

Defining Democracy Down

Bush's meddling in foreign elections undercuts his stated principles.

By James Bovard

GEORGE W. BUSH has been more emphatic about spreading democracy than any president since Woodrow Wilson. Yet Bush's policies have subverted elected governments, corrupted foreign elections, and tainted democracy itself. For most of the American media, however, Bush's pretensions on democracy remain sacrosanct.

When Bush took office in 2001, the U.S. already had a long history of meddling abroad in the name of foreign "self-determination." The National Endowment for Democracy (NED), a government agency created in 1983, had been involved in election-manipulation scandals in Panama, Nicaragua, Slovakia, and elsewhere. But the Bush team sharply ratcheted up both spending and the brazenness of U.S. interventions. The United States is currently spending more than a billion dollars a year on democracy promotion.

In 2001, NED quadrupled its aid to Venezuelan opponents of elected president Hugo Chavez, and NED heavily funded some organizations involved in a bloody military coup that temporarily removed Chavez from power in April 2002. After Chavez retook control, NED and the State Department responded by pouring even more money into groups seeking his ouster.

The International Republican Institute, one of the largest NED grant recipients, played a key role both in the Chavez coup and also in the overthrow of Haiti's elected president, Jean-Bertrand Aristide. In February 2004, an array of NED-aided groups and individuals helped spur an uprising that left 100

people dead and toppled Aristide. Brian Dean Curran, the U.S. ambassador to Haiti, warned Washington that the International Republican Institute's actions "risked us being accused of attempting to destabilize the government."

The U.S. pulled out all the stops to help our favored candidate win a "free and fair" election in 2004 in the Ukraine. In the two years prior to the election, the United States spent over \$65 million "to aid political organizations in Ukraine, paying to bring opposition leader Viktor Yushchenko to meet U.S. leaders and helping to underwrite exit polls indicating he won a disputed runoff election," according to the Associated Press. Congressman Ron Paul (R-Texas) complained that "much of that money was targeted to assist one particular candidate, and ... millions of dollars ended up in support of the presidential candidate, Viktor Yushchenko." Yet with boundless hypocrisy, Bush had proclaimed that "any [Ukrainian] election ... ought to be free from any foreign influence."

Though Bush perennially invokes spreading democracy to justify the invasion of Iraq, suppressing democracy was one of the first orders of business for the U.S. occupation authorities. Three and a half months after the fall of Baghdad, military commanders "ordered a halt to local elections and self-rule in provincial cities and towns across Iraq, choosing instead to install their own handpicked mayors and administrators, many of whom are former Iraqi military leaders," the *Washington Post* reported. Many Iraqis were outraged to see Saddam's former hench-

men placed back in power over them.

U.S. viceroy Paul Bremer feared that the chaos that followed Saddam's fall would not be conducive to electing positive thinkers: "In a postwar situation like this, if you start holding elections, the people who are rejectionists tend to win." And the U.S. military presence would likely be one of the first things freely elected Iraqis would have rejected.

The early suppression of popular government helped turn many Iraqis against the U.S. occupation. But, as Noah Feldman, the Coalition Provisional Authority's law advisor, explained in November 2003, "If you move too fast, the wrong people could get elected." The repeated delays of elections were partly the result of the Bush administration's lack of enthusiasm for Iraqi self-rule—as well as its fear that pro-Iran Shi'ites would win an honest election. The Bush administration only agreed to hold elections after Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani, the most powerful religious leader in Iraq, sent his followers into the streets demanding an opportunity to vote.

After it quickly became clear that pro-American parties would be clobbered, Bush authorized covert aid to Iraqi parties and politicians. However, when senior members of Congress were briefed on the plan, they vehemently objected. Bush canceled the formal plan but delivered covert aid, using back channels and undercover operators that could be kept secret from Congress as well as the American public. Seymour Hersh reported in *The New Yorker* last July, "the White House promulgated a

highly classified Presidential ‘finding’ authorizing the C.I.A. to provide money and other support covertly to political candidates in certain countries who, in the Administration’s view, were seeking to spread democracy.”

