</sup> His administration also created an Interagency Group on Human Rights and Foreign Assistance. In 1978, presidential directive NSC-309 announced that 'it shall be the major objective of U.S. foreign policy to promote the observance of human rights throughout the world'.<sup>83</sup> That same year Congress amended the Foreign Assistance Act to authorize the use of funds for projects to promote human rights abroad, including civil and political rights. USAID thus began experimenting with human rights projects.

In the early 1980s the policy discourse began to include democracy more explicitly, that is, distinct from human rights, though both remained minority interests within the government. Ronald Reagan's administration began assistance programmes for the conduct of elections and the administration of justice in Central America, and democracy assistance gained an institutional foothold in

<sup>80</sup> See Christopher J. Coyne, *After war: the political economy of exporting democracy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008); James Dobbins, *America's role in nation-building: from Germany to Iraq* (Stanford, CA: RAND Corporation, 2003); and Jeremi Suri, *Liberty's surest guardian: American nation-building from the founders to Obama* (New York: Free Press, 2011).

<sup>81</sup> See Barbara Keys, 'Congress, Kissinger, and the origins of human rights diplomacy', *Diplomatic History* 34: 5, 2010, pp. 823–51.

<sup>82</sup> See e.g. Mary E. Stuckey, *Jimmy Carter, human rights, and the national agenda* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2008), pp. 112–16.

<sup>83</sup> David F. Schmitz and Vanessa Walker, 'Jimmy Carter and the foreign policy of human rights: the development of a post-Cold War foreign policy', *Diplomatic History* 28: 1, 2004, p. 135.

the Latin America Bureau of USAID in particular.<sup>84</sup> In his landmark speech to the British parliament in 1982, Reagan announced that an effort was under way 'to determine how the United States can best contribute—as a nation—to the global campaign for democracy now gathering force'.<sup>85</sup> The result was the creation the following year of the National Endowment for Democracy to support democratization abroad through direct grants as well as through four independent core grantees: the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, the International Republican Institute, the Free Trade Union Institute and the Center for International Private Enterprise. Although in his campaign against communism Reagan continued to support America's autocratic allies around the world, his administration also made diplomatic efforts at crucial junctures that helped democratic transitions remove some of them—following the presidential election in the Philippines in 1986 that led to the fall of Ferdinand Marcos, in South Korea's first free presidential election in 1987 and in the plebiscite that rejected extending the rule of Augusto Pinochet in Chile in 1988.<sup>86</sup> In 1987 Congress earmarked US\$1 million for democracy assistance to Chile, most of which was channelled through the National Democratic Institute, making this 'one of the first attempts to strategically deploy the democracy institutions that the administration had brought into being'.<sup>87</sup>

By the early 1990s, the need to support economic and political reform in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union and to build a new collective security arrangement in Europe drove George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton to expand policies to promote democratic practices and institutions. Bush's realist foreign policy focused on Great Power diplomacy but did not completely ignore the role of democracy either, as his initial efforts to provide democracy assistance programmes to former communist countries show.<sup>88</sup> In 1990 Secretary of State James Baker declared that 'the time of building up the new democracies has arrived'.<sup>89</sup> President Clinton's foreign policy was in this respect a clear continuation of Bush's. It can be summed up as the pursuit of American security and economic renewal through the enlargement of the community of democratic states and the spread of economic liberalization.<sup>90</sup> As a result, his administration tried to institutionalize democracy promotion in different agencies of government, increasing bureaucratic capacity and assistance funds, while its diplomatic engagement on democracy varied considerably from case to case. At the same

<sup>84</sup> Thomas Carothers, *Aiding democracy abroad: the learning curve* (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1999), pp. 34–6.

<sup>85</sup> Ronald Reagan, 'Promoting democracy and peace', address to Parliament, London, 8 June 1982.

<sup>86</sup> See Michael McFaul, 'Engaging autocrats (and democrats) to facilitate democratic transitions', in Alexander T. J. Lennon, ed., *Democracy in U.S. security strategy: from promotion to support* (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2009).

<sup>87</sup> Traub, *The Freedom Agenda*, p. 67.

<sup>88</sup> Smith, *America's mission*, pp. 312–23. On Bush senior, see also Thomas Carothers, 'Democracy promotion under Clinton', *Washington Quarterly* 18: 4, 1995, pp. 13–25.

<sup>89</sup> James Baker, 'Democracy and foreign policy', speech at the World Affairs Council, March 1990, *American Foreign Policy: Current Documents, 1990* (Washington DC: US Department of State, 1991), pp. 12–17.

