

## Whither to, Obama? U.S. democracy promotion after the Cold War

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# **Whither to, Obama?**

U.S. democracy promotion after the Cold War

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## Summary

When George W. Bush assumed office in January 2001, many pundits – some benevolently, others grudgingly – considered the new president’s main agenda to be as simple as ABC – Anything But Clinton. When President Barack Obama assumed office eight years later, many correspondingly described the latest president’s approach as ABB – Anything But Bush. The current U.S. president has inherited quite a number of difficult situations and crises from his predecessor that he has vowed to handle very differently: among others, the two unpopular wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the treatment of prisoners in Guantánamo and other, undisclosed locations, the global financial crisis, the relationship to Pakistan and Iran, and the Israel-Palestine conflict. This PRIF Report is concerned with how Obama handles one particularly tainted legacy of the Bush administration: the global promotion of democracy. Is Obama discarding his predecessor’s favorite but severely criticized project, is he keeping it with slight modifications, or is he taking a completely new approach?

In order to answer this question, this PRIF Report turns to the larger context in which the Obama administration is operating. It first looks at how the idea of being an exceptional nation has shaped an exemplarist and an activist variant of democracy promotion, and portrays the current debate about this policy’s underlying rationales and its impact. It then assesses Obama’s immediate predecessors, Clinton and Bush, in terms of their democracy promotion policies and the rationales they have mustered in its favor. In light of these parameters that form the backdrop against which the Obama administration has to position itself, the current administration’s first initiatives regarding democracy promotion are assessed and interpreted with a view to this policy’s future.

Obama, as this analysis shows, cannot and will not abandon democracy promotion altogether. Deeply engrained in the country’s national identity is the notion that the United States holds a special place and has a special role to play among the nations of the world. A central part of this American ‘exceptionalism’ is the ambition to liberate and enlighten the world by endowing it with human rights and democracy. That it is part of a genuine American mission to promote democracy abroad is fairly uncontroversial and no U.S. president can elude the issue. Controversies about how to promote democracy, however, have shaped the 20th century, especially the post-Cold War presidencies, and just as the controversy over means – quiet exemplarism or active (peaceful or military) intervention – the set of rationales for democracy promotion has developed and changed over time and remains a matter of considerable contention at the beginning of the 21st century.

The analysis of rationales the Clinton and Bush administrations have drawn upon to legitimize the promotion of democracy shows that normative arguments play a very central role. Rationalist reasoning, however, is just as important: spreading democracy abroad, administration officials insist, makes the United States more secure, creates stable markets and opportunities for trade, provides other peoples with prosperity and security, and contributes to world peace. The Obama presidency, slow to develop its own democracy agenda and rhetoric, likewise draws upon normative motivations but is relatively silent when it comes to promoting democracy based on an agenda which pursues its own

interests. This stands in especially sharp contrast to the Bush administrations, which had forcefully maintained that promoting democracy everywhere was a security imperative and did not shy away from accomplishing this aim through the use of military force, and which regularly employed Manichean language to underline the significance of democracy promotion as a foreign policy panacea. The Obama team has substantially scaled back the use of such grandiose rhetoric and has assumed a markedly more reserved stance on the issue.

In many respects, as it takes its first steps on the issue the Obama administration resembles the Clinton presidency in how it handles the promotion of democracy. Democracy promotion under Obama seems once again to be considered one goal among others and is handled within a basically pragmatic foreign policy direction. Obama, like Clinton, favors a non-confrontational approach to democracy promotion, focusing on states that are inviting help from outside – and not primarily on rogue states as Bush did – and also decidedly favors multilateralism over unilateralism. Like both preceding presidencies, the Obama administration has raised the budget for democracy assistance and has affirmed repeatedly that it is committed to spreading democracy abroad as a responsibility the American people owe to the world.

Whereas, overall, democracy promotion under Obama stands in the light of continuity rather than change, he is beginning to shape his own approach. Distancing himself from the two George W. Bush administrations, Obama has conceded the existence of previous U.S. mistakes and now emphasizes mutual understanding and the non-coercive character of democracy (promotion). His administration has also changed the status of democracy promotion from signature issue to embedding it along with human rights promotion as part of a broader development policy framework. Especially in contrast to the time during which the Clinton administrations were operating, the Obama team faces circumstances that have a discouraging effect on any ardent democracy promotion efforts: the democratic euphoria of the 1990s, fueled by the end of the Cold War and democracy's 'third wave', has given way to a debate about its global backlash, while the United States is concerned with its own relative decline in light of new and aspiring rising powers on the world stage. As a consequence, Obama – in contrast to both his predecessors – draws heavily on the image of the U.S. as a 'beacon': promoting democracy by example. This may, in general, be the style he personally prefers; it is also fitting at a juncture where the U.S. lacks the resources and the credibility to promote democracy emphatically and on a large scale. Within this global context, Obama is careful not to have democracy promotion stand in the way of his agenda of global reengagement, fostering constructive relationships with all kinds of regimes and thus eliciting democratic change in the long run, a strategy strongly criticized by adherents of the Bush strategy. Whether he will be successful with his approach to democracy promotion within the foreign policy agenda remains to be seen.

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## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

When President George W. Bush left office in January 2009, his most prominent foreign policy project, the global promotion of democracy “with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world” (Bush 2005a), was beset with symptoms of crisis. President Bush had taken democracy promotion – at least at the level of rhetoric – to previously unknown heights in his ‘freedom agenda’, declaring it to be a, if not *the*, central tenet of the “War on Terror.” Upon his departure, this policy had caused estrangement and outright rejection in many parts of the world and was under severe attack domestically and internationally. Accordingly, during the final years of the second Bush administration, the scholarly and journalistic community diagnosed not only a backlash against democracy around the world, it also began investigating a backlash against democracy promotion.

Recognizing the burden the Bush democracy promotion legacy constitutes for his successor, many wonder ‘whither to, President Obama?’. Will his administration clearly break with its predecessor in this important foreign policy area or will it continue the latter’s general directions and substance, albeit assuming a more modest and low-key tone? One and a half years after Obama took office with his promises of change, the new president’s democracy promotion profile has not yet crystallized fully, and while some attest to the Obama administration’s continuity in this regard, others emphasize unequivocal signs of change. Independent of whose assessment will be the right one in the end, the Obama administration’s positioning on democracy promotion is not only relevant to the overall make-up of U.S. foreign policy but also to the international enterprise of external democracy promotion.

At this current crossroad, should we expect continuity or change in American democracy promotion? In its attempt to offer a first perspective on a likely answer, this PRIF Report outlines the possible determinants of Obama’s approach by taking a closer look at this policy’s practice and rhetoric under the two presidencies that have designed and carried out post-Cold-War democracy promotion. In order to decipher continuity and change, the main focus of attention will be on the *why* and *how* of U.S. democracy promotion: the reasons and rationales for this policy as well as the means through which it is conducted. The officially voiced motivations for democracy promotion – the administrations’ rhetoric – and how the presidencies went about spreading democracy will therefore be analyzed and compared. The larger context will be provided by a discussion of the significance of democracy promotion for U.S. foreign policy and history and its recent debates. Every in-coming administration has to position itself in regard to foreign policy concepts that either have a strong historical tradition and thus relevance for the nation’s identity or that have played a major role in the country’s foreign policy in the past years; in the case of democracy promotion, both applies.

1 I would like to thank Stefanie Herr and Jonas Wolff for their valuable comments.



In order to illustrate the motivations for the United States' emphasis on democracy promotion and how it was carried out as well as outline a likely road ahead, this PRIF Report will take the following approach: it will first trace the historic significance of this policy for U.S. national identity and discuss different positions on it that have taken shape over the last decades. Secondly, it will give an overview of how Obama's two predecessors in office, Presidents Bill Clinton (1993-2001) and George W. Bush (2001-2009), who both favored a strong democracy promotion agenda, approached and handled this policy. It will, thirdly, identify and compare the official rationales for the promotion of democracy under these two presidencies. Finally, the Obama administration's first moves will be explored tentatively, since a systematic study of its rationales is not yet possible.

It is usually very informative to look at the past in order to understand the present and form an idea of what is likely to come in the future; this is even more the case with the United States whose political actors are famous for their frequent references to the country's 'founding fathers' and their intentions as well as to what is perceived as a historically persistent *American way of life*. To be sure, the exact meaning of these references is highly contested, but actors of all political persuasions continuously underscore their significance. Looking at the standing of democracy promotion in U.S. history and contemporary thought as well as in recent political discourse will shed light on whether it is merely a foreign policy fad or is even intended to disguise so-called 'hard interests', or if it is or has become a part of the foreign policy canon across the partisan divide. Looking back will, for example, help shed light on the questions of whether the change from a Democratic to a Republican administration in 2001 brought about any substantial, perhaps even radical changes in this regard, whether external democracy promotion was mainly a specific project of the neo-conservatives in the Bush White House or an outgrowth of the "War on Terror", and whether Obama, who ran on a ticket promising change, is likely to abandon the severely criticized project.

Chapter 2 describes the major fault lines in the recent debate over American democracy promotion and takes a look at this policy's role and meaning in U.S. history. Since its inception, the United States has placed the promotion of democracy at the forefront of foreign policy goals (Monten 2005: 129-132; Smith 1994: 7). The country claiming to be God's own and founded on the principles of democracy and human liberty first sought to enlighten the world through its representation as a 'city upon a hill' and later, having expanded its territory, a stronger economy and more military power, actively tried to influence other country's regimes, albeit with different means and with different outcomes. Bringing the light of freedom to peoples all over the world – a metaphor often used – has deep roots in the country's perceived mission, and is a moral aim that all U.S. commentators on this issue subscribe to. Strong disagreements arise, however, over democracy promotion's underlying rationale(s), its justifications and its consequences.

The third chapter provides an overview of how the Clinton and Bush administrations approached and handled democracy promotion. The end of the Cold War advanced a new global wave of democratization and provided Western democracies with the opportunity to actively pursue their vision of a liberal, democratic and capitalistic world order (Geis/Brock/Müller 2007: 72). In this context, democracy promotion in the United States

as an explicit foreign policy goal – at least rhetorically – became increasingly important and has continued to be a consistent part of the foreign policy agenda up to the end of the second Bush administration. Both Clinton and Bush promoted the proposition that expanding the ‘zone of democracies’ constituted one of the foundations of American foreign policy. Although the Clinton and Bush administrations are usually cited in terms of their differences rather than their similarities, democracy promotion in fact figured so prominently on both presidents’ agendas that both have been likened to *Wilsonianism* and President Wilson’s quest to “make the world safe for democracy.”<sup>2</sup>

In chapter 4, an analysis of official documents and speeches by the American executive of the past two decades provides the tool for identifying the rationales that underlie the promotion of democracy. Why, according to the foreign policy elite, is democracy promotion such a worthwhile goal, a goal the United States is and has been pursuing even against growing resistance and strong criticism?<sup>3</sup> What exactly is on the relevant officials’ minds is, however, not of concern here; politicians may very well use arguments only strategically and not believe in their merit. It is precisely their rhetoric that one needs to focus on because it reveals which lines of reasoning political representatives feel will resonate best with the democratic audience they are accountable to, thus generating public support and legitimacy. It therefore seems reasonable to analyze the statements of high-ranking officials in the executive branch that are broadly circulated in the general public. This chapter’s first part summarizes results and observations, whereas its second part offers an interpretation. The background and assessments provided by the literature on democracy promotion and the Clinton and Bush presidencies will be discussed and revisited in light of the findings in the analysis – and will then form the backdrop against which the first moves by the Obama administration on democracy promotion, laid out in chapter 5, are assessed. Finally, the sixth chapter offers concluding remarks as well as an outlook on the future of U.S. democracy promotion.

- 2 The specter of Wilson haunts a large part of the literature on democracy promotion, despite *Wilsonianism* being an ever-contested and thus highly problematic term and “one of the most overused and misleading terms of the modern period” (Cox 2000: 222). For some serious and productive attempts to revisit *Wilsonianism* in the light of recent administrations, see for example: Cox 2000; Mazarr 2003.
- 3 Depending on a speaker’s intent, democracy promotion is either presented as a policy goal (an *end*) or as a policy instrument (a *means*) serving a higher objective; very often it is considered to be both, and no distinction is made.

