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REFLECTIONS

Making the World Safe for Muddle

The Meaning of Democracy in American Foreign Policy

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JAMES L. PAYNE

Americans swear by democracy. We fight our wars in its name; we criticize foreign leaders for not respecting it; we spend billions of dollars of foreign aid to encourage it. But what exactly is it?

For most Americans, this question will seem out of place. The term *democracy* is so familiar, so frequently used, that they assume everyone knows what it means. Furthermore, the term is so venerated that questioning it is viewed as the political equivalent of heresy. It is the apple pie and motherhood word that presidents never hesitate to include in their foreign-policy pronouncements. “The world must be made safe for democracy,” said Woodrow Wilson in his April 2, 1917, speech asking Congress for a declaration of war against Germany (Wilson 1917). Our aim in Iraq, said President George W. Bush on December 7, 2005, is “to leave behind a democracy” (“President Discusses War” 2005). When such statements are made, no one complains that they are incoherent.

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It is time someone made this complaint. The term *democracy* is one of the most confusing words in the English language, a term with a multitude of definitions, interpretations, and connotations. Any U.S. administration that tries to make democracy the lodestar of its foreign policy sails in a sea of muddle.

A proper exposition of the tangle surrounding the term *democracy* requires a massive volume that would try any modern reader's patience. In a few pages, however, one can explore the term's popular conceptions and show how these definitions, so simple and plausible at first glance, prove to be unworkable.

Government by the People

The dictionary's first meaning of *democracy* is "rule by the people," and when pressed for a definition, that is what most people will say: democracy is "government by the people," as Abraham Lincoln put it. At first glance, this conception seems tremendously appealing. If there actually were a country where the people—meaning "all the human beings in the area"—truly did rule—meaning "control the decisions of government"—then everyone would be happy. Shiites would get what they wanted, Sunnis would get what they wanted, street vendors of Rolex watches would get what they wanted. It would be Nirvana, an arrangement perhaps worth killing a great many people to establish.

But wait a minute. What happens if people in a country want different things—as they always do? Then they all cannot "rule"; that is, they all cannot have their own way. The cotton farmer wants his subsidy, but the taxpayer wants those same dollars in his pocket. One rules, and the other gets shafted. Thus, we see that democracy defined as "rule by the people" is a logical impossibility. It has the same status as the word *squircle*, which is defined as "a round square." At first, it sounds like a real thing, but upon reflection we see that it cannot exist.

The conception of democracy as "rule by the people" should have been laughed out of the dictionary long ago. Unfortunately, it is kept alive by an error called the "collective fallacy," which is the tendency to treat the people of a country as a unified whole. American thinking about Iraq is shot through with the collective fallacy. Presidents and diplomats insist on treating the Iraqi people as a unified, single entity and assume that they ("it") can choose, decide, and aspire to specific goals. For example, when L. Paul Bremer arrived in Iraq in May 2003 to take over the administration of the U.S. occupation, he said his goal was to help Iraqis "regain control of their own destiny" after decades of rule by Saddam Hussein ("New U.S. Administrator" 2003). Because "Iraqis" are not a unified group, however, the statement is misleading. Logically, Bremer could say only that he hoped for a situation in which *some* Iraqis were in control of their destiny—even though they almost certainly would be angrily opposed by other Iraqis who have a different "destiny" in mind.

Majority Rule

When the definition of the term *democracy* as “rule by the people” is shown to be unworkable, those who still cherish it turn to a second, scaled-back definition: “rule by a majority of the people.” Again, we have a definition that at first glance seems plausible, but loses credibility on close examination.

Our approval of the principle of majority rule comes from our experience with it in small groups. In this setting, it is a natural and useful decision principle. When the second grade has to decide the color of Kool Aid for the class party, a show of hands can usefully decide the question. Success at this level leads us to overlook the fact that when the decision involves a very large group deciding questions of great importance, which is the realm of government, majority rule has serious shortcomings.

One problem is that majority rule will often produce a result that is morally unacceptable. Suppose that in Iraq a referendum is held on a law that deprives all Sunni inhabitants of their homes, automobiles, or right to worship as they prefer. Everyone votes, and the Shiite majority wins the referendum. Would this outcome be a “democratic” one to be proud of? We certainly did not invade and occupy Iraq simply to set up a system that lets the Shiite majority oppress the Sunni minority.