The elections that were eventually held on Jan. 30, 2005, had more in common with a Soviet-era Eastern Bloc election than with a New England town meeting. In the weeks before the vote, the U.S. military carried out Operation Founding Fathers. In Samarra, the get-out-and-vote message was broadcast from loudspeakers at the same time American troops, leaping out of Bradley fighting vehicles, raided and searched people’s homes.

U.S. military convoys rolled through Mosul neighborhoods shortly after sunrise on Election Day “with speakers blaring messages urging everyone to vote,” *Newsday* reported. Soldiers also passed out thousands of sample ballots. Carina Perelli, the top UN election official, condemned the role of U.S. troops.

Bush proclaimed on the day of the vote that the elections were a “resounding success” and that “the world is hearing the voice of freedom from the center of the Middle East.” The American media largely parroted the official line. But pro-U.S. candidates were crushed at the polls as pro-Iranian parties took the prize.

According to Bush, democracy automatically brings peace. But the various elections and the U.S.-imposed timetables for a constitution in Iraq may have intensified religious conflicts and boosted the risk of civil war. The insurgency has mushroomed despite several national elections.

The brazenness of the U.S. military role in the January 2005 Iraqi election did not dissuade Bush from revealing a new standard for the purity of Middle East elections. On March 8, 2005, Bush declared, “All Syrian military and intelligence personnel must withdraw before

the Lebanese elections for those elections to be free and fair.” The fact that Bush’s comment evoked scant ridicule was testament to the docility of the American media and public.

Last year, to provide another bragging point for its “democracy in the Middle East” campaign, the Bush team decided it was time for the Palestinians to have an election. The Israelis grudgingly agreed. When it became clear that Hamas would pose a serious challenge to the ruling Fatah party, the Bush administration rushed a \$2 million program to allow the Palestinian Authority to launch 30 popular new projects just before the election this past January. Palestinians equated the Palestinian Authority with the Fatah party. The *Washington Post* reported that the last-minute spending binge included, “a street-cleaning campaign, distributing free food and water to Palestinians at border crossings, donating computers

Fatah lost in part because of its legendary reputation for corruption—of which the covert U.S. government windfall was simply one more example.

Team Bush carries on undeterred, continuing to cast elections as sacred events that automatically confer vast blessings upon a nation. Yet last June, Bush effectively urged Iranians not to vote, deriding their pending presidential election for ignoring “the basic requirements of democracy.” Bush declared that the elections would be “sadly consistent with this oppressive record” of the Iranian government. U.S.-financed television and radio stations, broadcasting in Farsi, also effectively urged a boycott of the election.

The U.S. government’s actions contributed to the defeat of Mohammad Khatami, a comparatively moderate reformer, and the victory of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a fire-breathing hardliner. Ahmadinejad’s subsequent comments

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to community centers and sponsoring a national youth soccer tournament.” Some of the projects were announced at Fatah campaign rallies. A U.S. Agency for International Development progress report noted: “The plan is to have events running every day of the coming week, beginning 13 January, such that there is a constant stream of announcements and public outreach about positive happenings all over Palestinian areas in the critical week before the elections.” Arabic newspapers were saturated with U.S.-paid ads hyping the generosity of the Palestinian Authority. The U.S. government role in financing the projects and the newspaper ads was kept secret from the Palestinian people. But despite the finagling, Hamas swept the election.

on Israel, the Holocaust, and other subjects sound almost Hollywood-scripted to help Washington persuade other nations that the Iranian government and its nuclear program must be suppressed at any cost.

In February, the Bush administration announced it was seeking \$75 million in “emergency” funding to promote democracy in Iran. (The U.S. government was already spending \$15 million or more, along with unknown amounts of covert spending to destabilize the government.) The new funds would be dabbled out for expanded TV broadcasts, scholarships for Iranians to study in America, and the fostering of independent media. This last goal is a hoot, considering the uproar over the ongoing U.S. program bribing “inde-

pendent” Iraqi newspapers to publish articles praising U.S. military operations.