## 2. Foreign policy panacea or idealist window-dressing? U.S. democracy promotion in history and contemporary thought

Democracy promotion comprises an “array of measures aimed at establishing, strengthening, or defending democracy in a given country” and thus involves political actions as diverse as diplomatic pressure, tying foreign aid to certain conditions, sanctions and the use of military force (Azpuru et al 2008: 151). Consequently, a political representative merely addressing the need for democratic change during a visit in a non-democratic country falls under the broad definition of democracy promotion as does a military intervention in the name of defending or building democracy. One specific form of democracy promotion is democracy assistance, which refers to “funds or direct assistance to governments, institutions, or civil society actors” (ibid.) working towards establishing or strengthening democracy. After the end of the Cold War, the democracy and governance budget allocated through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) – the most important distributor of democracy assistance – has steadily grown in size and done so, significantly, under both the Clinton and Bush presidencies.<sup>4</sup> It is widely agreed that the promotion of democracy as a foreign policy goal is deeply rooted in American historical tradition and is part of what is often referred to as ‘American exceptionalism’. Whereas there is a basic historical consensus on *why* democracy promotion should be on the foreign policy agenda in principle, *how* this policy should be pursued remains deeply controversial.

One cause of disagreement is the question of whether democracy promotion should be pursued by actively interfering in other countries or passively by leading through example. The notion of democracy promotion through exemplarism predates the nation’s founding and has religious origins. Preacher John Winthrop is the first on record to have expressed the continent’s unique position as a leading example to the unenlightened parts of the world. In his famous sermon, “A Model of Christian Charity”, he refers to the American colonies as a “city upon a hill” (Winthrop 1630). The first president, George Washington, in his Farewell Address in 1796 echoes the United States’ function as a role model:

“It will be worthy of a free, enlightened, and at no distant period, a great nation, to give to mankind the magnanimous and too novel example of a people always guided by an exalted justice and benevolence.” (Washington 1796)

4 USAID’s democracy assistance, in constant (2000) dollars, has increased from \$128 million in 1990 to \$902 million in 2005. Previously only a minor part of USAID outlays, the portion of the USAID budget dedicated to democracy initiatives had become the most important even before the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq called for higher expenditures. Moreover, the scope of democracy assistance has expanded (Azpuru et al 2008).

For about two centuries, the unique American mission expressed by the religious metaphor of a shining “city on a hill” dominated the idea of democracy promotion, while the notion of a more active involvement with the outside world was regularly rejected. In his Independence Day Address in 1821, Secretary of State John Quincy Adams stated in unequivocal terms that democracy promotion was to be a passive endeavor:

“Wherever the standard of freedom and Independence has been or shall be unfurled, there will her [America’s, AEP] heart, her benedictions and her prayers be. But she goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own. She will commend the general cause by the countenance of her voice, and the benignant sympathy of her example.” (Adams 1821)

The sentiment of America’s unique system and character, the necessity to protect these and their functioning as a beacon for the rest of the world also found its way into foreign policy-related documents such as the Monroe Doctrine in 1823, the concept of Manifest Destiny in 1839, President Wilson’s Fourteen Points in 1918 as well as the Atlantic Charter in 1941. Hence, those who see democracy promotion as an essential part of American foreign policy from its earliest beginnings onward certainly have an impressive host of crucial actors and major documents to refer to.

The ‘sense of mission’ to spread and defend freedom and democracy around the world – although religious in its origins – is more relevant today as a civil-religious impulse, which is especially important with regard to generating identity and cohesion within the American nation-state (Brocker 2006: 216). Calvinism and the Enlightenment are two important sources for America’s democratic mission, which originated “not only in the instrumental maximization of some material interest, but in a moral commitment to the universal political values that define the United States as a self-contained political community” (Monten 2005: 120). As a consequence, today’s moral fervor with regard to American democracy promotion most probably stems from this religious tradition (Nau 2000: 148). Regardless of how democracy promotion has taken shape over the centuries, commentators unanimously consider it to be central to U.S. political identity and its sense of national purpose.

Exactly how the democratization impulse has taken shape is often framed within “two competing theories of democracy promotion” (Monten 2005: 114): beacon and crusader, exemplarism and vindicationism (Monten 2005), exemplar nation and crusader state (Brocker 2006: 217-18). Monten argues that periods of activist democracy promotion can be explained by a convergence of a rise in material capabilities along with the presence of a nationalist domestic ideology that favors vindicationism over exemplarism; the two examples he cites are the 1890s and the Bush presidency. The latter, in his view, represents the perfect vindicationist storm (Monten 2005: 140). Brocker adds to the active mode of a crusader state and the passive mode of the exemplar nation the most common of all cases: rhetorical emphasis on America’s special mission and her global responsibility for freedom and democracy with the sole purpose of putting a suitable and widely accepted label on the pursuance of other interests. His examples are Reagan’s “crusade for freedom” and Bush’s attempt to legitimize the 2003 Iraq war (Brocker 2006).

When did the formerly exemplarist democracy promotion impulse take a more active turn? The presidency of Woodrow Wilson and his call to “make the world safe for democracy” in 1917 is often referred to as the beginning of a period of active democracy promotion in American history. Sometimes the beginning of an active liberal mission is dated to the Spanish-American war in 1898; most authors, however, see the first serious attempts under the Carter or Reagan administrations. In terms of *why* democracy should be promoted, rationales – beyond the idealistic missionary impulse – were augmented during the Wilson administration, which considered international security and prosperity as one welcome result of this policy. The most significant boost of democracy promotion’s legitimacy, however, came after the end of the Cold War, which seemed to provide the “liberal momentum” for a significantly more feasible and promising implementation of democratization worldwide (Geis/Brock/Müller 2007: 72). Responding to what was perceived as democracy euphoria and with the assumed backing of ‘democratic peace theory’ from the political sciences, Clinton attempted to elevate democracy promotion to the status of a national grand strategy and thereby replace the strategy of containment.

The democratic peace thesis, as it was received by policymakers, broadened the argumentative basis for democracy promotion up to the point where this policy was considered to be a foreign policy panacea. It holds that democracies do not fight each other,<sup>5</sup> and, although this phenomenon has not been satisfactorily explained and the scholarly community is still debating the implications of this finding, most policymakers have absorbed the following logic: the fact that democracies do not fight each other leads to – in proportion to the number of states the democratic community calls its own – greater stability in the international system, and thus to global peace and prosperity. Democracy promotion, consequently, fosters not only ‘global well-being’, but also bolsters the national security interests and economic benefits of one’s own country. During the Clinton presidency “possibly no other idea emanating from the academic community exercised as much influence as this one [democratic peace, AEP] on the White House” (Cox 2000: 226). More pronounced than ever before, the end of the Cold War and the emergence of democratic peace theory allowed for the conceivably smooth merging of normative impulses and rationalist reasoning within the promotion of democracy.<sup>6</sup>

The notion of American exceptionalism has also shaped a fairly optimistic American liberal tradition, which has been an influential current in U.S. political thought and was rekindled after the end of the Cold War. The basic premises of this belief system are (1) the conviction that development, including the promotion of liberalism, is a relatively smooth process; (2) that “all good things go together”, such as the improvement of the economy and the strengthening of democracy, the merger of U.S. values and vital inter-

5 Democracies are, however, just as often engaged in military conflict with non-democracies as are non-democracies with each other. This constitutes the so-called “dual finding of ‘democratic peace’ and ‘warlike democracies’” (Risse-Kappen 1995: 492).

6 For criticism of democratic peace theory’s implications and its activist adoption, see for example: Farrell 2000; Geis/Brock/Müller 2007; Schweller 2000.

ests, or the assertion that democratizing Iraq will benefit American security; (3) the premise that radicalism and revolution in principal are undesirable and need to be countered; and (4) finally, the belief that strengthening democracy is more important than maintaining stability (Desch 2007/08: 20-25). Whereas the liberal tradition is not the only point of reference and certainly not unchallenged, it represents an influential current among the foreign policy making elite and has, consequently, shaped the promotion of democracy abroad.

Looking at democracy promotion during the Cold War is instructive for highlighting the debate between those who see democracy promotion as a serious and activist tradition and those who see it as cheap talk, as well as between those who perceive democracy promotion as compatible or even identical with the country's national interest and those who identify severe conflicts. Tony Smith (1994: 3) falls into the former camp as he argues that democracy promotion was not only the cutting edge of America's rise to world-power status, it was also "the central ambition of American foreign policy during the 20<sup>th</sup> century"; an ambition whose relentless pursuit eventually won the Cold War for the United States and the democratic cause. Many scholars point out that after World War II the United States successfully managed to reconstruct a democratic Germany and Japan as well as forge a community of liberal democracies whose existence has outlived the Cold War (Nau 2000: 142). Smith is also convinced that Wilsonianism and realism have been made compatible through democracy promotion and that "the argument that nothing serves American national security like the expansion of democracy worldwide can be made historically, empirically, and logically" (Smith 1994: 332, 32).

Many authors vehemently disagree with this positive – some call it triumphalist – overall interpretation of U.S. history during the Cold War. These authors submit that the rhetoric on democracy promotion might have been impressive but the record was less consistent (Carothers 1999: 3), forming a glaring gap between words and deeds.<sup>7</sup> Containing communism, in the view of many, took clear precedence over the goal of promoting democracy (Schmitz 2006: 2). Farrell (2000: 584) calls the American record on democracy promotion during the Cold War "dreadful" and asserts that democracy was only promoted where it coincided with other interests but was discarded altogether whenever it got in the way. Likewise, Schmitz (2006: 1, 242) sees a still unresolved contradiction between American values and ideals on the one hand and American security and material interests on the other. In his analysis of U.S. support for right-wing dictatorships during the Cold War, he finds little to corroborate Tony Smith's positive assessment; supporting right-wing dictatorships was justified by the aims of providing stability, fostering U.S. economic interests, ensuring American security and even – as a long term goal – supporting freedom (Schmitz: 2006: 3-4). The inherent conflict between the support of brutal

7 Among those authors who argue that democracy promotion reality has never lived up to its promises and that this policy has often clashed and subsequently been subordinate to other interests are: Goldsmith 2008, Schmitz 2006, S. Smith 2000.

regimes and the articulated intent to spread democracy and freedom by doing so eventually made the policy untenable. Nowhere does Schmitz find reason to believe that democracy promotion and other American values ever took precedence over other interests during the Cold War. On the contrary, he asserts that the employment of covert action and military interventions undermined democratic developments and that U.S. policy overall hurt American interests and morale in the long run (Schmitz 2006: 6-7).

With a view to the role of democracy promotion after the Cold War, Carothers offers a summary of what seems to be the majority opinion among scholars:

“Democracy promotion remains at most one of several major US foreign policy interests, sometimes complementary to but sometimes in competition with other, stronger interests. Nevertheless, the promotion of democracy is playing an important role in US foreign policy.” (Carothers 1999: 5)

Monten adds to this assessment that there is a tendency among Americans to conflate American interests with what are thought to be common international interests. In this view, the political values and institutions that have traditionally defined U.S. national identity are universal and exportable. This perspective might also account for the lack of humility in exercising power (Monten 2005: 144-48).

Two concepts inseparable from the question of a possible convergence of ideals and interests are often and eagerly debated in the literature on democracy promotion, and many authors have expressed their intention to overcome the divide between the two: idealism and realism, “the two dominant perspectives on the conduct of foreign affairs” (Holsti 2000: 153). The idealistic position in American foreign policy emphasizes the special mission and moral responsibility the United States has for the world and the optimistic belief in the possibility of constant improvement, eventually leading to a world prosperous and at peace. Liberty, democracy, and human rights are considered concepts that all human beings aspire to as the conditions that enable their happiness and self-improvement. Democracy as a foreign policy objective, in this view, takes on a central role for the United States, either by staying out of foreign affairs and offering the world an example as democracy is perfected at home (the isolationist-passive variant), or by promoting it abroad and thereby transforming world affairs for the better (the internationalist-activist variant) (Holsti 2000: 153-157; Nau 2000: 127).

The realist perspective on democracy promotion in summary is the following: Regardless of the inner constitution of a nation-state, “in an anarchic world characterized by scarce material and social resources, states must engage in positional competition for power and influence” (Schweller 2000: 52); the best a state can do is to defend and pursue its national interest while soberly balancing risks and rewards as well as relevant resources; the norms of state sovereignty and non-interference in the internal affairs of other states should be respected in order not to further increase the international system’s lack of order and security; finally, even if realists do agree upon the desirability of democratic reform of other countries, they usually do not regard it as feasible to impose values and practices that are not indigenous (Holsti 2000: 155; Nau 2000: 127).

