



# United States

**Assessment:** Good

**Trend:** ↓

Capital: Washington, DC

Type of Government: Federal Republic

Head of State: President George W. Bush  
(since 20 January 2001)

Secretary of State: Colin Powell

Population: 278,058,881

Human Development Index Ranking 2002: 6

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The United States has a **good** record of support for democracy abroad. As the world's most powerful democracy with unrivalled global reach and capabilities, the United States has enormous leverage to influence trends toward democracy. When it has chosen to reach out to others and matched its rhetoric with consistent action, it has contributed decisively to democracy's spread around the world. Yet as the world's dominant power, facing a complex array of interests and challenges, concern for democracy often has lost out to other motives.

During the 1990s, democracy promotion arguably became the most consistent rhetorical theme of U.S. foreign policy across issues and regions, and Washington dedicated more resources and institutional support in this area than ever before. But democracy promotion often took a backseat to more pressing strategic or economic interests – as demonstrated in the cases of Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Pakistan. Furthermore, it has lost some of its moral leadership by expressing support for preferred candidates in close elections and by pursuing anti-terrorism strategies at home and abroad that have emboldened authoritarian leaders intent on suppressing internal dissent, thereby undermining fragile democratization processes.

## FOREIGN RELATIONS BACKGROUND

At least since the days of President Woodrow Wilson, democracy promotion has been an important principle of U.S. diplomacy, and it received new emphasis during the Reagan presidency (1981-89). But it was only after the fall of the Berlin Wall that many in Washington from both major parties began to argue that the spread of democracy had become *the* fundamental guiding tenet of American foreign policy.

"Beyond containment lies democracy," Secretary of State James A. Baker III pronounced in 1990, and soon he and President George H.W. Bush were heralding the opportunities for a "democratic peace," with freedom stretching "from Vancouver to Vladivostok." President Bill Clinton, during his eight years in the White House, placed almost every one of his Administration's decisions –invading Haiti, bombing Kosovo, enlarging NATO, promoting reform in Russia, passing the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and developing a policy of strategic engagement with China – within the context of promoting and defending democracy. President George W. Bush has similarly adopted the rhetoric of democracy promotion in the recently released National Security Strategy (September 2002), which states that the United States "will actively work to bring the hope of democracy, development, free markets, and free trade to every corner of the world," including Russia and China, "because these are the best foundations for domestic stability and international order."

Under Clinton, "democratic enlargement" replaced his predecessor's "democratic peace," but they both meant the same thing: countries that choose their own leaders are more likely to be better neighbors, allies, and trading partners; their economies and societies will be stronger and more consonant with U.S. interests; and they will be more likely to solve problems peaceably. Promoting and defending democracy was explained as far more than just a moral necessity: it was alternately described as a security imperative, a vital national interest, or a key element for U.S. national defense.<sup>1</sup>

The decade between 1992-2002 witnessed perhaps the most dramatic upsurge of resources and effort dedicated to supporting global democracy in U.S. history. Between 1992-1999, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) funding for democracy nearly tripled, from \$225 million to \$637 million a year. During the 1990s, the U.S. spent almost \$1 billion on programs it characterized as democracy assistance for the former Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact states alone. The Clinton Administration formally declared “building sustainable democracies” one of USAID’s core goals (over the resistance of some USAID insiders), and in 1994 created the Center for Democracy and Governance to lead this effort. In 1999-2000, the United States took the lead in conceptualizing the Community of Democracies, an initiative that brought the world’s established and newer democracies into a forum dedicated to democracy for the first time. And Washington proved that in select circumstances – such as the 1994 invasion of Haiti - it was prepared to accept the costs and risks of putting its military forces in harm’s way to defend the principle that a freely-elected government, deposed by military fiat, must be restored.

While these substantive shifts in the U.S. approach toward democracy are real, few could argue that it matched the high standards set by U.S. rhetoric. For all the increases in money allocated to promoting democracy, the programs still comprise only 10 percent of the entire foreign assistance budget – which itself is only about one penny on the federal dollar. And even where the U.S. has placed a high priority on supporting democracy, some question whether its assistance programs have gone about it the right way.

Moreover, Washington’s efforts to promote or defend democracy have suffered from deep inconsistencies. The United States has made democracy an essential condition of its relationship with some countries (like many in Eastern Europe and Latin America), yet elsewhere (in China, Pakistan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and most of the Arab world), democracy is pushed down the ladder of interests or ignored outright. Where democracy ranks in the hierarchy of interests often has shifted to suit other purposes, even to the point of undermining a pro-democracy strategy. When in conflict, economic and security interests almost always have trumped concerns about democracy.