As a method of deciding major social and economic questions, majority rule can produce ugly, unacceptable results. No one would endorse a system in which 51 percent of the people can exploit, oppress, or slay the other 49 percent. Everyone agrees that a majority, if it should exist, ought not to have full power, that it needs to be restrained by arrangements that protect the rights of individuals.

A second problem with majority rule is mechanical. It is easy to say “the people,” as in the phrase “let the people decide,” but we are speaking of millions of souls, and it is physically impossible for such vast numbers to make decisions. Modern governments have thousands of policies and programs, and it is unrealistic to expect the public in general to know about more than a few of them, let alone to have an opinion about each one of them. Even if people did have opinions, how would they make their views effective? How can 300 million people crowd into a Senate conference room or a Department of Agriculture working group? Doing so is a physical impossibility.

If we tried to make all these decisions through referenda, we would be expecting the entire populace to read, understand, and have an opinion on thousands of policy initiatives and then to turn out to vote in the thousands of referenda that would have to be held day after day, even hour after hour. Again, the requisite actions are impossible.

In all countries, government officials are the ones who rule: presidents and legislators, judges and undersecretaries, clerks and police officers. They make, manage, and implement policy. It is true that in all countries government officials take into account to some degree the desires of segments of the public, as these desires may be reflected in conversations, newspapers, opinion polls, graffiti, angry street demonstrations, and rumblings of violent revolution.

Does the general public have more influence in some countries than in others? Probably so, but we have no simple method for answering such a question, and many twists of circumstances can produce confounding results. One notices, for example, that in countries called dictatorships the leadership is often quite demagogic, pandering to shallow popular desires with bread-and-circus-type measures. And in some countries called democracies, the leadership may be resistant to seemingly popular demands. In the United States, for example, both opinion polls and the 2006 congressional election results indicated that majorities disapproved of the U.S. engagement in Iraq, yet government officials deepened the engagement by sending a “surge” of additional troops.

The Use of Elections

Dictionary writers, perhaps sensing that “rule by the people” and “rule by a majority of the people” are unworkable definitions of the word *democracy*, offer a third definition, which recognizes that the people of a country never actually run the government. This definition stipulates that democracy is an arrangement in which the people exercise power through “a system of representation involving periodically held free elections.” At first glance, this definition seems plausible and appealing: by choosing government officials, the populace would be able to control government policies indirectly. Alas, this conception also does not stand up under examination.

In the first place, a choice between candidates is not necessarily a choice between policies. Government has thousands of programs, and the overwhelming majority of them are never publicly examined or discussed. As a result, the candidates do not have different positions on most issues or, indeed, any ascertainable positions, so voters cannot possibly control them through elections.

A second problem is that candidates usually avoid taking positions even on prominent issues. To avoid alienating segments of the public, they resort to euphemisms and ambiguities, telling voters they are for “hope,” “change,” “vision,” “progress,” and, no doubt, “democracy.” The candidates, as one *Washington Post* columnist recently put it, “hide behind oversimplified blather that treats voters like morons” (Fisher 2008).

A third reason why elections do not allow citizens to control policy is that what candidates promise in campaigns may differ from what they do after taking office. For most candidates, taking positions is a shallow advertising operation that adopts phraseology designed to resonate with voters and the media. The candidates do not treat this phraseology as a promise to do or not do something—and because it is so vague, it in any case usually cannot be taken seriously as a guide to action. Once elected, candidates respond to the new context of office holding, influenced by the officials, friends, and lobbyists who surround them, as well as by polls, media commentaries, and their personal impulses. Anything they might have promised in a campaign becomes ancient history.

A good example of this pattern is George W. Bush's flip-flop on nation building. In the 2000 campaign, he condemned the Clinton policy of assertive military involvement abroad. Once Bush gained office, however, this campaign phraseology went in the wastebasket, and he launched the most ambitious nation-building crusade in history. His father gave us another lesson in the meaninglessness of campaign rhetoric, promising, as clearly as lips could say so, not to raise taxes and then raising them.