Many authors emphatically argue that the divide between idealism and realism has finally been crossed by the foreign policy concept of democracy promotion (Carothers

2000b, Holsti 2000). In Carothers' words: "The end of the cold war gave rise to the appealing notion that the traditional tension in U.S. foreign policy between *realpolitik* security interests and Wilsonian moral interests was over" (Carothers 1999: 4-5, his emphasis). Spreading democracy around the world, now that it appeared more feasible than under the restrictions of the Cold War's bipolar confrontation, seemed after all to offer a multitude of 'hard' and 'soft' benefits: it satisfied the assumed societal demands for an idealistic policy in line with the American self-image while at the same time pacifying the world and thereby enhancing U.S. security and economic opportunities. The security logic of democracy promotion in particular can only be appreciated when one moves beyond the realism/idealism dichotomy (Nau 2000: 127). Whereas the theoretical debate has been productive in this regard, putting democracy into practice in non-democratic countries and reaping its benefits has been, not surprisingly, more complicated and less successful.

Whether American democracy promotion has been effective or not is another field of debate in which the cautionary have obtained the upper hand. Several studies on democracy promotion in Latin America have shown that past attempts had little enduring success (Lowenthal 1991). A study on the democracy-building effects of USAID assistance from 1990 to 2003 concludes that it has had a "moderate but consistent worldwide effect" but its authors emphasize a number of qualificatory observations (Finkel/Pérez-Liñán/Seligson 2007: 436).<sup>8</sup> Recently, the emerging literature discussing the global backlash against democracy and democracy promotion has added to the impression that external democratization is not performing well and is even fueling a countermovement (Carothers 2006; NED 2006).

According to Carothers, effects often fail to materialize because a lot of well-meaning aides confuse American democracy with liberal democracy itself. The two main misunderstandings which lead to failure, he points out, are the assumption that democracy is a formal set of procedures which can be imposed on any kind of system regardless of prior democratic experience and norms on the one hand, and the premise that the democracy to be promoted needs a 'made in the United States' label in order to function on the other (Carothers 2000a). Lowenthal adds that "efforts to nurture it [democracy, AEP] must be restrained, respectful, sensitive, and patient. These are not qualities for which U.S. foreign policy is generally noted, but they are needed to promote democracy abroad" (Lowenthal 1991: 402).

The area in which this kind of restraint, sensitivity and patience is probably least present is the one in which democracy has been promoted through military means. This is important to note as there has been a shift towards militarily imposed democracy since

8 Apart from outlining the difficulties in making a valid assessment and the complexity of the causation process, the authors point out that "U.S. democracy assistance pales relative to other U.S. development assistance, relative to per capita development assistance provided by many other advanced industrial nations, and, most starkly, relative to the sums expended to democratize nations via military intervention" (Finkel/Pérez-Liñán/Seligson 2007: 436).



the American invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. Muravchik is convinced that during the Cold War “military occupation and covert action have been highly effective means of spreading democracy” (Muravchik 1991: 222-23). To the contrary, as a study covering the time period from 1946 to 1996 has shown, most interventions by liberal states have failed to lead to successful democratization in target countries; only supportive interventions by United Nations blue helmet troops seem to have limited effectiveness (Pickering/Peceny 2006). As will be shown in the following chapter, the attempt to promote democracy by force is a characteristic the Bush administration has become known – and strongly criticized – for.

### 3. Democracy promotion from Clinton to Bush

#### 3.1 The Clinton presidency – geoeconomics via democracy promotion?

“It’s the economy, stupid!” was one of Bill Clinton’s highly successful campaign slogans for the 1992 presidential election, which he won against his predecessor George H.W. Bush, who was renowned for his foreign policy successes. In a world now suddenly lacking the framework the Cold War had offered for many decades, candidate and early President Clinton was indeed slow to develop his own foreign policy profile and was hence strongly criticized. During his election campaign, Clinton had only vaguely outlined three major foreign policy goals: “[...] updating and restructuring American military and security capabilities, elevating the role of economics in international affairs, and promoting democracy abroad” (Brinkley 1997: 112). In August 1993 he asked his staff to devise a strategic vision with an accompanying catch-phrase. These so-called ‘Kennan Sweepstakes’<sup>9</sup> were won by the term ‘enlargement’: “enlargement of the world’s free community of market democracies” (Lake 1993). Clinton and his staff hoped that democratic enlargement would catch on and eventually replace ‘containment’ as the new grand strategy after the Cold War.

The concept of enlargement never did catch on, let alone become America’s new grand strategy (Travis 1998: 270). The lack of public enthusiasm for democracy promotion or even for foreign policy in general, the greater latitude that interest groups and Congress consequently had, polarized party politics after the so-called ‘Republican Revolution’<sup>10</sup> as well as personal animosities all worked against the Clinton administration’s attempt to

9 Diplomat and policy advisor George F. Kennan had delivered the grand strategy catch-phrase for the period after 1945 – ‘containment’ – whose replacement the Clinton team was now seeking. Thus the search process was granted the title ‘Kennan Sweepstakes’.

10 The Republican Revolution refers to the 1994 mid-term elections, after which the Republican Party took over the majority of both the House of Representatives and the Senate.

forge a new foreign policy consensus around the enlargement concept. Critics of the administration felt that the inexperienced Clinton had fallen for “the old Wilsonian fallacy” (Cox 2000: 219) – idealistic policies unfit for the real world and dangerously compromising national security (Wiarda 1997: 12). Although these charges are unwarranted for the most part (Cox 2000), in response to criticism the administration had to scale back their enlargement efforts, though never losing sight of them completely. Three key adjustments to the strategy of enlargement were made: while high-profile rhetoric was maintained, the administration ceased to push its strategy as a priority; it shifted emphasis from democracy promotion to free market promotion, which was more acceptable to many opponents in Congress; and the continuing efforts to promote democracy assumed a lower profile (Travis 1998: 262-65).

The linkage between promoting democracy and promoting free market systems is of major concern to many authors. The Clinton-coined term ‘market democracy’ was deliberately created in order to show that promoting democracy and promoting market economies were two inseparable concepts, “that there was a symbiotic and positive relationship between market forms and political democracy” (Cox 2000: 232-33). Exactly how this mutually enforcing relationship worked and manifested itself was never clearly elaborated (Smith 2000: 78). Wiarda (1997: 16) interprets the connection between democracy and free market capitalism as follows: the promotion of open markets and free trade improves a recipient country’s economy, raises its people’s living standard and creates a middle class, thereby enhancing the state’s stability and the chances for democratization. Reciprocally, democracy promotion ensures stability and moderation which is needed to foster a climate conducive to foreign investment, open markets and free trade.

Not surprisingly, then, this apparently uncritical merging of promoting democracy and free markets was and still remains widely disputed. Whereas some insist that the causal connections between democracy and economic development are still inconclusive, others wonder whether it was concern for democracy or concern for the economy that took the ‘driver’s seat’ in Clinton’s enlargement concept (Smith 2000). Contrary to those who argue that “enlargement was about spreading democracy through promoting the gospel of geoeconomics” (Brinkley 1997: 125, Smith 2000: 78) perceives democracy promotion as subordinate to a neo-liberal economic agenda. Smith and Cox (2000: 225) agree that “for the Clinton administration geoeconomics replaced geopolitics as the central foreign policy goal” (Smith 2000: 78) and that in order to pursue this goal a coherent strategy was indeed devised, thus refuting the argument that Clinton was lacking in vision.

Clinton may have had a vision and may have been a believer in the ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ benefits democracy promotion offered, but – contrary to many critics’ charges – he was not a foolish missionary zealot. Clinton and his staff were not interested in pursuing the enlargement strategy for the sake of idealistic missions. Being a “pragmatic Neo-Wilsonianist” or a “pragmatic crusader”, Clinton was not willing to place democratization above other goals but considered it to be one objective among a number of others which were aimed at consolidating America’s hegemonic standing in the international system

(Cox 2000: 228, Travis 1998: 263). In other words, promoting democracy was not a moral duty but a policy instrument to advance American power (Cox 2000: 221).

Consequently, American business efforts in the international economy were more important to the president, who also made clear that democracy promotion was only one (small) contributor to national security, which would still be pursued through traditional means (Carothers 2003: 96; Cox 2000: 229-230). Democracy promotion was hence one promising strategy among many others. Accordingly, it has been pointed out that Clinton acted as a selective liberal democratic internationalist, who would stop short of using military force for the sake of democracy or human rights abroad – with the exception of the multilateral intervention in Haiti as well as the U.S. involvement in Somalia, the latter of which seriously backfired (Smith 1994: 325-26).

Not only was the Clinton administration (increasingly) reluctant to become militarily active for democracy promotion, it was also mainly focused on those nations already well engaged in the democratization process by themselves. The allocation of democracy assistance reflects this focus, as the main aid recipients were Latin American countries and countries in the former Soviet sphere (Azpuru et al 2008: 154). Several statements of Clinton representatives, among them Strobe Talbott, underline this policy direction:

“Henry Clay articulated a standard that holds up today: ‘I would not force upon other nations our principles and our liberty, if they did not want them. But, if an abused and oppressed people will their freedom; if they seek to establish it; if, in truth, they have established it; we have a right, as a sovereign power, to notice the fact, and to act as our circumstances and our interest require.’” (Talbott 1996)

Madeleine Albright (2000b) points to the importance of *renewing* the democratic momentum in states which have gotten stuck in their progress. And Anthony Lake (1993), addressing policy towards “backlash states” unwilling to reform, outlines the administration’s strategic objective to “seek to isolate them diplomatically, militarily, economically, and technologically”. Apparently, democratic reform was not to be forced upon those outside the already existing community of (newly developing) democracies. As will be shown, these statements stand in sharp contrast to the Bush administrations’ calls to either reform or eradicate those opposed to liberalism and democracy.

Overall, it is thus reasonable to argue that Clinton’s foreign policy, while certainly lacking contours in the beginning, followed a fairly traditional set of interests, such as consolidating American hegemonic standing in the world through economic engagement, while not falling prey to the post-Cold War lure of a democratist crusade to reshape the world after America’s own image and ideals. Yet, idealist notions were not irrelevant. Brinkley summarizes Clinton’s foreign policy as “pragmatic realism first, idealism always a close second” (Brinkley: 1997: 127), whereas Carothers speaks of the rediscovery of semi-realism (Carothers 2000b).

### 3.2 The Bush presidency – fighting terror via democracy promotion?

If one is inclined to pick a main theme for the presidency of Bill Clinton, it would probably be the economy; for Bush one would probably choose the issue of national security. Whereas Clinton won the election campaign with a focus on the economy, economic concerns ranked as a top priority during his two administrations, and he is – accurately or not – often remembered as presiding over a ‘golden age’, it is concerns about America’s security that have left the most noticeable imprint on the Bush presidency, and his dealing with the issue will likely be what he will be remembered for. Unilateralism, withdrawal from international treaties, the doctrine of preemption, the fight between ‘good’ and ‘evil’, and the “War on Terror” – primarily manifesting itself in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq – are probably the most-frequently discussed concepts and points of discussion regarding the Bush presidency (Fukuyama/McFaul 2007/08). Democracy promotion as a foreign policy strategy and objective also played a crucial role as manifested by the president’s proclaimed ‘freedom agenda’. But, compared to the Clinton presidency’s economic focus, the agenda’s emphasis had shifted noticeably.

In the early months of the Bush presidency, however, democracy promotion seemed to be in danger of getting the ax (Carothers 2003: 84). During his election campaign, Bush had made it clear that he would reduce foreign policy commitments to defending traditional and vital interests and would not fall for any of the idealistic notions he accused the Clinton team of; realistic thinking would re-enter the White House (Carothers 2003: 84; Jervis 2003: 365). But the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, forced the administration to fundamentally reconsider America’s national security, a process at whose end stood democracy promotion’s elevation as a central objective in what came to be known as the Bush Doctrine (Goldsmith 2008: 120). This new foreign policy agenda’s framework was developed and presented in statements from June to September 2002, culminating in the National Security Strategy of September 17, 2002 (Smith 2007: 2). Jervis succinctly outlines the Bush Doctrine’s four central elements as follows:

“[...] a strong belief in the importance of a state’s domestic regime in determining its foreign policy and the related judgment that this is an opportune time to transform international politics; the perception of great threats that can be defeated only by new and vigorous policies, most notably preventive war; a willingness to act unilaterally when necessary; and, as both a cause and a summary of these beliefs, an overriding sense that peace and stability require the United States to assert its primacy in world politics.” (Jervis 2003: 365)

The Bush Doctrine has stirred up high waves in academic debate and has found only a few enthusiastic followers there. Tony Smith, whose outlook on America’s democracy promotion capabilities and successes turned rather bleak under the Bush government, criticizes that the Bush Doctrine offers “the stark choice [...] between a ‘benevolent’ American hegemony over the international system, with imperialism against those who thwarted America’s grand design, or chaos and the march of the barbarians” (Smith 2007: 3). This imperially inclined hegemon is, as the administration has made clear, very much willing to use force if it is considered necessary. The administration is also responsible for creating the impression that military intervention is the *only* democracy promotion instrument when in fact it is the rarest of all instruments as well as the least likely to succeed (Fukuyama/McFaul 2007/08: 34).