## **RESPONSE TO OVERTHROW OF DEMOCRATICALLY-ELECTED GOVERNMENTS**

Whenever a democratic government has been overthrown, whether by military coup or extra-constitutional measure, the initial U.S. response has almost always been strong rhetorical condemnation. It has regularly sponsored or supported resolutions in regional or international fora to condemn the action and often was prepared to do more. In fact, this practice has been so consistent during the past decade that when U.S. policy has strayed from categorical condemnation – such as in the April 2002 coup in Venezuela – it draws wide attention and heavy criticism.

However, U.S. willingness to go beyond casting votes or making strong public statements has depended on the particular situation and the interests involved. Haiti stands out as the case where the full spectrum of American resources – from public condemnation and political isolation to sanctions and the threat of military force – was deployed. Working first through the OAS, and then through the United Nations, the U.S. tried to squeeze the military junta that had overthrown President Jean-Bertrand Aristide in 1991. It allowed Aristide to live in exile in the United States. In July 1994, the U.S. succeeded in persuading the UN Security Council to authorize the use of “all necessary means” to restore Aristide to power – the first time the Security Council had ever called for international action and authorized military force to restore democracy. Two months later, 21,000 U.S. troops led a coalition of 28 other countries to occupy Haiti and return Aristide to office.

The recent case of Venezuela stands on the other side of the spectrum from Haiti. As the attempted coup against democratically-elected President Hugo Chavez unfolded in April 2002, the initial U.S. reaction was to blame Chavez for provoking the crisis. Instead of calling the overthrow a coup, the State Department issued a press release titled “Venezuela: Change of Government,” and offered assistance to the new civilian government. Most major Latin American leaders, however, quickly denounced the coup, despite their outright criticism of Chavez’s anti-democratic tendencies. Although the U.S. soon endorsed an OAS resolution condemning the coup, this vacillation damaged its credibility. The State Department’s Inspector General has since investigated this episode and found that U.S. government officials properly discouraged



“undemocratic and unconstitutional moves.” But some still argue that U.S. behavior undermined two decades of efforts to persuade Latin Americans that the United States respected regional norms designed to respond collectively when democratic governments were threatened.<sup>2</sup>

The Haiti and Venezuela examples reside at the extremes. Perhaps more typical is the U.S. response to the October 1999 coup in Pakistan. As in Haiti, the U.S. publicly condemned the extra-constitutional actions and imposed aid sanctions. During a visit to South Asia, President Clinton praised India’s democracy while pointedly cutting short his visit to Pakistan to a brief airport meeting. But the response basically stopped there. It did not try to isolate the regime, and it did not sever its bilateral ties. Given Pakistan’s status as a nuclear power hostile to India, with ties to the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, and fundamentalist factions gaining ground at home, the U.S. decided to limit its response in order to safeguard other more immediate interests at stake. The post-September 11 war on terrorism and renewed tensions between India and Pakistan have reinforced the desire to not change this position – in fact, even the rhetorical pressure on the Islamabad leadership to adhere to democracy has abated.<sup>3</sup> Despite allegations of fraud from opposition parties and skepticism from Commonwealth members, the United States chose to view Pervez Musharraf’s referendum in May 2002 to extend his presidency another five years as the beginning of a process leading to elections in October.

When confronted with unconstitutional overthrows of democratic governments elsewhere, the U.S. usually has been willing to consider penalties beyond rhetorical punishment, such as curtailing bilateral assistance (as it did against Cote d’Ivoire in 1999), or recalling its Ambassador (as it did in Fiji in 2000). In other cases, like Ecuador, the United States has been quick to issue timely threats to isolate a coup regime. Thus, while the U.S. consistently reacts, it doesn’t always react consistently. Exactly how far it is willing to go to punish an insurgent regime depends on specific circumstances and competing interests. In this sense, one democratic overthrow is not the same as another.

#### **RESPONSE TO MANIPULATION OF ELECTORAL PROCESSES**

The United States’ record of acting to prevent or punish electoral fraud is strong, but uneven. Most U.S. government officials and democracy advocates consider elections as the

clearest benchmark of a democracy’s health. American policymakers follow foreign elections very closely, and usually support international watchdog efforts by NGOs. Yet there are several prominent cases – Egypt and Russia in 1996 being two – where the U.S. endorsed election results even though strong evidence of fraud or manipulation existed.

As in its response to overthrows of elected governments, the U.S. is usually critical if proof of election fraud emerges. In the most egregious cases of election malfeasance during the past decade – from Burma to Nigeria to Peru and most recently Zimbabwe – the U.S. expressed its condemnation clearly and loudly, both bilaterally and in multilateral fora.