Repudiating Elections and Proud of It

Though we seldom discuss our misgivings about elections publicly, Americans have understood all along that elections are not the essence of our system. The Supreme Court is a nice illustration of our willingness to ignore electoral democracy. Here is a body of nine people who are believed to be as wise and capable as presidents and senators, who have as much public approval as presidents and senators, and who have as much power to decide important policy questions as presidents and senators. Yet these officials never stand for election; they are appointed and serve for life. If we truly believed that elections are essential for popular control of policy, we would never tolerate this arrangement. In fact, however, Americans are fond of the Supreme Court. If a foreign aggressor keen on elections threatened us with invasion unless we abolished this seemingly undemocratic institution, we would fight the invaders on the beaches to defend it.

Another exhibit for the point that Americans do not care very deeply about elections is the Electoral College. This arrangement permits a perfect negation of the theory of democratic elections. The candidate who receives the most votes and presumably is most desired by "the people" may be thrown on the ash heap of history, while the candidate rejected by "the people" becomes president of the country.

This outcome is not just a theoretical possibility. It has happened four times, most recently in the 2000 election, when Al Gore received half a million votes more than George Bush, yet Bush gained the presidency through the operation of the Electoral College.

Do not misunderstand: I do not oppose the Electoral College. To my way of thinking it is simply another charming irrationality in a quaintly illogical system. My point is that people who *say* they believe that elections are rational devices for accomplishing rule by "the people" ought to be incensed by the Electoral College, and they ought to be moving heaven and earth to get rid of it. Yet we see no demonstrations or candlelight vigils. How many people have died in hunger strikes against the Electoral College?

A look around the world confirms that we do not equate democracy with the use of elections. Elections have been held in scores of countries that we do not regard as democracies. Hitler came to power through an election. Indeed, most dictatorships have been preceded by periods of free and competitive elections. Iraq conducted thirteen elections between 1921 and 1958, including five held during the two periods

of British occupation. These elections did not prevent the rise of Saddam Hussein. Our own experience in Iraq further documents our lack of conviction about elections. Iraq held an election on January 30, 2005, a referendum on October 15, 2005, and parliamentary elections on December 15, 2005. If we believed that the definition of democracy is having elections, our troops should have left the country years ago.

In conclusion, *periodically held free elections* may well be an aspect of what we mean by democracy, but the phrase is not a complete, useable definition of the term.

Democracy in the Field

When the United States invades and occupies a country, its soldiers, diplomats, and administrators say they are trying to support democracy. They obviously are not using any of the dictionary definitions of the word because, as we have seen, these definitions are unworkable. What definition, then, do they employ in practice?

In researching definitions, I came across a work that seemed tailor made for this inquiry, a book entitled *What Is Democracy?* Edited by Richard Ketchum and published in 1955, at the height of the Cold War, it was a popular textbook for use in the public schools (the copy I obtained in the secondhand market is stamped “Balboa Junior High School. Discard”). At that time, the Communists, our enemies, said that their countries were democracies, and we naturally could not let them appropriate a term with such a valuable semantic glow. So this book was created as a sort of antipropaganda propaganda, put together by a photo editor and a freelance writer, and given the imprimatur of academic authority with an introduction by “Dr.” Grayson Kirk, then president of Columbia University.

For anyone looking for a definition of democracy, the book is a disappointment. It never answers the question its title poses; indeed, it takes pride in insisting that there is no answer: “If we searched for an exact definition, the chances are that the answers we received would be nearly as many and as varied as the people who tried to define democracy for us” (Ketchum 1955, 22).

In the book’s meandering discussion, the author mentions the U.S. highway construction program (“Highways are vital to the progress of modern man”), public education (“One of the great contributions which democratic society can offer mankind is to help human beings to think and to learn”), agricultural extension programs, the United Nations, equality for women, the abolition of slavery, trial by jury, the Marshall Plan, the Magna Carta, election campaigns, newspapers, public-health programs, welfare programs, freedom of religion, collective bargaining, and “finding time for joy and relaxation” (76, 134, 20).

This litany is a veritable dog’s breakfast of images and ideas, to be sure, but in a backhanded way the book does answer the question its title poses. It says, in effect, that *democracy is the sum total of American culture*. This cultural approach does not focus on a specific element or limit itself to political arrangements. Rather, it marshals the infinitely expandable collection of images and phrases that Americans embrace.