The argument discussed most frequently with regard to democracy promotion under Bush – and usually in connection with the choice of military means – is the supposition that spreading democracy is not only a good way of enhancing America’s national security in general, but, more concretely, a viable counterterrorism strategy. It is especially the Middle East that the administration has focused on in this regard, and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have, accordingly, brought about the sharpest change in democracy spending since the end of the Cold War, as the assistance budget for both countries rose dramatically (Azpuru et al 2008: 155). President Bush’s 2006 National Strategy for Combating Terrorism highlights, as the first among six strategies aimed at winning the “War on Terror”, the necessity to “advance effective democracies as the long-term antidote to the ideology of terrorism”.<sup>11</sup> Larry Diamond is one of the few authors following this line of argumentation as he evokes “a long twilight struggle’ against the enemies of freedom” to be won in the long run by promoting democracy, which will “undermine, isolate, and ultimately defeat radical islamist terrorism” (Diamond 2007: 1, 9). Although Diamond agrees with the president’s framing of the problem and of the solutions, he – as do many others – laments that Bush “has been disastrously wrong in the unilateral, blunt and blundering means with which he has tried to bring it about”, abandoning democratic commitments made with pompous rhetoric whenever difficulties arose (Diamond 2007: 9-10).

Whereas Clinton was accused of being too idealistic in his foreign policy designs and was exonerated by many commentators, it appears to be the reverse in the case of Bush. The Bush team has repeatedly claimed that its policymaking is firmly grounded in the realist tradition (Mazarr 2003: 503), a claim that many scholars have endeavored to refute. One of them has tested the basic premises of realism against the worldview that the President and his representatives have conveyed in their statements and finds them to be clearly inclined towards idealistic notions (Mazarr 2003). Bush’s foreign policy agenda, in fact, “horrifies Realists (and perhaps realists)” (Jervis 2003: 366), whereas it shows character traits that justify labeling it “Wilsonianism with a vengeance” (Rhodes 2003: 133) and putting it squarely in the liberal tradition (Desch 2007/08: 37). Carothers (2003: 84) and Diamond (2007: 10) agree that two contradictory imperatives produce tension in Bush’s proclaimed foreign policy: the realist imperative to foster good relations with ‘friendly tyrants’ in order to maintain stability and order is in conflict with the neo-Reaganite impulse to promote and strengthen democratic systems around the world. Rhodes (2003) strikes a similar note when he explains that the Bush Doctrine is imperial but liberal and claims that this tension lies at the heart of the president’s foreign policy.

11 The White House: National Strategy for Combating Terrorism 2006. A 2007 White House Fact Sheet entitled “Advancing Freedom and Democracy Around the World” also insists: “Expanding Freedom Is More Than A Moral Imperative – It Is The Only Realistic Way To Protect Our People. The 9/11 attacks were evidence of an international movement of violent Islamic extremists that threatens free people everywhere. Nations that commit to freedom for their people will not support extremists; they will join in defeating them.”

The Bush administration's 'freedom agenda' has also led a few scholars to revisit the meaning and implications of liberalism. In light of what many consider illiberal excesses of American (foreign) policy<sup>12</sup> and the president's supposedly imperial designs, scholars have pointed again to the illiberal dangers that are inherent in liberalism (Desch 2007/08; Geis 2006). But while recent U.S. policies have offered a vivid example of illiberal policies, all liberal democracies can potentially fall for it:

"Democracies are janus-faced. While they do not fight each other, they are frequently involved in militarized disputes and wars with authoritarian regimes. [...] To a large degree democracies create their friends and enemies – "us" and "them" – by inferring either defensive or aggressive motives from the domestic structures of their counterparts." (Risse-Kappen 1995: 491)

Rhetoric and politics of recent U.S. counterterrorism may serve as marked examples, but the creation of strong enemy images and illiberal measures are a pitfall that all Western democracies face. In order to expand the institutions and the scope of the security state, "the construction of 'others' that are presented as threats to a society *in principle* lies in the self-interest of *all* democratic governments" (Geis 2006: 155, *her emphasis*).

Michael Desch, who demonstrates that the Bush administration fully embraced liberalism's basic premises (see chapter 2), posits that these same principles – and not, as widely accepted, the Al Qaeda attacks on September 11, 2001 – are responsible for the administration's illiberal policies.<sup>13</sup> From a traditional American liberal point of view, threats stemming from non-liberal forces appear unrealistically large whereas the challenges to promote liberalism are considered unrealistically small. Threats from non-liberal aggressors such as terrorists, accordingly, cannot be contained or otherwise managed but need to be eliminated; either through annihilation or spreading democracy so far the terrorists no longer find fertile ground for their intentions (Desch 2007/08: 25-26). Desch reasons that "given Liberalism's dire view of the threat posed by non-liberal currents and its radical prescriptions for how to deal with these threats, it is not surprising that illiberal policies would be the result" (Desch 2007/08: 27). It also follows from liberalism that its norms are self-evident and that there is no legitimate reason to reject them, which is why the Bush administration considers any attack on the free world to either stem from "moral defect or malign intent" (Desch 2007/08: 32; Geis 2006: 150-52). Desch's argumentation hence offers an explanation for the president's and his administration's inclination to present the world in pointedly dichotomous terms and the concep-

12 Authors highlight, for example, the indefinite detention of presumed terrorists at Guantánamo Bay, the rendition campaign and torture practices, and unauthorized wiretapping (Desch 2007/08: 7; Fukuyama/Mc Faul 2007/08: 34-35).

13 Similarly, Rhodes (2003: 149) warns that "the real tragedy for America is likely to be that the pursuit of liberal imperium conflicts with its own republican values. A liberal democratic republic may pursue imperial dominance, but in gaining the whole world it loses its own soul."

tual basis for the oft-cited remark “either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists” (Bush 2001a).<sup>14</sup>

The overall assessment of (not only) democracy promotion under Bush turns out to be harshly negative (Goldsmith 2008: 121). Again, just as with the Clinton administration, rhetoric never lived up to reality; but then the Bush administration’s rhetoric also far exceeded Clinton’s, creating the impression that his foreign policy was one of “democracy promotion on steroids” (Carothers 2007a: 11). The administration’s blustering rhetoric has even hurt American interests abroad as it gambled away credibility and triggered anti-American responses (Fukuyama/McFaul 2007/08: 36). And substantive efforts going beyond the use of rhetoric – most prominently the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq as well as the significant increase in financial democracy aid<sup>15</sup> – have failed to enlarge the number of people living in freedom (Fukuyama/McFaul 2007/08: 24). Even worse, talk of a worldwide democratic rollback as well as a democracy promotion backlash emerged.<sup>16</sup> The charge of promoting double standards is frequently voiced, often in connection with pointing out the good and thriving relations between the Bush government and dictatorships (Carothers 2003: 84; Schmitz 2006: 243). Consequently, the image of Bush having embarked on a democracy crusade that is sometimes evoked is a myth.

### 3.3 The two post-Cold War presidencies compared

With regard to means considered and used for democracy promotion, the Clinton record is – in clear contrast to the Bush presidency – one of military restraint. Hand in hand with this observation goes the more restricted group of addressees of democracy assistance under the Clinton presidency. Whereas – by implication more than by explicit articulation – the Clinton team sought to assist nations either with a somewhat (pre-)democratic structure or nations that themselves took the initiative to pursue reform, Bush explicitly extended the circle of addressees to those quite unwilling to democratize and even included the so-called ‘rogue states’. This observation along with the Bush administrations’

14 This statement was reiterated at least once later that year: “You are either with us or you are against us in the fight against terror” (Bush 2001b).

15 The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were publicly only ex-post justified as being about bringing democracy to oppressed peoples, but the Bush administration insists that this goal was decisive (and in the case of Iraq Desch concurs: 2008: 37). As Goldsmith (2008: 121) reports, financial aid for democracy promotion in 2000 was \$500 million per year; the 2008 budget request for democracy promotion and human rights rose to \$1.5 billion.

16 Carothers 2006; NED 2006. In June 2007, the Washington Post offered a bleak summary of the state of U.S. democracy promotion: ever since Bush had made it a key to U.S. long-term security, democracy had suffered considerable setbacks in the Middle East as well as Latin America and Russia; the administration has lost its credibility on the issue; and (semi-)authoritarian governments now respond more quickly and more morosely to American rebukes with regard to the lack or pace of democratic progress (Wright 2007).

Manichean inclinations and their harsh rejection of the illiberal ‘other’ allows the style of democracy promotion under Bush to be characterized as confrontational, an assessment that is well corroborated by the president’s general penchant for unilateralism in foreign policy. In contrast, Clinton’s more reserved, consensual approach in promoting democracy goes hand in hand with his inclination towards a multilateral foreign policy stance in general. In terms of argumentative reasoning for democracy promotion, scholars have picked their favorite point of discussion for each administration: economic benefits for Clinton and keeping America safe for Bush. It remains to be seen in the following chapter whether the alleged importance of these lines of argument for democracy promotion is reflected in statements made by the respective administrations.

## **4. Fulfilling America’s global mission and keeping her safe**

### **4.1 The official rationales for democracy promotion under the Clinton and Bush administrations**

This chapter mainly focuses on *why* democracy was to be promoted; it discusses and interprets the results of a qualitative content analysis of public statements made by officials of the Clinton and Bush administrations with regard to the reasons given in favor of the promotion of democracy.<sup>17</sup> The main question is: what do the speakers believe resonates best with – and thereby creates support among – the American people? The actors under analysis are accountable to the electorate and have to justify and gain support for their actions. Hence the assumption is that they will choose arguments they deem to be most plausible and convincing to their audience.

<sup>17</sup> The methodological approach was the following: secondary literature was scanned for hints and traces of conceivable – not necessarily actually voiced – arguments for American democracy promotion. This fairly comprehensive collection was then broken down into suitable categories. In order to ensure that important arguments had not been missed, the category scheme was used in a pilot study on a few sample speeches, and additional lines of argument were incorporated. The category scheme and codebook resulting from this process were then applied to 56 public statements from each presidency. Political actors under survey were the presidents, the secretaries of state, as well as other administration officials who have made notable statements on the promotion of democracy.



### Frequency of argumentation in % for Clinton and Bush presidency and for both presidencies together

Argument	Clinton Presidency	Bush Presidency	Clinton & Bush Presidencies
<i>Democracy promotion enables/strengthens:</i>			
America's special mission and identity	22.3	26.2	24.4
US national economy	10.7	1.0	5.6
US national security	15.3	23.8	19.8
US national interest	15.8	6.6	10.9
Liberal-democratic world order	16.2	19.4	17.9
Benefits for other people(s)	14.4	20.3	17.5
residual	5.3	2.7	3.9

A chi-square test points to a significant relationship between both variables (presidency and argument) at the level of  $p < 0.001$ .

The cluster of arguments that officials of both presidencies most frequently invoke is a normative one, namely the idea that promoting democracy is a moral endeavor and/or that it is an expression of a specific American mission or role in the world and thus part of U.S. national identity – irrespective of whether rooted in the country's religious or political foundation, its historic roots, its culture or tradition, or its intrinsic values. These arguments conform to a 'logic of appropriateness'; U.S. policymakers tend to behave in accordance with what is considered to be normatively appropriate or consistent with American political identity (Monten 2005: 120). Promoting democracy, both administrations are firmly convinced, is not only in line with American tradition; it is also a moral responsibility on the part of the American people to spread its values, and this is a role that other nations have come to expect and rely on. "Support for freedom is in the proudest tradition, from Washington and Jefferson, to Reagan and Clinton" (Albright 2000b) and "[t]he United States promotes freedom because it is right to do so, and because it is a part of our heritage as a nation" (Berger 1999). Even more forcefully, "[l]ike generations before us, we have a calling from beyond the stars to stand for freedom" (Bush 2004). In the count for the Clinton presidency, more than a fifth of all arguments fall into this category (22.3 %), more than a fourth for the Bush presidency (26.2 %). As is clearly reflected in the choice of reasoning, the United States' mission and identity with regard to democracy promotion has had a strong and constant presence in speeches and documents from the past two decades.