<sup>90</sup> On Clinton, see Nicolas Bouchet, 'Bill Clinton', in Cox, Lynch and Bouchet, eds, *Democracy promotion and US foreign policy*; Carothers, *The Clinton record on democracy promotion*.

time, development aid became increasingly conceptualized in more explicitly political terms and began to target specific democratization goals.<sup>91</sup> Gradually, USAID organized its democracy work around four areas: electoral assistance, rule of law, accountability and transparency, and civil society. This was part of what could be called a 'political turn' in the international development discourse in the 1990s, which often went under the label of good governance. By the end of the 1990s it could be argued that the programmes for democracy assistance developed since the mid-1980s amounted to 'the most extensive, systematic effort the United States has ever undertaken to foster democracy around the world'.<sup>92</sup> After 9/11 the George W. Bush administration also embraced the rhetoric and practice of democracy promotion as part of its campaign against terrorism and as a framing device for foreign policy in the shape of the Freedom Agenda. Bush had criticized Clinton's predilection for democracy promotion and nation-building from Russia to Haiti, only to end up for a while attempting to do the same thing, against greater odds and on a grander scale, in the Middle East and Afghanistan.<sup>93</sup> In many ways the Bush administration expanded the institutionalization, funding and operationalization of democracy promotion, for example with the creation of the Millennium Challenge Corporation and the Middle East Partnership Initiative.

Under Obama, the policy infrastructure has not developed on a scale commensurate to that observed under the first Bush, Clinton and the second Bush. There have been no major new legislative initiatives for democracy promotion and no institutional expansion of it within the government agencies. However, the administration has defended the democracy bureaucracy and funding in a period of severe pressure on the federal budget, and since January 2011 in the face of a Republican House of Representatives controlling the purse strings. The President has requested from Congress a consistent amount for democracy promotion within the international affairs budget. Obama's first full budget request for 2010 was US\$2.8 billion. His next three requests were US\$3.3 billion, US\$3.1 billion and US\$2.8 billion.<sup>94</sup> The 2012 budget request also includes an additional US\$770 million to establish a new Middle East and North Africa Incentive Fund to support transitions in the region, though this has run into trouble in Congress.<sup>95</sup> Now that Obama has secured a second term, it will be possible to gauge what impact, if any, bureaucratic changes towards a better merging of development and democracy work in USAID, and towards their integration in foreign policy in the State Department, will have on US actions. The QDDR has also led to the position of Under-Secretary for Democracy and Global Affairs being turned into a reinforced one of Under-Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and

<sup>91</sup> See Carol Lancaster, *Transforming foreign aid: United States assistance in the 21st century* (Washington DC: Institute for International Economics, 2000), pp. 17–28; Jennifer Windsor, 'Democracy and development: the evolution of U.S. foreign assistance policy', *Fletcher Forum on World Affairs* 27: 2, 2003, pp. 142–7.

<sup>92</sup> Carothers, *Aiding democracy abroad*, p. 331.

<sup>93</sup> Thomas Carothers, *U.S. democracy promotion during and after Bush* (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2007); Traub, *The Freedom Agenda*.

<sup>94</sup> Data from annual analyses of the President's budget requests produced by Freedom House.

<sup>95</sup> Josh Rogin, 'State Department's new Middle East fund falls victim to Capitol Hill dysfunction', *The Cable, Foreign Policy*, 27 Sept. 2012.

Human Rights with wider responsibilities. It remains to be seen if this will help the cause of democracy at the organizational level or dilute it by bundling it with an even wider range of issues. Ultimately, one should not read too much into the limited institutional innovation for democracy promotion under Obama, as it reflects above all the existence of a well-established legislative and bureaucratic framework that does not necessarily need major change or augmentation, both of which would only divert time and energy from operationalizing democracy and implementing policies. In that respect, the administration has undertaken a number of promising, often low-key, initiatives to diversify the portfolio of assistance activities and themes in line with its broader developmental and rights-based approach to democracy, especially in the areas of gender rights, minority rights, religious freedom, civil society, anti-corruption, and information and communication technologies.

As for encouraging autocratic adversaries to reform and liberalize, the concept of dual-track engagement with regimes and with their citizens has been central to the Obama administration's conception of democracy diplomacy. As set out in the NSS, this is about seeking 'to improve government-to-government relations and use this dialogue to advance human rights, while engaging civil society and peaceful political opposition, and encouraging US nongovernmental actors to do the same. More substantive government-to-government relations can create permissive conditions for civil society to operate and for more extensive people-to-people exchanges.'<sup>96</sup> There is not much evidence of this being undertaken to any great extent—or, if it is, of its producing results—with the likes of China, Russia or Iran. With Russia, for example, the appointment of Michael McFaul, a noted democracy promotion advocate, as ambassador indicates that the issue has not been taken off the agenda of the bilateral relationship, and the administration has criticized the parliamentary and presidential elections in 2011 and 2012 as well as the curtailing of civil and political rights. However, the strategic 'reset' and a host of other issues, not least arms control, were prioritized throughout Obama's first term. In the latest example of this, there has been little public reaction from Washington to the expulsion of USAID from Russia in September 2012. In less strategically important Burma, on the other hand, American engagement has seen some success in terms of supporting changes towards democratization, although this has had more to do with the Burmese regime's own strategic agenda than with US initiatives. Here as in most other cases, democracy diplomacy under Obama has been mostly reactive, which places it firmly in the democracy tradition.

