

# RONALD REAGAN INSTITUTE

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## **The Enduring Relevance of Reagan’s Westminster Speech**

*By Mr. Richard Fontaine*

In retrospect, it all seems so clear. In June 1982, the world had reached “a turning point,” Ronald Reagan said, “a great revolutionary crisis” within the Soviet Union.<sup>1</sup> Moscow was overstretched, pouring resources into armaments while central planning stalled economic growth. Despite the USSR’s routine use of force to quell any stirrings of discontent, the yearning for liberty was rising from Central Europe to Vladivostok. “The march of freedom and democracy,” Reagan said, “will leave Marxism-Leninism on the ash-heap of history as it has left other tyrannies which stifle the freedom and muzzle the self-expression of the people.”

The populations trapped behind the Iron Curtain were, the President announced, moving toward democracy. But their progress would not occur in isolation – they required the active support of the free world. “How we conduct ourselves here in the Western democracies,” Reagan said at Westminster, “will determine whether this trend continues.” And so, the United States would be no idle observer, silently cheering on the unfolding of freedom in lands where it was then denied. Democracy may be no fragile flower, the President observed, but “still it needs cultivating. If the rest of this century is to witness the gradual growth of freedom and democratic ideals, we must take actions to assist the campaign for democracy.”

With his Westminster address, President Reagan set the course for an active and institutionalized American program of worldwide democracy support. Proposing “to foster the infrastructure of democracy, the system of a free press, unions, political parties, universities,” Reagan set out the framework for what soon became the National Endowment for Democracy, the International Republican Institute, the National Democratic Institute and their sister organizations.

Within three years of Reagan’s speech, Mikhail Gorbachev would ascend to power in Moscow, ushering in an era of glasnost that ultimately proved combustible. Four years after that, the Berlin Wall – “that dreadful gray gash across the city,” Reagan called it – would crumble. Another two years and the Soviet Union itself would disintegrate. A decade after Reagan’s speech, dozens of previously communist dictatorships were on their way to liberal democracy. It all seems so clear.

But, of course, none of this was actually clear on that day in 1982, when President Reagan spoke to the British Parliament at the Palace of Westminster. Reagan highlighted flickers of democratic hope in his remarks, citing progress in India, Nigeria, the Caribbean and Central America. But at this time, Solidarity, the first trade union in a Warsaw Pact country not under communist party

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald Reagan, Address to the British Parliament at Westminster, 1982.

control, was facing serious pressure in Poland. The Soviet Union was fighting in Afghanistan to support that country's communist regime. The Sandinistas had taken Nicaragua. Under such circumstances, Reagan's claim that, "Around the world today, the democratic revolution is gathering new strength," was bold – indeed, so bold as to be dismissed as rhetorical excess, offered by an American leader enjoying the warm embrace of British parliamentarians.

Nearly three decades later, however, it's plain that Reagan's diagnosis of the democratic condition was superior to that of the prevailing wisdom. Communism was in crisis; the forces of freedom were stirring.

Today, many suggest that it's the democracies that are in crisis: riven by populism, politically divided, unable to deliver the goods their populations demand, and dwindling in number for over a decade. And in a world of renewed great power competition, China and Russia are taking active measures to undermine democratic practice. Reagan said in 1982 that democracy is not a fragile flower. It's hard to be so certain today.

As American political leaders confront these new challenges, they would do well to return to the spirit of Reagan's Westminster speech. In its confidence, optimism, faith in the superiority and legitimacy of the democratic model, and, above all, its call to action, Reagan's address imparts critical lessons. This essay examines the context in which the President delivered his remarks and their relevance for today's challenges. At a moment of division and disillusion for many of the world's democracies, Americans could use a bit of Reagan's Westminster spirit.<sup>2</sup>

## **The Crisis of 1982**

Most observers, hearing in 1982 the American president speaking of a major crisis, would have naturally assumed his focus was on Western democracy. Gross domestic product in the United States contracted by 2.5 percent that year, and unemployment stood at over 10 percent.<sup>3</sup> In an effort to purge inflation from the economy, the Federal Reserve raised interest rates to unprecedented levels; the prime rate in 1982 hit 21.5 percent.<sup>4</sup> The 1979 oil shock continued to reverberate, with high prices harming the oil-dependent American economy and helping the oil-producing Soviet one.