Under the Bush presidency, the second most frequently voiced reason for democratization abroad is the advancement of national security (23.8 %). The security argument is usually very straightforward. Officials often succinctly declare that the promotion of democracy will enhance America's national security: "Only in an increasingly democratic world will the American people feel themselves truly secure" (Talbot 1996). Sometimes they refer to the fact that democracies do not sponsor terrorist acts and that "democracy promotion is the best antidote to terrorism" (Dobriansky 2003). Apart from arguing that democracy promotion in general contributes to U.S. security and stability, a few officials elaborate by pointing out that democracy promotion helps dry up the "breeding ground" for terrorism and extremism in recipient countries as it brings people freedom, security

and prosperity (or at least hope). According to former Secretary of State Albright (2000c), “We have found, through experience around the world, that the best way to defeat terrorist threats is to increase law enforcement capacities while at the same time promoting democracy and human rights”. Although the frequency of this argumentation is less salient under the Clinton presidency (15.3 %), it is by no means marginal.

For the Bush administrations, two other lines of argument were relevant when emphasizing the rationales behind democracy promotion: the strengthening and advancement of a liberal-democratic world order (19.4 %) and the benefits for other people(s) (20.3 %). As to the former, officials often talk about democracy, peace (or the absence of war), and freedom or liberty as *ends in themselves* rather than means to other ends. They are assumed to be globally shared values whose eventual culmination will be a liberal-democratic world order of enduring peace, international stability and security. “Democracies don’t go to war with each other” (Clinton 1991) and “an ever-widening circle of democracies is forging a freer, more prosperous, and more peaceful international community” (Christopher 1993). From a perspective emphasizing the spread of democracy as a *means to other ends*, it is also considered a viable tool against the non-liberal world of authoritarian regimes and ‘outlaw states’ and, in the perspective of some, an effective tool fighting ‘evil’ in the world: “democracy and capitalism [...] are like twin lasers working in tandem all across the globe to illuminate the last dark corners of totalitarianism and dictatorship” (Powell 2001).

Sometimes, officials use an argument neither evoking moral or material benefits for their electorate nor a liberal-democratic world order as a universal value to be pursued, but refer to the positive effects of democracy promotion on the recipient countries’ populations. These benefits for others either refer to the improvement of security, the economy or other more specific, material benefits that American democracy promotion brings to other peoples, or they refer to the non-material benefits all people have a right to enjoy: “We know from our own experience that democracy and free markets – for all their imperfections – are the best means to the ends to which people all over the world aspire: security, freedom and prosperity” (Lake 1995). Democracy and freedom are assigned a very strong and notably universal appeal, and officials often point out that other people deserve American support and solidarity in their struggle for their own universal rights.

The combination of arguments relating to an American mission and to national security under the Bush administration makes up half of all arguments voiced, whereas referring to benefits for others and the liberal-democratic world order both account for about one-fifth of all arguments. Thus, the Bush administration is strongly focused on four lines of argument. For the Clinton presidency, the result is more widely varied as six lines of argument receive remarkable attention, thus treating as relevant two argumentative patterns that are negligible for the Bush presidency: fostering American national interest (15.8 %) and strengthening the U.S. economy (10.7 %). Since liberal-democratic world order and benefits for others both play an important role as well (16.2 % and 14.4 %), the Clinton administrations’ lines of argument are fairly evenly divided; here the margin between the strongest category (American mission at 22.3 %) and the weakest (U.S. economic benefits with 10.7 %) is only a little more than 10 percentage points in comparison

to the Bush presidency's 25 percentage points margin (between American mission with 26.2 % and U.S. economic interests at only 1.0 %).

Contrary to the expectations generated by Clinton's general focus on the economy during his presidency, the connection between democracy promotion and the promotion of U.S. economic interests is not remarkably strong. Those making the argument consider democratic governance in a recipient country as a guarantor for a long-term stable political regime which in turn strengthens the economy. Whether democracy primarily strengthens a country's (free market) economy or whether the economy primarily strengthens the democratic system is disputed in the political (and academic) discourse, but it is generally accepted that both reinforce each other. In making their case, officials often point to stable and reliable trade relations between the U.S. and other democracies as well as to the opening up of relatively secure markets for American goods in democratic systems: "Democracies create free markets that offer economic opportunity, and they make for reliable trading partners" (Lake 1994). At 10.7 %, arguing for economic benefits is the least relevant among the six lines of reasoning. When it comes to democracy promotion, it is clearly not simply "the economy, stupid". The assumption that Clinton's main political driving force was the U.S. economy is not reflected in his administrations' legitimizing strategy for democracy promotion. However, economic considerations may be concealed beneath the label of 'national interest', the Clinton presidency's second strongest argumentative cluster (15.8 %).

While the Clinton team attached great relevance to furthering the national interest through democracy promotion, the Bush administrations showed only little proclivity to evoke this idea (6.6 %). From Clinton officials one often heard that "[w]e are not starry-eyed about the prospects for spreading democracy, but we know that to do so serves our interests" (Lake 1994) and that "from Central America to Central Asia, our interests dictate that we should be FOR a world in which the democratic tide continues to rise" (Albright 2001). The national interest, of course, is a somewhat elusive concept; it is undoubtedly of the highest importance and no one would dare to oppose it, but the term itself is open for interpretation and could include everything from enhancing national security and economic interests to fulfilling a moral duty, even to ignoring the matter of democracy promotion altogether. Whatever it denotes in any specific reference, however, it is always regarded as crucial.

The prominence of the national interest category in argumentation used during the Clinton presidency makes it even less safe to assume – as some of its critics have – that the Clinton presidency had a strong focus on the economy while not being too concerned about security issues. The results indicate that security considerations were no less important than economic issues in the Clinton administrations. The Clinton record does pale quite a bit in comparison with the Bush administrations' security rationale, which accounted for nearly one-fourth of all lines of argument (23.8 %). If, however, one adds up all categories describing or at least including 'hard' U.S. interests – security interests, economic interests, and the national interest – the Clinton result is over 10 percentage points ahead of the Bush count; 41.8 % versus 31.4 %. This is because – apart from the very pronounced security focus – the Bush record is weak on arguing in favor of the national in-

terest (6.6 %) and basically non-existent in terms of arguing on behalf of the economy. So when it comes to the so-called ‘hard’ interests, the Bush administrations chose to focus almost solely on national security, whereas the Clinton team argued along different lines, with a tendency to draw upon the somewhat vague ‘national interest’.

Another difference in the choice of arguments emerges when comparing whether administration officials, when arguing for a liberal-democratic world order, favor emphasizing democratization’s positive contributions to the community of democracies or its effect of enlightening, containing, or eliminating ‘enemies’ to liberalism and democracy. That democracies counter ‘evil’ only accounted for 2.1 % of the Clinton presidency’s lines of argument, whereas members of the Bush administrations relied on this line of argument in 6.4 % of all cases. The latter, however, drew upon democracies producing ‘good’ in only 1.0 % of all arguments, whereas the Clinton team’s count was 6.0 %.<sup>18</sup> The numbers are almost reversed, demonstrating a proclivity on the part of Bush representatives to evoke the image of an enemy who needs to be at least checked, possibly fought or eliminated by democracies. This notion is distinctly less strongly embraced by the Clinton administrations.

In this regard, another observation – one that has often been discussed elsewhere (Geis 2006; Mazarr 2003) – is the Bush administrations’ proclivity to speak in Manichaeic and messianic categories. This is true especially for the president himself, who in his rhetoric paints the world in the dichotomous terms of ‘good’ and ‘evil’, depicting a constant struggle of biblical proportions between the good and pure forces of freedom and the evil and utterly destructive forces of terror and tyranny. “Evil men, obsessed with ambition and unburdened by conscience” (Bush 2005b) seek to eradicate everything the liberal world stands for: “Take almost any principle of civilization,” the president is convinced, “and their goal is the opposite” (Bush 2007). Not “allowing the violent to inherit the Earth” (Bush 2006) is the duty of the brave and valiant defenders of liberty. This struggle is definitive and concessions are worthless:

“We’re facing a radical ideology with inalterable objectives: to enslave whole nations and intimidate the world. No act of ours invited the rage of the killers – and no concession, bribe, or act of appeasement would change or limit their plans for murder. [...] We will never back down, never give in, and never accept anything less than complete victory.” (Bush 2005b)

Whereas President Bush vociferously evokes democracy and freedom as the remedies for everything that goes wrong in the world, the Clinton representatives in comparison are more sober in their use of language. Apart from the almost complete absence of the successor administration’s hyperbole during the Clinton presidency, democracy is sometimes even depicted as a possibly precarious condition. Secretary Albright, for example, concedes that “[i]n truth, democracy can be maddening, messy, and muddled. But as Chur-

18 These findings – not presented in Table 1 – and other secondary results as well as a list of all primary documents used in the analysis can be found online here: [www.hsfk.de/Publikationen.9.0.html?&no\\_cache=1&detail=4203&cHash=b6c37f825d](http://www.hsfk.de/Publikationen.9.0.html?&no_cache=1&detail=4203&cHash=b6c37f825d).

chill famously observed, as a system of government, it is miles ahead of whatever is in second place” (Albright 2000a). Later in the same speech, she talks about how for many people the promise of democracy has not lived up to expectations and that “a majority [in the ‘New Independent States’, AEP] have come to equate democracy with inequality, and the unraveling of social fabric.” Elaborating further on the problems of democratization, she warns of “sham democracy” as a dangerous result, once again emphasizing U.S. responsibility to promote democracy with more effort and resources.

Both administrations share the conviction that American values and American interests are either the same or mutually reinforce each other. As former Clinton Deputy Secretary of State Talbott (1996) maintained, “[i]t is the basis for asserting, in rebuttal to some self-described realists’ insinuations to the contrary, that American values and interests reinforce each other.” Similarly, former Bush Secretary of State Rice explained: “I try to remind people that while at times there may seem to be short-term tradeoffs, that the United States has never been confused that in the long term our interests and our values are absolutely identical [...]” (Rice 2008). The assumption that national interests and values are usually not in conflict with each other, is, as has been shown, very much disputed in the academic community.

Arguments against the promotion of democracy were, not surprisingly, a rare phenomenon in the documents and speeches analyzed. Counter-arguments were made a few times, though, in anticipation of or as indirect reactions to criticism, or simply in order to introduce the ensuing argumentation favoring democracy promotion in an even more pronounced way. The arguments against the promotion of democracy that speakers covered fell into two camps: the charge that democracy promotion is only a second- or third-order objective and that pursuing it is a waste of resources, and the assumption that the United States is embarked upon a hegemonic crusade in which it naively seeks to impose its own values on other peoples regardless of their wishes, thereby potentially destabilizing their societies. Talbott’s rebuttal attacks the premises of both camps:

“Those who hold that view often claim to be realists, to distinguish themselves from woolly-minded idealists enamored of the notion that the United States can, and should, affect other countries’ internal affairs. Yet the so-called realist critique is anachronistic: it fails to take account of the growth of the global marketplace, along with the deepening and widening of interdependence among regions. It is in that sense unrealistic.” (Talbott 1996)

Whereas Albright (2000a) simply refuses the possibility that democracy by definition could ever be imposed upon a people, Rice (2008) paints a picture of how things might have turned out had the United States never taken an interest in making the world a better place; the result, in her view, would have been a bleak and hopeless world, in which Nazi Germany, Japanese imperial tyranny and the communist Soviet Union would still be running rampant. She is also among those who defend against the charge that democracy can only be promoted at the expense of creating greater instability. According to Rice:

“For 60 years, we often thought that we could achieve stability without liberty in the Middle East. And ultimately, we got neither. Now, we must recognize, as we do in every other region of the world, that liberty and democracy are the only guarantees of true stability and lasting security.” (Rice 2005b)

“If the school of thought called “realism” is to be truly realistic, it must recognize that stability without democracy will prove to be false stability, and that fear of change is not a positive prescription for policy.” (Rice 2005c)

## 4.2 The rationales in perspective

Both the Clinton and Bush administrations have made it clear that the time of exemplarism is past; isolationism is a paradigm the American people can no longer afford. Democracy promotion is one aspect of an American foreign policy of engagement guided by the belief in the indispensable necessity of American leadership in the world. As far as the most recent presidencies are concerned, the worldwide spread of democracy is an endeavor serving American as well as what is considered to be general international interests; in fact, these interests do not diverge but are identical. The liberal perspective, in whose tradition both presidencies stand, upholds that all people want the same things out of life; that all people, naturally, aspire to the same values and rights. The expansion of the zone of democracies as the prime vehicle and guarantor of liberal rights, safety, and prosperity for all people, including the people of the United States, is, in the eyes of its proponents, an instrument and a goal beyond the nitpicking disputes between adherents of idealism and realism. Democracy promotion is considered an achievable goal in principle – minor difficulties notwithstanding – and it serves America’s and the world’s vital interests, while it also caters to America’s tradition and its sense of mission.