The administration’s efforts seem geared far more to domestic strutting than to the survival of Iranian democrats. The profusion of U.S. money makes it far easier for the Iranian government to tar all reformers as fifth columnists and traitors. Iranian human-rights activist Emad Baghi bitterly complained, “We are under pressure here both from hard-liners in the judiciary and that stupid George Bush.” Vahid Pourostad, editor of the pro-reform *National Trust* newspaper, told the *Washington Post* that whenever the U.S. “came and supported an idea publicly, the public has done the opposite.”

It is unclear whether the Bush administration honestly wants to advance democracy in Iran or whether it is merely creating another pretext to start bombing. If the Iranian regime responds to Bush’s brazen intervention by rounding up reformers, further repressing free speech, acting even more paranoid, it may help Bush sway Americans on the need to bomb Iran in the name of democracy.

Thomas Carothers, director of the Carnegie Endowment’s Democracy and Rule of Law Project, warns that Bush policies are creating a “democracy backlash” around the globe. The U.S. has gone from being a “shining city on the hill” to championing barbaric practices that civilized nations have long condemned. While many Americans seem to pay attention only to Bush’s idealistic invocations, foreigners are not as gullible.

The administration seems to have learned nothing from its democracy debates of the last four years. But perhaps the rhetoric has all been a ruse. Perhaps invoking “democracy” is simply a smoke-screen in pursuit of the neoconservative goal of “benevolent global hegemony.” ■

James Bovard is the author of the just-published Attention Deficit Democracy and eight other books.

Lost in Translation

Open borders, closed minds

By Marcus Epstein

AT FIRST GLANCE, the National Capital Immigrant Coalition’s protest at the U.S. Capitol against HR 4437—a bill that would dramatically step up enforcement of laws combating illegal immigration—seemed a routine left-wing affair.

The speakers included labor leaders, Democratic politicians, clergy, minority spokesmen, the ACLU. Their speeches were predictable. America was frequently referred to as a nation of immigrants. Both legal and illegal immigrants were credited with sustaining the economy and were praised as hard workers who had strong family values. And predictably, supporters of immigration restriction were denounced as racists. The crowd was reminded that hatred is un-Christian, un-American, and above all not family value. One priest even said he was praying for congressmen who supported the bill, “because they have become atheists, because if they were Christians they would not have this kind of law.”

Kweisi Mfume claimed that not only slaves but also Asian immigrants built the District of Columbia. A congressman told the crowd, “If you are illegal immigrants, then so am I.” This wasn’t that surprising either. Politicians often go overboard when they start hyperbolizing to a rabble.

In spite of the racially diverse speakers, virtually all of the 10,000 demonstrators were Hispanics pronouncing their unalienable right to live and work in this country. That the crowd lacked African-Americans and white churchgoers to see their leaders speak from the podium

was not much of a shock either. A poll by the Pew Research Center in 2003 found that 77 percent of weekly churchgoers and 74 percent of African-Americans think that the government should do more to control who is coming into this country.

What genuinely shocked me as I walked around the west lawn of the Capitol—even with my low expectations—was how culturally alien the crowd appeared. It is not that they were anti-American Reconquistadors who wanted to take over the Southwest. There were a few signs quoting Che Guevara or Emiliano Zapata, but the overall tone to the protest was not radical. What was more striking than the demonstrator’s lack of hostility to America was their lack of affection for or even understanding of this country.

The *Washington Post’s* article described many of the protesters as carrying small American flags and accompanied the piece with a photo essay filled with Old Glory. In reality, while some of the demonstrators flew the stars and stripes, they were greatly outnumbered by the standards of various Latin American countries. One of the protesters was waving an upside down American flag. When I talked to him *en Espanol*, I realized that it wasn’t because he hated America or thought we were in distress. He was completely incognizant of how our flag is supposed to be flown. In some ways, this was worse than the flag burnings that accompanied protests against Proposition 187.