Other Western economies were also faltering. In 1980, the year after Margaret Thatcher took office, British inflation stood at 18 percent. By 1982, some 3 million people – 12.5 percent of the United Kingdom's workforce – was unemployed.<sup>5</sup> Canada's unemployment rate hit nearly 13

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<sup>2</sup> For reflections on the Westminster speech's lessons for present-day democracy support efforts, see, *inter alia*, Andrew Wilson, "President Reagan's Call for a Campaign for Democracy Still Applies Today," CIPE Blog, June 8, 2017; Philip Scib, "The Reagan Legacy and Democracy," HuffPost, August 6, 2012; and Carl Gershman, "Remarks at the Conference on the 'The United States and Global Democracy Support,'" Remarks at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, April 20, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Kimberly Amadeo, "U.S. Real GDP Growth Rate by Year Compared to Inflation and Unemployment," *The Balance*, May 2019. <https://www.thebalance.com/u-s-gdp-growth-3306008>

<sup>4</sup> "FED: CRITICISM ON RATES," Karen Arenson, *The New York Times*, April 1982. <https://www.nytimes.com/1982/04/01/business/fed-criticism-on-rates.html>

<sup>5</sup> "Unemployment," *UK Politics Brief*. <https://www.politics.co.uk/reference/unemployment>

percent in 1982, the highest level since the Great Depression, and inflation hovered around 12 percent.<sup>6</sup>

The geopolitical conditions facing Western democracies also appeared less than incandescent. Three years before Reagan's address, Iran's West-friendly Shah had fallen to Islamic revolutionaries with deep animosity toward the United States and Britain.<sup>7</sup> Daniel Ortega's leftist Sandinistas ousted America's former ally in Nicaragua. Cuban troops fought in Angola and the Communist Derg ruled Ethiopia. Poland's Solidarity movement was alive, with help from the United States, but the regime had imposed martial law in 1981. Intellectuals even expressed concern about the attractions of Eurocommunism in Western Europe. For all of Reagan's hopes, his administration could point to the rollback of Communism in not a single country.

Yet for all this, President Reagan insisted the problems lay not in the West, but in the East. "The crisis is happening not in the free, non-Marxist West," he said, "but in the home of Marxist-Leninism, the Soviet Union. It is the Soviet Union that runs against the tide of history by denying human freedom and human dignity to its citizens. It also is in deep economic difficulty." To claim a march of freedom and democracy, and to describe Soviet Communism as destined for history's ash-heap, must have appeared wrong – even outrageous – to many.

Reagan marshalled evidence for his claims, pointing to declining economic growth rates in the Soviet Union since a high point in the 1950s. He referenced the increasing proportion of the Soviet economy diverted to weapons production rather than to meeting the population's basic needs. And he pointed to positive developments – elections in India, the end of military rule in Nigeria. "Around the world today," Reagan declared, "the democratic revolution is gathering new strength."

One senses from Reagan's remarks, however, both at Westminster and elsewhere, that such evidence was not the foremost support underneath the President's convictions. Instead, his faith that democracy would triumph appears rooted in an understanding of basic human aspirations. "Freedom," he declared, "is not the sole prerogative of a lucky few, but the inalienable and universal right of all human beings." Not only a right, he added, but a deep-rooted desire that compelled choice and action: "Who," the President asked, "would voluntarily choose not to have the right to vote, decide to purchase government propaganda handouts instead of independent newspapers, prefer government to worker-controlled unions, opt for land to be owned by the state instead of those who till it, want government repression of religious liberty, a single political party instead of a free choice, a rigid cultural orthodoxy instead of democratic tolerance and diversity?"