As the overall results for both presidencies taken together show, the two dominant legitimization strategies for democracy promotion are drawing upon the American ‘idealistic’ sense of mission (24.4 %) and invoking ‘realist’ national security (19.8 %), the ‘hardest’ of all ‘hard’ interests so to speak. The representatives offer no hint as to their perception of a possible fundamental contradiction or conflict between the two. Neither do desire for enhancement of a liberal-democratic world order or concern about benefits and rights for other peoples – the two lines of argument ranked third and fourth (17.9 % and 17.5 % respectively) – provide any point of conflict. In very clear and straightforward terms, American democracy promotion is portrayed as a fairly frictionless remedy for many of the United States’ as well as for the global society’s problems and concerns. This conviction clearly echoes the American tradition of embracing the liberal premises that development is a relatively smooth process and that in principle “all good things go together” (Desch 2007/08: 20-25).

Arguments that deal with the U.S. historical mission to guide the world towards freedom and democracy provide the most frequently invoked justification for the administrations’ designs to promote democracy. The strength of the mission-focused argumentation is further corroborated by the relatively high incidence of arguments pointing to benefits for others, which are closely related to missionary reasoning. Apparently, all speakers are convinced that the American public is highly susceptible to appeals to their identity and patriotic mission. As has been outlined in chapter 2, American political culture is indeed strongly informed by “a ‘civil religion’ which embraces the notion of a ‘manifest destiny’

and ‘special providence’ of the U.S., of the overriding values of freedom, liberty and democracy” (Geis 2006: 149).

Whereas the expectation that the Clinton team’s justifications would focus most notably on the economy turned out to be unwarranted, the Bush team’s overarching national security focus found clear expression in justifications for democracy promotion. The question posed by Steve Smith (2000: 78) on whether concerns for democracy or for the economy were in the ‘driver’s seat’ in Clinton’s enlargement agenda cannot be answered by these results. The comparatively low incidence of economic justifications in the Clinton documents in this regard is quite stunning. If the Clinton administration indeed considered it obvious that democratization and the enhancement of free market systems beneficial to the U.S. were each others’ natural twins, one wonders why a tenth of the argumentation was still founded upon highlighting these economic benefits.

That Clinton, as some scholars have pointed out, was indeed not a daydreaming idealist is an assumption corroborated by this study’s findings; as has been shown, American ‘hard’ interests were used significantly more often to justify democracy promotion than during the Bush presidency. While Bush’s argumentation regarding ‘hard’ interests almost solely emphasizes the issue of national security, the Clinton argumentation strategies are more diverse with references to the country’s national interest the most frequently used. The Clinton administrations operated at a time after the Cold War in which many Americans focused on domestic issues and during which it was not yet clear what exactly constituted the national interest with regard to foreign policy. The situation was very different for the Bush presidency after September 11, 2001, when the terrorist attacks had unmistakably demonstrated America’s (physical) vulnerability, and national security again turned into the undisputed primary prerogative. Thus, while idealists, realists, isolationists, liberals and the followers of other foreign policy creeds were still debating what the new ‘uniting theme’ of foreign policy was to be after the Cold War, it probably was a viable and – arguably – safe strategy for the Clinton team to justify democracy promotion by evoking the national interest; a general concept that is regarded as crucial by all currents of thought and that holds critical importance regardless of how diffuse and undefined it may temporarily be.

The all-encompassing security architecture after the 2001 terrorist attacks is not only visible in the high occurrence of democracy-as-a-security-tool argumentation but also in the distribution of arguments pertaining to a liberal-democratic world order. Whereas the Clinton team favors pointing out the ‘good’ democracies tend to achieve over emphasizing the ‘evil’ that democracies need to counter, the first line of argument barely exists in the Bush record. The Bush presidency clearly prefers to evoke the image of an enemy that democracies have vowed to fight. This is in line with the new focus on national security as well as the new threat perception after the attacks; it also resonates with the scholarly concern over the implications of the type of liberalism the Bush government embraced. Painting the enemy in sinister colors – presenting an evil and uncontrollable threat to the free world – allowed the Bush team to underline and justify the dire necessity for their controversial and, at least in part, illiberal counteractions (Geis 2006: 150). The promo-

tion of democracy as part of the attempt to reshape the world, especially when conducted through military means, became one of these controversial policies.

For Clinton, on the other hand, there was no more or less specific enemy in sight and no war to win for which the public's support needed to be rallied, so evoking the image of an antagonist – a cruel, invincible, and uncontrollable one at that – probably did not appear a sensible thing to do. The September 11 attacks provided an opportunity for the successful construction and employment of the image of the 'other' (Geis 2006). But, as Desch (2007/08: 8) emphatically argues, the terrorist attacks are not responsible for the outburst of illiberal policies under the Bush administrations. American illiberalism, in this view, has become a greater problem because the end of the Cold War and the rise of U.S. hegemony also left American liberalism with fewer physical constraints. The attacks, then, should more appropriately be seen as a window of opportunity or a trigger which boosted existing illiberal tendencies.

Scholars may very much doubt that democracy promotion is an excellent long-term antidote to the growth of terrorism; the Bush presidency presents itself as utterly convinced. In a time of war, the security line of argument, with a 23.8 % share, is deemed to resonate extremely well with the public. Whole paragraphs making effective use of high-profile rhetoric on the terrorist threat which has to be fought by freedom's forces were placed prominently in the State of the Union Addresses from 2004 onwards. The forcefulness with which the terrorist-fighting component of democracy promotion was emphasized in the second George W. Bush administration permits the assumption that this line of argumentation was increasingly used in defense of measures that were coming more and more under heavy criticism. It is likely that, in the beginning, the security argument's primary purpose was to rally Americans around active (and military) democracy promotion but that, towards the end of the Bush presidency, it was used primarily as a defensive strategy and a justification for wars that did not yield the promised results.

In pointing out that freedom and democracy are something all the world's peoples aspire to, speakers for Clinton and Bush probably react to the (realist) charge that indigenous and cultural differences stand in the way of a successful implementation of democracy from the outside. Administration representatives insist that human rights are universal, and democracy – in contrast to tyranny – can never be imposed. In both presidencies, this rationale is visible, although referring to the *material* benefits for others is slightly preferred. Historically, the logic of this argument has not been as persuasive as today's policymakers would make it sound. As Schmitz points out, supporting right-wing dictatorships during the Cold War “was justified by the argument that non-Western European people were unprepared for self-government and that democratic governments in Third World nations would be weak and unstable” and thus easy prey for communism (Schmitz 2006: 241). This assessment also conflicts with Secretary Rice's assertion that democracy promotion leads to greater stability in recipient countries (Rice 2005a,b,c). As Desch



(2007/08: 23-25) notes, the premises of liberal thought even hold that strengthening democracy is more important than maintaining stability. This reasoning is a marked departure from the lines of arguments embraced during the Cold War.<sup>19</sup>

The triumphal belief that, after the Cold War, American interests and the ‘world’s interests’ have become identical and that American institutions and values are exportable as well as universal (Monten 2005: 144-47) is reflected in both presidencies’ statements; though more strongly expressed by Bush representatives. The Clinton team struck a very optimistic, yet more sober note than the successor administrations, as can be concluded from its restricting itself to non-military means of democracy promotion, the more cautious statements on the benefits and problems that democracy brings, as well as the lower ranking of arguments pointing out benefits for others in the analysis. In line with the literature’s assessment, it seems that the Clinton presidency was far less inspired than its successor by the belief that America’s democratic mission was indeed the remedy for most if not all American and global problems. It was quite pragmatic; if a clash between traditional interests and values were detected, the former would have priority.

Both presidencies, as has been pointed out, uphold the belief that American interests and American values are expressed harmoniously through the worldwide spread of democracy. But it is mainly the Bush presidency which has been accused of showing a significant lack of humility in exercising power (Monten 2005: 148). America’s hegemonic standing at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the September 11 attacks have provided the impetus for the illiberal excesses and subsequent policy failures that have drawn much more criticism than the Clinton team ever had to face for its own democracy promotion rhetoric and policy. As the following chapter will show, the latest president is working hard to distance himself from his predecessor’s lack of humility and illiberal excesses.

## **5. The Obama presidency – shaking off the Bush legacy and finding a way forward**

Where the Obama administration stands on democracy promotion and, subsequently, whether its approach represents continuity or change with regard to preceding administrations has been a widely discussed issue in policy and journalistic circles. It appears that the current president has heeded the call of some to at least significantly tone down the rampant rhetoric and thereby distance himself and his policies from the Bush administration and its faults (Carothers 2007b; Goldsmith 2008); others are squarely disappointed by what they perceive as the “abandonment of democracy” (Muravchik 2009). Earlier fears that the Obama administration – in its attempt to distance itself from its predecessor

19 On democracy promotion’s paradigm changes over the 20th century, see for example T. Smith 2007.

and be ABB (“Anything But Bush”) – would completely turn away from promoting democracy, however, seem to be unwarranted. This chapter will lay out, at length, how the Obama administration has so far tackled democracy promotion and, briefly, outline the reasons the administration has cited in support of this policy.

In terms of rhetoric and tone, the contrast to the Bush administration is glaring. Whereas President Bush rarely missed out on talking about democracy, observers of the early Obama administration count the occasions on which the current president and his advisers, sometimes ostentatiously, eschewed the issue. Not even once did Obama mention the word “democracy” in his inaugural address – the issue that his predecessor had made his central theme four years earlier. In addressing progress and setbacks of U.S. foreign policy in Iraq and Afghanistan, the goal of establishing democratic governments has barely received mention during the early months.<sup>20</sup> And Obama has also remained curiously reserved on questions of democracy and freedom during the protests erupting after the fraudulent elections in 2009 in Iran and the ensuing repressions (Bouchet 2010). It was, however, not only the president himself that supporters of democracy promotion eyed with growing concern. During her Senate confirmation hearing in January 2009, Secretary of State Clinton referred to the ‘three Ds’ of defense, diplomacy and development as the new pillars of U.S. foreign policy, making observers wonder about the future role of the ‘D’ of democracy in this administration. And on her first official visit to China, Clinton made waves by declaring that issues like human rights would not be addressed as “our pressing on those issues can’t interfere with the global economic crisis, the global climate change crisis and the security crisis” (quoted from Muravchik 2009: 22).

When the Obama team did speak about democracy and its promotion – and it increasingly did so starting with the widely-received presidential speech in Cairo in June 2009 – a distinctly new tone of voice became discernible. Acknowledging the existing controversy about democracy promotion and its connection to the Iraq war, Obama declared in Cairo that “no system of government can or should be imposed [on] one nation by any other.” While emphasizing his commitment “to governments that reflect the will of the people,” he struck a humble note when elaborating that

“[e]ach nation gives life to this principle in its own way, grounded in the traditions of its own people. America does not presume to know what is best for everyone, just as we would not presume to pick the outcome of a peaceful election. But I do have an unyielding belief that all people yearn for certain things: the ability to speak your mind and have a say in how you are governed; confidence in the rule of law and the equal administration of justice; government that is transparent and doesn’t steal from the people; the freedom to live as you choose. These are not just American ideas; they are human rights. And that is why we will support them everywhere.” (Obama 2009a)

20 One commentator even argues that the administration’s insistence on the Afghanistan operation being *not* about democracy sabotages the development of any credible democracy promotion agenda (Hiatt 2010).