Inevitably, it is Washington's reaction to major democratization crises that attracts the most attention. One reason why the first two years of Obama's presidency appeared neglectful of democracy, therefore, is that they were not marked by high-profile cases, bar perhaps the emergence of Iran's 'Green Movement' in June 2009. The near-absence of US reaction on that occasion can be explained in part by timing, with the post-election protests coming as the new administration was beginning to pursue its policy of engagement with Iran on the nuclear issue

<sup>96</sup> The White House, *National Security Strategy*, May 2010, p. 38.

and at the height of its distancing itself from the Bush legacy in the Middle East. The somewhat more critical stance adopted after 2009 suggests that Washington might have reacted differently had the Iranian election taken place later, although continuing policy towards Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states shows that security interests would have remained paramount no matter what the circumstances. Other than Iran, the countries where the administration was confronted by democratization crises and setbacks in 2009–2010—for example, Honduras, Niger, Sri Lanka, Kyrgyzstan, Guinea, Belarus—do not constitute a roll-call of priorities for the United States, which explains why its democracy activity attracted little attention at the time, even where it has had a positive impact, as in, say, Côte d'Ivoire. As for Afghanistan and Iraq, two high-priority countries where the top US concern has been to secure military withdrawal and where democratization prospects have faced very serious setbacks, the administration has stopped talking them up as cases of post-conflict democratic nation-building, while still spending a large share of its democracy budget on them to little effect. The democratic component of post-conflict nation-building has not been jettisoned entirely, as the ongoing involvement in Libya shows, but it is no longer trumpeted as a leading example of democracy promotion as it was under Bush with Afghanistan and Iraq.

Since January 2011 the Arab Spring has forced Obama and his administration to confront democracy issues in a strategically crucial context more than it would have liked (and in the region where America historically has least wanted to). In some cases it has forced the administration to give up not only on its preferred democracy policy option—quietly nudging allies to reform and open up political space gradually—but also on its second-best option, namely for these allies to set in place orderly transitions once protests have reached a critical mass. At every step of the way Washington has been overtaken by events and has had to try to secure its interests in highly fluid circumstances. For example, the administration did not react to Egypt's stage-managed parliamentary elections in November–December 2010. Weeks later, it tried to get the embattled Mubarak to lead an orderly transition, however far-fetched the notion by that stage, before doing an abrupt turn and dropping Washington's close ally of 30 years once it was clear that he was doomed. Since, the administration's Egypt policy has been severely tested by, first, the military's attempts to manage the post-Mubarak transition, especially as American and other employees of US democracy NGOs were arrested and prosecuted, and, then, by the political turmoil that has marked Mohamed Morsi's presidency since he was elected in June 2012. In Cairo in 2009, Obama had said: 'We will welcome all elected, peaceful governments—provided they govern with respect for all their people.' In May 2011, he declared that 'it will be the policy of the United States to promote reform across the region, and to support transitions to democracy'.<sup>97</sup> So far his administration has shown willingness, at least once confronted with the inevitable, not to try to dictate the path of transitions, certainly when compared to American engagement with Russia and other post-communist countries in the 1990s. Obama has chosen to live with freely elected

<sup>97</sup> Obama, 'A new beginning'; Obama, 'A moment of opportunity'.



Islamist governments in Egypt and Tunisia, in marked contrast to the reaction to Hamas's win in the Palestinian elections of 2006. Measures on debt, aid and investment have been taken, with promises of more to come, to alleviate the economic problems of these two countries in particular, even if it is not clear whether they can make more than a dent in them.<sup>98</sup> But elsewhere, from Bahrain to Morocco, the Obama administration still clings to the semi-realist paradigm of democracy promotion, prioritizing other interests while, as far as can be seen, making very small efforts at quiet engagement on democracy and human rights.

## Conclusion

Despite the differing approaches and emphases of successive administrations, there has been a great degree of continuity in US democracy promotion since at least the Reagan years—both on the positive and on the negative side. As he begins his second term, Obama stands squarely in the mainstream of the democracy tradition and in line with his predecessors, and there is no evidence to date that his presidency will mark any great shift in it. One can expect more of the same in the second term, because he is subject to the same influences and restrictions that have shaped the policies of his predecessors, and he has not shown in any way that he is minded to buck these. It is also possible that the rank accorded to democracy will rise over the next four years, if only because presidents tend to focus more on foreign policy in their second terms as they become increasingly lame ducks in domestic politics. That is not to say that the democracy tradition is impervious to forces of change or is bound to keep moving in the direction of more democracy promotion by the United States in more cases. But any change is likely to occur over the long term, just as it took decades for the tradition to evolve from the ideational to the strategic and then the policy level. As has been noted above, this came about to a great extent as a result of the growth of American power and of the evolution of the international terrain over which its reach extended. This suggests that any significant change in the democracy tradition, and especially any retreat from democracy promotion, should be expected to come not through the agency of particular presidents but from realignment in the international balance of power. Should global changes in that direction continue over the long term, with the rise of different democratic and autocratic powers, they will make the projection of American political values more difficult, resistance to it easier and the promotion of competing alternatives more likely, and may perhaps even erode the world-view of US leaders that is based on the inseparable intrinsic and utilitarian value of democracy to their country.

<sup>98</sup> Uri Dadush and Michele Dunne, 'American and European responses to the Arab Spring: what's the big idea?', *Washington Quarterly* 34: 4, Fall 2011, pp. 131–45.

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