## **Legitimacy and Universality**

In this way, Reagan suggested a historical inevitability to the expansion of freedom and democracy. The rights to them might be abridged, but the desire for them inhabits the human

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<sup>6</sup> Mike Duffy, "Unemployment reaches all-time high in 1982," *CBC Television News Special*, January 1983. <https://www.cbc.ca/archives/entry/unemployment-reaches-all-time-high-in-1982>

<sup>7</sup> Roger Cohen, "1979: Iran's Islamic Revolution," *The New York Times Upfront*, February 2009. <http://www.nytimes.com/learning/teachers/studentactivity/20090213iranoverview.pdf>

heart. Democratic aspirations could be frustrated but never extinguished. And what endures would triumph in the end. “The ultimate determinant in the struggle that's now going on in the world will not be bombs and rockets,” he said, “but a test of wills and ideas, a trial of spiritual resolve, the values we hold, the beliefs we cherish, the ideals to which we are dedicated.”

There was a material dimension to the contest between democracy and dictatorship, Reagan suggested, but the inherent superiority of the democratic ideal was more important still. Herein lay an insight worth remembering today, amid increasing questions over the efficacy and attractiveness of liberal democracy. Democracy, and the will to support its expansion, have changed history for the better.

Enlightened observers of today's world, wishing to accommodate the full range of human differences, sometimes suggest that democracy is just one of multiple forms of legitimate government. It has been argued that other forms of government than those born of the unique historical circumstances of Western Europe and its diaspora may be better suited for particular cultures at particular times. Defenders of contemporary autocracy offer other arguments: China, for example, is too large, diverse and fractious to embrace Western-style elections; Russia's history and geography require a nationalist strongman; the religiosity of Arab populations proves infertile soil for the exercise of basic rights; democracy is generally ineffective in delivering economic growth, infrastructure, industrial policies, and long-term plans.

Today, Beijing and others peddle a seemingly compelling story: that fractious, paralyzed democracies simply can't muster the will to deliver the goods their people want. Better, they suggest, to embrace an effective, tech-fueled autocracy that can move nimbly to pursue national interests and spread prosperity. What's a bit of free speech and the right to choose your leaders if those leaders merely squabble while strongmen lead their populations boldly forward? A state derives its just powers, they suggest, from the convenience of the governed.

To all this, one suspects, Reagan would have said: nonsense. His Westminster remarks echo the Founding Fathers' belief, channeling John Locke, that legitimacy rests on the consent of the governed, measured by periodic, free elections. “From Stettin on the Baltic to Varna on the Black Sea,” Reagan declared, “the regimes planted by totalitarianism have had more than 30 years to establish their legitimacy. But none – not one regime – has yet been able to risk free elections. Regimes planted by bayonets do not take root.” To the dictators who so often invoke the love and support of their people, Reagan might say, put it to the test: hold free elections and let the people choose.

And to the dogmatic relativists, Reagan would have argued that the legitimacy of democracy lies in its universality, and that all people, everywhere, have a right to it. “Democracy already flourishes in countries with very different cultures and historical experiences,” Reagan pointed out. “This is not cultural imperialism, it is providing the means for genuine self-determination and protection for diversity... It would be cultural condescension, or worse, to say that any people prefer dictatorship to democracy.” Here, the president's words ruffle feathers on both the right and the left some 30 years later.

The Trump administration, for one, has articulated a very different philosophy. The President's National Security Strategy is nearly silent on issues like freedom and democracy, but not totally. Indeed, a small portion of the document commits the administration to support individual dignity, freedom, and the rule of law. Such good things, however, are cast as "American values," rather than rights to which all people are entitled. The strategy makes several references to "individual rights" but the term "human rights" appears just once - to warn that the United States will deny admission to human rights abusers.<sup>8</sup> "We are not going to impose our values on others," the document assures readers. "The American way of life cannot be imposed upon others, nor is it the inevitable culmination of progress."<sup>9</sup>

President Reagan's universal view of democratic rights and aspirations is at once both more defensible and more inspiring. Far from imposing American values on others, Reagan made clear that America asked "only that these [autocratic] systems begin by living up to their own constitutions, abiding by their own laws, and complying with the international obligations they have undertaken."