This mélange appears to be the meaning of democracy embedded in our foreign policy. When we invade and occupy a country such as Iraq and say that we are going to make it “a lasting democracy,” no one has a specific political structure in mind. Instead, the diplomats, bureaucrats, and scholars apply a constellation of values drawn from American culture.

Larry Diamond, one of the leading academics in the movement to promote democracy abroad, provides a good picture of what this ad hoc approach means in the field. Several months after the invasion of Iraq, Condoleezza Rice asked Diamond to go to Baghdad to see what he could do. “Having studied, observed, and assisted democracy-building efforts in some twenty countries over the previous two decades,” Diamond writes, “I felt I could make a contribution” (2005, 14). He recounts his experiences in his book *Squandered Victory: The American Occupation and the Bungled Effort to Bring Democracy to Iraq*.

Diamond uses the word *democracy* freely throughout the book; indeed, he even prepared a speech for Iraqis titled “What Is Democracy?” However, like Ketchum in his 1955 volume, he never defines the term. Instead, he talks around it, using the traditional catchphrases from American civic books, but without analyzing them. For example, he says, “Real democracy requires . . . constitutional limits on the power of government” (106). One of the superstitions of American politics is that the Constitution (we always capitalize it) accounts for everything good, true, and wonderful about the U.S. government. This belief is painfully naive. In the first place, as many constitutional scholars have explained at length, this constitution has been amended, interpreted, ignored, and trashed in a dozen ways since the founding, so there is no such thing as *the* Constitution. Moreover, it is naive to point to a legal document to explain a political system’s character. Countries around the world have had constitutions that contain limits and requirements, guarantee freedom of speech, limit terms of office, and so on. These limits are frequently ignored, however, or overridden by nasty and violent leaders. The KGB arrests people who exercise freedom of speech; the dictator extends his term. So a paper constitution is an insufficient condition for democracy. Nor is it a necessary condition. Great Britain, long called a democracy, does not have a written constitution, only some traditions that relatively nonviolent participants have been willing to observe over the years.

Diamond is particularly proud of his leaflet on the “rule of law,” a phrase he regards as central to the meaning of democracy. Unfortunately, he does not delve into what it means in practice. Yes, a breakdown of “law and order” with a great deal of killing and plundering is unpleasant. For this reason, *all* governments, even the nastiest, have laws and insist that people obey them. Saddam Hussein had plenty of laws, courts to enforce them, and, according to Diamond himself, “a relatively decent judiciary” (149). Therefore, it is misleading to say that democracy in particular is characterized by “the rule of law.” But because Americans traditionally speak reverently of this idea, Diamond thought that Iraqis should be trained to repeat it—or, rather, its Arabic translation.

Another of Diamond's favorite expressions is "a government of laws, not individuals" (in politically incorrect days, we used to say "men") (106)—another American political cliché that is essentially meaningless. Individuals make laws in every government on earth. After all, unless you believe in fairies, who else can make them? And the laws these individuals make may be cruel, oppressive, or idiotic. A law may authorize sending people to death camps or slaying them for questioning the rulers' intelligence.

Besides making leaflets and posters of American political chestnuts, Diamond reports that he and other "postconflict specialists" in Iraq busied themselves with "programs of outreach and assistance to political parties, civic groups, women's organizations and universities" (108). One has to smile at the naïveté of this list. Political parties exist everywhere, in the best and worst governments. U.S. taxpayers do not need to "assist" them. Likewise for civic groups, also known as pressure groups: they abound wherever there is a government open to pressure, and most people believe government would be better with fewer rather than more of them. As for women, several centuries of experience on both sides of the Atlantic prove that what is called democracy can get along fine without them. Switzerland, a country long celebrated as the epitome of democracy, did not give women the right to vote until 1971.

Diamond's list of assisted groups does not spring from a coherent theory of democracy or from a serious historical analysis of regimes, but from a cultural definition of democracy. Political parties, lobbyists, female activists, and academic busybodies loom large on the American landscape today, say the nation builders, so Iraq must have them, too. Thus have the "postconflict specialists" in Iraq applied the Balboa Junior High School approach to building democracy.

