

The dangers of exporting democracy

Bush's crusade is based on a dangerous illusion and will fail

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Although President Bush's uncompromising second inaugural address does not so much as mention the words Iraq, Afghanistan and the war on terror, he and his supporters continue to engage in a planned reordering of the world. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are but one part of a supposedly universal effort to create world order by "spreading democracy". This idea is not merely quixotic - it is dangerous. The rhetoric implies that democracy is applicable in a standardised (western) form, that it can succeed everywhere, that it can remedy today's transnational dilemmas, and that it can bring peace, rather than sow disorder. It cannot.

Democracy is rightly popular. In 1647, the English Levellers broadcast the powerful idea that "all government is in the free consent of the people". They meant votes for all. Of course, universal suffrage does not guarantee any particular political result, and elections cannot even ensure their own perpetuation - witness the Weimar Republic. Electoral democracy is also unlikely to produce outcomes convenient to hegemonic or imperial powers. (If the Iraq war had depended on the freely expressed consent of "the world community", it would not have happened). But these uncertainties do not diminish its justified appeal.

Other factors besides democracy's popularity explain the dangerous belief that its propagation by armies might actually be feasible. Globalisation suggests that human affairs are evolving toward a universal pattern. If gas stations, iPods, and computer geeks are the same worldwide, why not political institutions? This view underrates the world's complexity. The relapse into bloodshed and anarchy that has occurred so visibly in much of the world has also made the idea of spreading a new order more attractive. The Balkans seemed to show that areas of turmoil required the intervention, military if need be, of strong and stable states. In the absence of effective international governance, some humanitarians are still ready to support a world order imposed by US power. But one should always be suspicious when military powers claim to be doing weaker states favours by occupying them.

Another factor may be the most important: the US has been ready with the necessary combination of megalomania and messianism, derived from its revolutionary origins. Today's US is unchallengeable in its techno-military supremacy, convinced of the superiority of its social system, and, since 1989, no longer reminded - as even the greatest conquering empires always had been - that its material power has limits. Like President Wilson, today's ideologues see a model society already at work in the US: a combination of law, liberal freedoms, competitive private enterprise and regular, contested elections with universal suffrage. All that remains is to remake the world in the image of this "free society".

This idea is dangerous whistling in the dark. Although great power action may have morally or politically desirable consequences, identifying with it is perilous because the logic and methods of state action are not those of universal rights. All established states put their own interests first. If they have the power, and the end is considered sufficiently vital, states justify the means of achieving it - particularly when they think God is on their side. Both good and evil empires have produced the barbarisation of our era, to which the "war against terror" has now contributed.

While threatening the integrity of universal values, the campaign to spread democracy will not succeed. The 20th century demonstrated that states could not simply remake the world or abbreviate historical transformations. Nor can they easily effect social change by

transferring institutions across borders. The conditions for effective democratic government are rare: an existing state enjoying legitimacy, consent and the ability to mediate conflicts between domestic groups. Without such consensus, there is no single sovereign people and therefore no legitimacy for arithmetical majorities. When this consensus is absent, democracy has been suspended (as is the case in Northern Ireland), the state has split (as in Czechoslovakia), or society has descended into permanent civil war (as in Sri Lanka). "Spreading democracy" aggravated ethnic conflict and produced the disintegration of states in multinational and multicommunal regions after both 1918 and 1989.

The effort to spread standardised western democracy also suffers a fundamental paradox. A growing part of human life now occurs beyond the influence of voters - in transnational public and private entities that have no electorates. And electoral democracy cannot function effectively outside political units such as nation-states. The powerful states are therefore trying to spread a system that even they find inadequate to meet today's challenges.

Europe proves the point. A body such as the European Union could develop into a powerful and effective structure precisely because it has no electorate other than a small number of member governments. The EU would be nowhere without its "democratic deficit", and there can be no legitimacy for its parliament, for there is no "European people". Unsurprisingly, problems arose as soon as the EU moved beyond negotiations between governments and became the subject of democratic campaigning in the member states.

The effort to spread democracy is also dangerous in a more indirect way: it conveys to those who do not enjoy this form of government the illusion that it actually governs those who do. But does it? We now know something about how the actual decisions to go to war in Iraq were taken in at least two states of unquestionable democratic bona fides: the US and the UK. Other than creating complex problems of deceit and concealment, electoral democracy and representative assemblies had little to do with that process. Decisions were taken among small groups of people in private, not very different from the way they would have been taken in non-democratic countries.

Fortunately, media independence could not be so easily circumvented in the UK. But it is not electoral democracy that necessarily ensures effective freedom of the press, citizen rights and an independent judiciary.

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