In this oft-quoted statement, President Obama embeds the democracy question in the less controversial language of human rights. Instead of speaking of universal rights being true and right for all people and all times, and instead of pointing out America's indispensable role in creating and spreading these rights, he begins the enumeration of the basic elements of democratic government by pointing to his personal "unyielding belief" and ends it by putting American ideas squarely in the broader human rights framework. In stark contrast to most of his predecessor's rhetoric, Obama even goes as far as stating that America does *not* know what is best for everyone – an admission that inspired a critic to comment that "[t]his, alas, is very much the claim advanced by many authoritarian regimes, including the absolute monarchy of Saudi Arabia" (Muravchik 2009: 25).

In a similar vein, the president explained in another high-profile speech – this time in front of the United Nation General Assembly – that

"[d]emocracy cannot be imposed on any nation from the outside. Each society must search for its own path, and no path is perfect. Each country will pursue a path rooted in the culture of its people and in its past traditions. And I admit that America has too often been selective in its promotion of democracy." (Obama 2009b)

Although Obama went on to talk about the continuing strong commitment to universal, basic principles for people everywhere, the changes in tone – if, possibly, not so much in substance – in the Cairo and UN speeches are remarkable. This humility in the language of a U.S. president is what provokes praise as well as rejection by those concerned with the fate of democracy promotion and foreign policy in general. Focusing predominantly on the administration's rhetoric, Muravchik criticizes Obama for "turning so sharply away from the goals of human rights and democracy" instead of putting his own stamp on the policy. Bothered by what he perceives as a series of "mea culpas", "national self-abnegation" and a tendency for cultural relativism, he accuses the president of pursuing a strategy of "peace through moral equivalence" (Muravchik 2009: 22, 26).

Hand in hand with the change of tone went a general re-positioning of democracy promotion within the larger field of foreign policy. After mostly eschewing the issue of democracy (promotion) during its first months in office, the administration slowly developed its own democracy promotion rhetoric, closely linking it to human rights and development in general and thus embedding it in a broader framework. Sampling a few high-level administration officials, Bouchet is convinced that the Obama team has taken up "both a developmental view of democracy and a democratized view of development", essentially seeing little difference between the two concepts (Bouchet 2010). A statement by Secretary Clinton illustrates the connection between development and democracy:

"Progress can only take hold if it is built on the foundation of economic growth and material improvements in people's daily lives. One of the biggest challenges facing democracies everywhere – and I include my own country in 2009 – is we must demonstrate unequivocally that democracy produces positive outcomes for hardworking people who get up every day and do the best they can to raise their children, who go to work, who work hard, and deserve to have that hard work rewarded." (H. Clinton 2009)

In a similar vein, in an early interview with the *Washington Post* the president explained that he would like to consider democracy promotion "through a lens that is actually deliv-

ering a better life for people on the ground and less obsessed with form, more concerned with substance” (quoted from Baker 2009).

In contrast to Bush, who had treated democracy promotion as his signature issue, Obama is thus realigning democracy promotion with the promotion of human rights and development policies in general. Another difference in comparison to his immediate predecessor is Obama’s pronounced multilateral approach. A recent presidential statement on the occasion of the ten-year anniversary of the Community of Democracies stresses the administration’s strong commitment to a multilateral endeavor. The president called the Warsaw Declaration, the Community’s founding document, “a powerful expression of our shared commitment to universal values and democratic principles”, and went on to explain that

“[t]his forum also challenges us to act collectively, as a community of democratic nations, to support countries undergoing democratic transitions and to push back against threats to democratic progress. [...] I welcome this celebration of the Community’s first ten years and believe that its role in fostering strong and effective cooperation among the world’s democracies is essential for confronting the challenges ahead. Working together in partnership, we can advance the dignity of all human beings and the rights that are universal.” (Obama 2010a)

This, in the eyes of one observer, is a “full-throated endorsement of the Community of Democracies, beyond anything we heard from the Bush Administration” (Piccone 2010). It thus seems reasonable to assume that, in toning down the rhetoric and reframing the democracy promotion impetus, the administration is not breaking with the American foreign policy tradition of democracy promotion but rather – as other administrations have done before – has developed its own style and framework for tackling it (Bouchet 2010).

In light of this finding, could the current president be returning to a more Clintonian style of democracy promotion? The endorsement of multilateralism strikes a chord with those who – fondly or grudgingly – remember Clinton’s attempt to impress on U.S. foreign policy the stamp of “assertive multilateralism”. And, after all, Obama, just like Clinton, is a Democratic president with a strong focus on the economy. As has been shown, the Obama administration’s rhetorical style – again similar to Clinton’s – is far less confrontational than the Bush administrations’ choice of words. Another similarity appears to be the labeling of the two Democratic president’s foreign policy approach as generally “pragmatic” and “realist”. In looking at how the early Obama administration handled the recent crises in Iran, Honduras, and Afghanistan from a democracy (promotion) standpoint, Bouchet considers Obama “a liberal by belief but a moderate, pragmatic leader by temperament” (Bouchet 2010). The Obama team, quite busy in its first months with other pressing policy issues such as U.S. involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq, its promise to close Guantánamo as well as the global financial crisis, had not had time to lay out a democracy promotion approach or even to fill all relevant posts when these crises called for an immediate U.S. reaction in the early summer of 2009. As late as November of that year, Carothers pointed out that the administration was still “entirely missing a leadership team at a crucial time” (Carnegie Europe 2009: 2); the Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor had only been sworn into office on Sep-

tember 23, 2009, and the relevant USAID appointments even took until the spring of 2010 to be complete. Commentators were also surprised that Obama's chief advisor on democracy, Michael McFaul, had not been entrusted with the issue of democracy but had instead been given the Russia portfolio in the National Security Council.

So how did the administration react when it had to take a stand in the early summer of 2009? When protests over the allegedly fraudulent elections in Iran erupted in June and were brutally repressed by the government, the Obama administration only found moderately critical words, apparently acutely aware of possible damage any strong criticism could inflict on the diplomatic effort over Iran's nuclear activities but also cognizant of the likelihood that any interference could lead to counterproductive effects and further delegitimize the Iranian opposition. As the Honduras coup d'état against President Zelaya in the same month shows, a country of less strategic importance but of relatively high U.S. influence did not automatically elicit a strong and consistent stand on democracy on part of the U.S. either; although the United States at first reacted by denouncing the ouster and imposing sanctions, it eventually lifted them again and – to the dismay of most other Latin American countries – recognized the elections later that year.<sup>21</sup> The August election fraud in Afghanistan, where, as Bouchet (2010) points out, the United States holds important strategic interests as well as significant influence, again displayed the Obama administration's unwillingness to loudly defend and call for democracy and adherence to its principles. Apparently, the United States put pressure on the Karzai government through unofficial channels but, not least because it depends on Afghan cooperation, did not have much success. Bouchet concludes:

“Obama's democracy promotion so far has been a low-key – even stealthy – affair conducted more by diplomacy than by exhortation and criticism. It is a realist approach that realizes democratization, however desirable, clashes with other strategic goals.” (Bouchet 2010)

Carothers agrees with regard to the diagnosis of the new administration's realism and pragmatism – as well as its long-persisting uncertainty and caution – and places the new approach within the larger foreign policy framework of “re-engagement and partnership with the world” that Obama has embraced (Carnegie Europe 2009: 7-8). The new position in the White House, he explains, is closer to the European approach of democracy and human rights promotion. As the administration sees it, no matter how distasteful the authoritarian governments and practices may be to deal with, one needs to stay engaged in order to bring about democratic change. As Obama put it in his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech:

“The promotion of human rights cannot be about exhortation alone. At times, it must be coupled with painstaking diplomacy. I know that engagement with repressive regimes lacks the satisfying purity of indignation. But I also know that sanctions without outreach – condemnation without discussion – can carry forward only a crippling status quo. No repressive regime can move down a new path unless it has the choice of an open door.” (Obama 2009c)

21 It should be noted, however, that according to news reports insistent voices in the U.S. Senate are – at least partially – responsible for the eventual recognition of the elections.

Consequently, “Practicing Principled Engagement with Non-Democratic Regimes” is the second item on a list enumerating how the U.S. is advancing universal values in the National Security Strategy (2010: 38). From this perspective, if one severs all ties in protest, one also loses leverage and the opportunity for influence. The Obama administration is thus walking a very fine line in re-engaging countries like Russia, China, Iran and others, and it will probably remain under attack for selling out on democracy and human rights – a charge to which it will respond that clamorous rhetoric and setting singular examples under the Bush government have yielded no results and that it is now time to give quiet engagement in a productive relationship with a non-democratic country a chance (Carnegie Europe 2009: 8-10). Obama’s softer tone and more development-oriented thinking complement this basic realist direction.

While critics of the Obama administration seem to be particularly disturbed by the president’s lack of patriotic oratory and his conceding of mistakes, this reorientation is exactly what many critics of the Bush administrations’ approach have been hoping for. Many consider democracy promotion an essential U.S. foreign policy goal and tool but admit that it has become quite a bit “radioactive” under Bush (quoted from Baker 2009) and thus see it as in dire need of “de-toxification” from the Bush legacy. This legacy includes a close entanglement of democracy promotion with the “War on Terror”, regime change and the use of military force, as well as a worldwide loss of credibility on the part of the United States; a loss partly due to high-profile messianic rhetoric about democracy and universal rights on the one hand, the blatant violation of some of these rights in Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib on the other (Baker 2009, Carothers 2007b). As early as September 2007, Carothers called for the domestically and internationally discredited concept of democracy promotion to be repaired by the next government by reducing the glaring gap between words and deeds, disentangling the concept from fighting terror, making democracy promotion less America-centric, and thus restoring American credibility and the power of setting a positive example (Carothers 2007b). Carothers’ particular warning that “[a]ny post-Bush effort to relaunch democracy promotion without regaining the power of the positive U.S. example will be stillborn” (Carothers 2007b) is one apparently resonating with Obama. As the president recently declared:

“As I have said many times, there is no more powerful tool for advancing democracy and human rights than our own example – we promote our values by living our values at home.” (Obama 2010a)

Praising passive democracy promotion – not actively engaging abroad but leading by example – as the most important tool in this policy’s toolbox is remarkable because this notion was rarely, if ever, emphasized by former Clinton and Bush officials. The “beacon theme” is one frequently recurring in Obama statements and is also strongly embedded in his National Security Strategy, where Obama explicitly highlights the prohibition of torture “without Exception or Equivocation” in order to strengthen the power of the U.S. example (NSS 2010: 36, 10). Though it is scarcely conceivable that Obama will completely abandon the activist part of foreign engagement for democracy, he might be paving the way for less, possibly more selective, engagement only in countries welcoming U.S. engagement, thus again evoking the Clintonian style of democracy promotion.

Consequently, it appears that President Bush's "perfect vindicationist storm" (Monten 2005: 140) is now being followed by a new period of relative exemplarism. In line with the thesis that periods of activist democracy promotion are enabled by the convergence of a rise in material capabilities along with the presence of a nationalist domestic ideology that favors vindicationism over exemplarism (Monten 2005), an Obamanian turn towards exemplarism can be explained by the convergence of three factors: the oft-praised unipolar moment that the end of the Cold War had brought about has vanished in light of fast-rising new powers such as China and India; partially in response to that, the U.S. has recently been confronted with an internal debate about its own decline; and the forceful and strongly ideological attempt by the Bush presidency to democratize the world has severely backfired and discredited the United States. Reframing democracy promotion primarily as an exemplarist endeavor, in which living by one's own ideals is considered to be the most powerful influence on others, therefore appears to be a logical – low-cost as well as credible – consequence.

In terms of democracy assistance, no significant differences between the Bush and Obama administrations are discernible. The Obama administration's first two budget requests offer no general reason for concern to the democracy promotion community; on the contrary, requests for foreign aid increased, including the budget's 'Governing Justly and Democratically' section, which accounted for \$2.81 billion in the budget request for 2010 (an increase of 9 % compared to the previous request) and rose another 25 % to a record \$3.3 billion in 2011 (Freedom House 2009, 2010). Most of this increment, however, is due to higher investment proposals in Afghanistan and, to a lesser degree, Pakistan. Whereas Obama has shifted attention to and away from different countries and regions and redirected some distribution channels, the numbers do not speak a significantly different language than those of his predecessor's.