We may poke fun at this shallowness, but defining democracy in terms of American cultural values has an unfortunately serious consequence. Sophisticated observers may overlook American arrogance and cultural relativism, but some foreign activists are not so urbane. I am thinking, for example, of Muslim men steeped in their religion and culture, who already fear that modernity and its creeping corruptions are undermining their way of life. The idea of their womenfolk sauntering down the street in bikinis terrifies them; drinking and smoking are anathema; letting a dog in the house is a sacrilege.

Along come the Americans—Christians, dog lovers, and devotees of women's lib—drinking and smoking their way through the Middle East, declaring in effect that their culture is the democracy they want to impose everywhere. What is the anxious local Muslim to think? He sees that to implement this policy of "spreading democracy," Americans have sweeping programs of economic and military aid, troops and military bases all around the world, and gigantic naval fleets. He notices that if all this pressure fails, the Americans will undertake a military invasion and occupy a Muslim country—for a hundred years, some of them say—until it is forced to become a democracy, meaning until American cultural practices are fully imposed and all its inane political mantras memorized. In this way, the nation

builders' shallow, ethnocentric meaning of the term *democracy* has fanned the flames of Islamic terrorism around the world. It's not the first time in history that a muddy, subjective, political aim has led to bloodshed and tragedy.

The problem with the term *democracy* is not that it has no meaning, but that it has too many meanings. Democracy is like a sprawling frieze carved along the top of a federal building in Washington, showing the rays of a sunrise, generals on prancing horses, lawmakers declaiming, clergymen blessing, surgeons operating, and farmers tilling their land. The word carries the burden of centuries of national history, philosophy, and myth all bound together. Politicians may sprinkle it in their speeches, and scholars may use it to juice up grant applications, but it does not provide a secure foundation for a constructive foreign policy.

George Washington's Vision

What is the alternative? If trying to make the world safe for democracy is too tangled and subjective a goal, what should be our guiding principle? A persuasive answer lies close at hand. American statesmen have voiced it for hundreds of years, beginning with George Washington in his Farewell Address: the United States should "cultivate peace and harmony with all." Instead of assertively attempting to impose our views on the rest of the world, we should strive to be a good neighbor and to set a good example.

This role of standard-bearer of peace may seem rather narrow until we realize that it speaks to *the* outstanding problem of world politics, the problem of violence. All the great tragedies of civilization have been catastrophes of bloodshed. When we look back over the twentieth century, what stands out are not the many errors in political theories or governmental arrangements, but the perverse and excessive use of force. If revolutionaries, fascists, Communists, anarchists, monarchists, national liberationists, Islamists, and so on had refrained from embracing the sword, their wacky ideas would not have done much harm. Today, violence—whether it be the violence of gangs, tribes, parties, or governments—remains public enemy number one.

It would therefore be eminently logical and moral for the United States to make the promotion of peace its main goal in world affairs. How one implements this aim in any given conflict may be difficult to discern, given that peacemakers must on occasion use force. The general approach, followed for centuries by circumspect statesmen, is to take care not to strike the first blow, not to be the aggressor. There may be good guys and bad guys, this approach concedes, but if neither attacks the other, the catastrophe of violence can be avoided, and the passage of time will allow for the dissipation of the conflict. Broadly speaking, this approach corresponds to the doctrine of containment that brought us through the Cold War. We had many objections to the conduct of governments in Communist countries, but we perceived that maintaining peace was more important than invading those countries to try to put things right. This approach may allow us to steer a sober, constructive course

through the maelstrom of hatreds in the modern world. “Cultivating peace and harmony” will not supply all the answers for American foreign policy, but at least it will restrain policymakers from invading and occupying countries in the name of words they cannot define.

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It is time to make the world safe for diversity. India, which will begin the 21st century with a sixth of the human population, is indispensable to that effort. A version of this op-ed appears in print on May 18, 1996, on Page 1001019 of the National edition with the headline: Making the World Safe for Diversity. Today's Paper|Subscribe. Continue reading the main story. Trending. Joe Biden Expresses Regret to Anita Hill, but She Says "Sorry" Is Not Enough. Feature: Australia Is Deadly Serious About Killing Millions of Cats. The Trump Campaign Conspired With the Russians.