But again, what the U.S. did next was typically subject to situation, circumstance, and other interests involved. In some cases, the U.S. was willing to sanction the responsible regime and work toward political isolation; in others it was slow to do more than issue verbal condemnations. The more important a country is to U.S. economic or security interests -- and the more cooperative the dominant regime has been in support of those interests -- the less willing the U.S. has been to punish it for electoral fraud. For example, in Peru’s first round presidential election during the spring of 2000, the U.S. described the result as “invalid” and pressured the government to hold a second round. But the U.S. did not suspend its aid or trade programs with Peru, it sent its Ambassador to President Fujimori’s inauguration for a third term, and continued its military cooperation, which were explained as important for fighting the drug war.

In cases where economic and security interests are secondary, the U.S. insists that elections be “free and fair.” For example, during the 2002 election turmoil in Zimbabwe, the U.S. did take steps to punish the regime for its actions. It suspended defense exports to Harare, and declared senior Zimbabwean officials ineligible for travel visas. It has also begun to work with human rights advocates, labor groups and pro-democracy organizations, both in Zimbabwe and throughout the region, to pressure and isolate President Robert Mugabe.

The same has been true in Belarus. After a decade of deeply flawed elections – the latest being the September 2001 presidential election of Lukashenko – the U.S. adopted a policy of “selective engagement,” conditioning the bilateral relationship solely upon Belarus’ behavior. In 2002, when the U.S. outlined the conditions that Belarus must meet to improve relations, the first was that it establish



legitimate election procedures.

Although often implemented inconsistently, promotion of fair elections was at the core of 1990s U.S. democracy policy. In fact, the U.S. government's faith in elections has been so strong that some believe it takes them too seriously. These skeptics explain that, especially during the last ten years, U.S. democracy assistance programs have become too focused on elections at the expense of securing other core democratic elements like a strong civil society or a free press.<sup>4</sup>

### **PROMOTION OF INTERNATIONAL DEMOCRACY**

The United States usually has been consistent in speaking out forcefully and frequently in support of international democracy. It does so in both bilateral and multilateral settings. In the United Nations and key regional forums like the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the Organization of American States (OAS), the U.S. has consistently worked to craft and pass resolutions defending democracy. Through the National Endowment for Democracy, the U.S. Congress also funds and supports nongovernmental organizations working to implement and monitor democratic reforms. In March 2002 the Bush Administration announced the creation of a "Millennium Challenge Account," a proposal to increase U.S. assistance to developing countries by 50 percent over the next three years, and targeting that assistance to countries that prove a commitment to upholding the rule of law, human rights, and open economies. Finally, by helping to conceptualize and develop the Community of Democracies initiative, the U.S. has proved willing to create a multilateral forum composed of like-minded states for international democracy advocacy and consensus-building.

That said, the U.S. foreign assistance budget is quite small relative to other large donors, and the percentage of funds devoted to democracy assistance even smaller. Although President Bush has promised to triple the foreign aid budget over the next three years, it still comprises only a small percentage of U.S. GDP. And even in countries in which U.S. officials stress that success of democracy is paramount, democracy assistance has decreased substantially. For example, of the \$36 billion in U.S. assistance to Russia since 1992, less than two percent went to supporting democratic institutions.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, USAID has allowed undemocratic regimes, like Egypt, which receives \$2 billion a year

in U.S. assistance, to resist pressure for democratic reform by allowing Egypt to veto aid allocations to specific groups.

### **POLICY TOWARDS ENTRENCHED DICTATORSHIPS**

U.S. policy toward a handful of stalwart anti-democratic states is probably the most controversial aspect of its approach toward democracy promotion. Many believe that Washington policymakers are excessively confrontational and simplistic, or too quick to use the blunt instruments of diplomatic isolation, sanctions and non-cooperation. Others believe that the U.S. is too lenient on dictatorships – particularly those in Central Asia and the Middle East – when they serve American economic and security interests.