What, then, are the rationales that the Obama team cites in favor of democracy promotion? No systematic assessment comparable to the Clinton and Bush administrations (chapter 4) is possible yet, so, in order to answer this question, the available speeches and documents that address democracy promotion have been searched for motivations that are voiced. There are, however, only a few relevant documents; and within these, only very few arguments can be found. Two observations stand out: first, normative argumentation in general is dominant. In almost all instances closely connected to human rights, the Obama administration repeatedly emphasizes its conviction that "it is the responsibility of all free people and free nations to make clear that these movements [democratic reform movements, AEP] – these movements of hope and history – they have us on their side" (Obama 2009c) and that basic democratic principles "are not just American ideas; they are human rights. And that is why we will support them everywhere" (Obama 2009a).

Second, those few arguments relating democracy promotion to interests rarely pertain to U.S. national interests but more broadly to those which benefit either the whole world or countries receiving democracy aid. Apart from the normative reasoning, the Cairo speech, for example, offers only one other argument in favor of democracy promotion: "Governments that protect these rights are ultimately more stable, successful and secure"

(Obama 2009a). In Oslo, the president underlined the significance of democracy and human rights for the “nature of the peace we seek,” which he defined as “a just peace based on the inherent rights and dignity of every individual” (Obama 2009c). So far, only in the National Security Strategy 2010 can one detect an argument that is straightforwardly based on U.S. interests, even if only coming in second place: “The United States supports the expansion of democracy and human rights abroad because governments that respect these values are more just, peaceful, and legitimate. We also do so because their success abroad fosters an environment that supports America’s national interests” (NSS 2010: 37).

As the final lines of this chapter were being written, Obama attracted the attention of the democracy promotion community with his second speech before the UN General Assembly on September 23, 2010, thus underlining that any assessment of his understanding of democracy promotion can only be preliminary. At this significant venue, Obama for the first time spoke at length about his administration’s democracy and human rights agenda, prompting commentators to talk about Obama’s “new democracy rhetoric” and wonder whether a “genuine shift” was in sight (Hiatt 2010; Wilson 2010). Despite a slight shift in emphasis, however, this speech broadened and elaborated on tendencies noted earlier. Obama did, for the first time explicitly and in detail, emphasize U.S. stakes and interest in the global advancement of democracy and human rights, but he squarely put the responsibility on the shoulders of all democratic states as well as the United Nations. Using the Universal Declaration of Human Rights from 1948 as a point of departure, he explained that “freedom, justice, and peace for the world must begin with freedom, justice, and peace in the lives of individual human beings. And for the United States, this is a matter of moral and pragmatic necessity” (Obama 2010b). Remaining firmly grounded on a broader human rights and development framing of the issue, he urged other democracies to do more to support other peoples in their struggle. He specifically demanded action from young democracies whom he told not to “stand idly by”: “Recall your own history. Because part of the price of our own freedom is standing up for the freedom of others” (ibid.). In clear contrast to his predecessor, Obama called for a more proactive UN role in fostering global (democratic) development and highlighted multilateral initiatives.

A slight shift in tone became discernible when Obama reiterated his conviction that “each country will pursue a path rooted in the culture of its own people” – this time this statement is followed directly by a qualification: “Yet experience shows us that history is on the side of liberty; that the strongest foundation for human progress lies in open economies, open societies, and open governments.” Obama’s attempt to unite the often conflicting concepts of universal values and local tradition is most obvious when he maintains that “[t]here is no soil where this notion [that every citizen demands a say in how they are governed] cannot take root, just as every democracy reflects the uniqueness of a nation.” But he also repeated his earlier stated conviction that strengthening the foundations of freedom in democratic countries so that they can be an example to others and thereby “light the world” is central to the endeavor (ibid.).



When asked about the differences between Obama's and Bush's democracy agenda, Deputy National Security Adviser for Strategic Communications Ben Rhodes is quoted as saying that

“[t]he Obama one is pragmatic and focused on doing what is best to promote the specific capabilities needed in specific countries. [...] So in some sense, ironically for this president, it's less rhetorical and more roll-up-your-sleeves build capacity in emerging democracies.”  
(quoted from Wilson 2010)

Whether this is true and whether there is a genuine shift not only in rhetoric but also in the implementation of democracy promotion remains to be seen. As this survey of the new administration's first one-and-a-half-years in office has shown, Obama is not settled on doing away with democracy on his foreign policy agenda, but is finding his own approach – one definitely quieter and more restrained than his predecessor's and probably more pragmatist in style. A substantial evaluation of his understanding of democracy promotion both in word and deed, however, will have to wait for another year or two.

## 6. The way forward

President Obama will not and cannot abandon democracy promotion altogether. Democracy promotion in the daily business of U.S. foreign policy may have time and again been used rhetorically without serious backing, been relegated to taking the back seat in policy implementation, and on a regular basis even been intentionally used to conceal other interests – it remains an issue at the center of U.S. foreign policy, not least because it is an issue at the heart of U.S. national identity. That democracy promotion can be misused as a label to gloss over less-than-democratic policies and that ignoring the issue publicly sparks the kind of debate witnessed in the early Obama months even underlines its significance. The American sense of a missionary purpose to carry the light of freedom and democracy into the world – as a debt owed to the ‘founding fathers’, the fulfillment of a providential plan or a task rooted in the commitment to universal human rights – is too deeply entrenched in U.S. national identity to be ignored or dropped completely by any president of that country. And although it is too early to systematically document the officially voiced motivations for democracy promotion in the Obama administration, the statements discussed have already made it clear that the notion of America's normative commitment to democracy remains at the center of democracy promotion's legitimacy.

Looked at from a democracy promotion angle, the post-Cold War administrations of President Clinton, President Bush, and probably even President Obama represent continuity rather than change. Democracy promotion, as the analysis has shown, is not a foreign policy fad, nor merely a vehicle for disguising ‘hard’ interests, but is quite obviously an issue spanning the partisan divide – despite the differences between Democratic and Republican presidencies and despite Obama's attempt to distance himself from his predecessor's ‘freedom agenda’. Apart from being the manifestation of a special role in the world, democracy promotion is associated with all kinds of benefits: advancing one's own security and prosperity as well as those of others and creating global stability and peace in

a liberal democratic world order. Clinton and Bush administration representatives may disagree on the relative weight and nuances of these goals but concur in principle in the conviction that spreading democracy abroad has normative and material benefits to U.S. citizens as well as to the rest of the world. Democracy promotion, then, is not a specific neo-conservative project or an outgrowth of Bush's "War on Terror" but, after the September 11 attacks, has been refocused and placed at the center of security policy.

"De-centering" democracy promotion is what Obama did during his first months in office. Given the strong prominence of democracy promotion rhetoric under both his predecessors, especially in the administration immediately preceding his, the Obama team's initial and continuing reserve on this matter is quite striking. The current president, however, neither broke with the U.S. foreign policy tradition of democracy promotion nor did he proceed with it unchanged. After, presumably, enough time had passed for democracy promotion to have become "detoxified" from its Bush legacy, it has returned to a condition in keeping with Obama's overall foreign policy agenda, which is more pragmatist and realist in style. Since a strong focus on democracy promotion stands in the way of Obama's attempt at reframing the foreign policy agenda in the name of re-engagement and global partnership, democracy promotion is no longer the signal catch phrase and a foreign policy panacea but has been 'downgraded'; it is now closely connected with promoting human rights in general and embedded within a broader and notably multilateral development policy. When Obama did choose to speak about democracy at all, he chose his words carefully, underlining leading by example as the most important means of democracy promotion and emphasizing mutual understanding, past mistakes and a vow to respect every people's right to pursue its own path to democracy. His democracy language is devoid of stark, dichotomizing images of light and dark and good and evil. Since little has changed so far in terms of implementing democracy promotion – the assistance budget has not changed significantly and no new on-the-ground agenda has emerged – the starkest contrast between the Bush and Obama administrations might indeed be the choice of language and tone.

Whereas, from a broad perspective, continuity rather than change characterizes U.S. democracy promotion after the Cold War, Obama's marked departure from Bush's grandiose and Manichean rhetoric does constitute a clear element of change and has not been simply a marginal adjustment. The rhetorical framing of this issue – as of many others – matters greatly. Whereas Schweller (2000: 62), referring to the Clinton presidency, points out that cheap talk and a little action will probably not harm U.S. interest and may even produce marginal benefits, Goldsmith, commenting on the late Bush presidency, is convinced of harmful effects and consequently recommended adopting a lower profile:

"This means limiting the self-righteous oratory about freedom, because it triggers a defensive response in many corners of the globe that damages U.S. standing and influence. [...] Blustering, all-embracing democracy promotion is not a way to enhance national security because it wastes U.S. resources and can prove counterproductive in furthering the ultimate goal, which is to add to the world population of pluralistic majoritarian states". (Goldsmith 2008: 146-47)

Closing the gap between words and deeds, from this quite plausible standpoint, is hence a matter of political prudence and necessity. After rhetorically distancing itself from its

predecessor – while not making significant changes with regard to democracy assistance – the Obama administration is, however, now ending the silence and introducing its own (rhetorical) democracy promotion framework, thus not breaking with the democracy promotion tradition in U.S. foreign policy at all.

So, is Obama taking a Clintonian turn with regard to democracy promotion? Yes, in the sense that he subscribes to a more pragmatic approach and would probably agree to the Clintonian focus on states where the U.S. can make the greatest difference and where democracy is already on its way. Yes, also in the sense that Obama favors a multilateral and non-confrontational approach to democracy promotion. But the Obama approach, insofar as it has become discernible during the first one-and-a-half years of his administration, is certainly not merely a return from the exuberant Bush period to the democracy promotion mainstream bearing the stamp of Clinton's administration. The Obama administration, in contrast to both predecessors, is more sober and pragmatic in assessing democracy promotion's chances and its benefits to everyone involved; looking at the arguments made, it appears that the administration tends to consider democracy and human rights as important in their own right and not so much as means to other (U.S.) ends. With regard to the means of spreading democracy, it presents itself as more flexible and emphasizes patience as well as the need to become engaged and sustain a critical and constructive dialogue. Carothers (Carnegie Europe 2009: 8-10) even likens the new approach to the European style of democracy promotion and speculates about a closer partnership between the U.S. and Europe on that matter. This assessment should, however, not hide the fact that Obama has also continued unilateral development policies and partially even increased confrontational measures in countries such as Afghanistan, Pakistan and Yemen; but these policies are no longer carried out in the name of democracy promotion.

The Obama-Clinton comparison has another clear limit, which lies in the international context. Clinton had assumed office during a period that, in retrospect, appears euphoric; democracy and freedom had prevailed over communism, were in high demand all around the globe and had just produced a 'third wave'. The promotion of democracy at that time was considered a promising and relatively risk-free endeavor, the scholarly as well as the political community was debating the 'democratic peace' and the 'right to democracy', and no serious obstacles to implementing democracy were perceived. In 2010, however, the optimism is long gone and the prospects are sobering: scholars may differ on its degree and characteristics, but a backlash against democracy and democracy promotion has indeed manifested itself in many corners of the world, as authoritarian regimes in the past years have more self-confidently brushed off democratization pressures. Some have begun to offer their own model for propagation elsewhere, while the United States faces another debate about its alleged decline. That democracy promotion is not an easy, quite smooth task which can be achieved everywhere has become apparent as resistance to prescribed democracy models has manifested itself 'on the ground' and catchwords such as 'sovereignty' and 'ownership' have regained strength in the general debate. The liberal premise that all good things go together has been severely challenged. This is certainly not entirely the Bush administration's fault, although its close linking of democracy promotion and the "War on Terror" and its endorsing of illiberal practices probably exacerbated the backlash process.

Democracy promotion is hence unlikely to return to its former stature at any time soon, but it will remain important. Under the Obama presidency, democracy promotion is definitely not in the 'driver's seat' – if ever it was – but is one foreign policy instrument and goal among others. Acknowledging this reality that Bush had chosen to rhetorically gloss over is probably a smart strategy for dealing with a tainted legacy and restoring American credibility – and for making sense of a new foreign policy that values partnership and engagement, even with authoritarian states, over proclaimed normative dogmatism and unilateralism.

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### List of Speeches and Primary Documents

This is a list of all speeches and primary documents cited in this Report. For a full list of all primary sources of the Clinton and Bush administrations used in the document analysis, please visit: [www.hsfk.de/Publikationen.9.0.html?&no\\_cache=1&detail=4203&cHash=b6c37f825d](http://www.hsfk.de/Publikationen.9.0.html?&no_cache=1&detail=4203&cHash=b6c37f825d)

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