Many criticize the U.S. approach towards regimes like Iraq, Iran, Cuba, North Korea, Libya, Sudan and Belarus for being all stick and no carrot. Countries mired in repressive dictatorships tend to get only a small portion of U.S. assistance for democracy promotion because U.S. officials believe that the standard template of American democracy programs cannot work in such closed systems. In these countries, the U.S. has instead focused on more basic goals like promoting the idea of democracy or developing civil society. For example, the U.S. transmits radio broadcasts into authoritarian countries, like Radio Free Asia, Radio Marti in Cuba, or the "ring around Serbia" initiative against Slobodan Milosevic during the 1999 Kosovo war. By funding organizations like the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), the U.S. Congress funnels support to indigenous human rights groups, free media outlets, exiled dissidents, and civic education. And the U.S. Congress has earmarked funds for pro-democracy programs in Cuba, Burma and Sudan.<sup>6</sup>

But the main thrust of U.S. policy toward such regimes – and the one that causes the most concern among allies – is isolation and shame. Although the U.S. makes some attempts to work within dictatorial societies to bring about democratic change, and may maintain a minimum level of relations necessary for the administration of humanitarian aid, external pressure has been its main tool of choice. The U.S. has consistently voted for international resolutions to isolate entrenched dictators or impose political and economic sanctions on their regimes. It exposes anti-democratic practices in its annual human rights reports. And it actively pursues non-cooperation in almost every



conceivable realm, whether economic, military, political or diplomatic. Washington also pressures its allies to do the same – almost always with words but sometimes with deeds. The U.S. Congress has gone so far as to pass legislation to levy sanctions against any third-party that does business with repressive states like Iran, Libya and Cuba.

Although the “with us or against us” approach to the war on terror has brought new attention to the concerns about such policies, Washington’s strategy toward these countries has remained fairly consistent during the past decade. President George W. Bush calls such states “evil,” President Clinton called them “rogue nations.” Unlike some of its closest allies, the U.S. does not believe that engaging such states will bring about democratic change. Instead, it seeks to punish such regimes, leaving them weak, and poor, hoping that the combination of isolation and promise of improved relations might spark internal reform, or internal revolts. In the case of Iraq, the Bush Administration, with support of the U.S. Congress, has gone further. It is actively working with opposition groups in exile to lay out plans for a democratic Iraq, which would follow from a U.S.-led military attack designed to force Saddam Hussein from power. Many experts, however, contend that such a strategy would be seen by Iraqis as an externally-imposed regime designed to satisfy American desires to control strategic oil reserves in

the Middle East.

The policy is less clear-cut in those countries that are undeniably undemocratic, yet because of size, resources or location (or in some cases all three), they remain members of the international community and are not treated as outlaws. China is the most obvious case here, although after September 11 more attention has been given to the undemocratic regimes in Central Asia and the Middle East that are U.S. allies, especially Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Because of the economic and military implications of these relationships, the U.S. approach has been little more than softly critical: just enough pressure to let its views be known, but not enough to rock the boat.

Since September 11, this hands-off strategy has been seriously questioned, and some shifts have already occurred. In August 2002, the Bush Administration announced that it would oppose any additional assistance to Egypt (above the \$2 billion already allocated annually) to protest the Egyptian government’s prosecution of human rights advocate Saad Eddin Ibrahim as well as its general anti-democratic practices. In addition, the Administration plans to conduct a comprehensive review of the effectiveness of \$1 billion in U.S. aid to the Middle East, and to allocate at least \$25 million to democracy education programs, training, election monitoring and related projects.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony Lake, “From Containment to Enlargement,” speech at Johns Hopkins University, 21 Sep 1993; Brinkley, Douglas. “Democratic Enlargement: The Clinton Doctrine.” *Foreign Policy*. (Spring 1997); Talbott, Strobe.

“Democracy and the National Interest.” *Foreign Affairs* (November-December 1996).

<sup>2</sup> United States. State Department. *A Review of U.S. Policy Toward Venezuela, November 2001-April 2002*. Washington: U.S. Dept. of State, 29 July 2002; Hakim, Peter. “Democracy and U.S. Credibility.” *New York Times* 21 April 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Vick, Karl. “U.S. Offers Musharraf Leeway on Democracy.” *Washington Post* 13 April 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Massing, Michael. “In Failed States, Can Democracy Come Too Soon?” *New York Times* 23 Feb. 2002; Kaplan, Robert. “Was Democracy Just a Moment?” *Atlantic Monthly* Dec. 1997; Zakaria, Fareed. “The Rise of Illiberal Democracy.” *Foreign Affairs* (Nov. - Dec. 1997).

<sup>5</sup> Mendelson, Sarah. “Democracy Assistance and Political Transition in Russia: Between Success and Failure.” *International Security* (Spring 2002).

<sup>6</sup> Carothers, Thomas. *Aiding Democracy Abroad*. Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1999, p. 95.

<sup>7</sup> Slevin, Peter and Glenn Kessler. “U.S. to Seek Mideast Reforms.” *Washington Post* 21 Aug. 2002.