Indeed, even the most repressive governments in the world today appeal to universal political ideals, though they are honored in the breach rather than in practice.

There is nothing particularly American about Article 35 of the Chinese constitution, for instance, which states that "citizens of the People's Republic of China enjoy freedom of speech, of the press, of assembly, of association, of procession and of demonstration," or Article 36, which holds that no state organ may "discriminate against citizens who believe in, or do not believe in, any religion."<sup>10</sup> Russia's constitution articulates similar guarantees: Article 29 states, "Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought and speech," and "The freedom of the mass media shall be guaranteed. Censorship shall be prohibited."<sup>11</sup> Even North Korea provides such formal guarantees. Article 67: "Citizens shall have freedom of speech, press, assembly, demonstration, and association. The state shall guarantee conditions for the free activities of democratic political parties and social organizations."<sup>12</sup> The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was adopted unanimously by the United Nations General Assembly, states simply, "The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret ballot or by equivalent free voting procedures."<sup>13</sup>

Why would the drafters of such documents provide liberal guarantees that leaders have no intention of ensuring? Perhaps it is because they realize, like Reagan, that such notions are

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<sup>8</sup> This paragraph and other material in this essay draw on John Bellinger and Richard Fontaine, "To Strengthen Trump's National Security Approach, Promote Human Rights," *Lawfare*, January 2018.

<https://www.lawfareblog.com/strengthen-trumps-national-security-approach-promote-human-rights>  
<sup>9</sup> *National Security Strategy of the United States*, December 2017. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> *Constitution of the People's Republic of China*. [http://www.npc.gov.cn/englishnpc/Constitution/2007-11/15/content\\_1372964.htm](http://www.npc.gov.cn/englishnpc/Constitution/2007-11/15/content_1372964.htm)

<sup>11</sup> *The Constitution of the Russian Confederation*. <https://www.departments.bucknell.edu/russian/const/ch2.html>

<sup>12</sup> *Constitution of North Korea*.

<http://web.archive.org/web/20090426060256/http://www.kcckp.net/en/great/constitution.php?6>

<sup>13</sup> *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. <https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>

intrinsic to human aspiration, irrespective of culture and history and geography. Citizens of no nation enjoy being arrested for their thought or speech, or enduring beatings by a secret police, or having to hide their religious beliefs or criticisms of government. Better, perhaps, to claim adherence to basic rights implicitly acknowledged by most of the world, and then to abridge them in practice. This, too, offers a lesson's for today's challenges: Rather than indulge the notion that certain peoples are insufficiently civilized or prosperous or secular to exercise basic rights, the United States should instead call on their leaders to fulfill the obligations they have freely undertaken.

## **Democracy in a World of Great Power Competition**

Ronald Reagan believed in the intrinsic righteousness of supporting democracy, and he chided “the shyness of some of us in the West about standing for these ideals that have done so much to ease the plight of man and the hardships of our imperfect world.” The positive difference American efforts might make in the lives of foreign men and women was reason enough to act – itself evidence of the cause's nobility. Why support democracy and freedom? Because in a country as great, generous and blessed as America, it is self-evidently the right thing to do.

But Reagan suggested there was more to the case than this. He nodded to strategic reasons for acting in support of basic political rights. “I believe,” he said at Westminster, “the renewed strength of the democratic movement, complemented by a global campaign for freedom, will strengthen the prospects for arms control and a world at peace.” Interests, and not just values, were at stake.

In our day, as in Reagan's, embracing the cause of basic rights and freedoms gives purpose and direction to America's role in the world, beyond its narrowly-construed national interests. But, again, as in Reagan's time, interests are at stake as well.

Today, Republicans and Democrats generally agree that the United States has reentered an era of great power competition, in which Beijing and Moscow wish to contest the attractiveness of democratic government and shape a world consistent with their authoritarian model.<sup>14</sup>

The result is a contest not just of nations but of political systems. Many policy makers are newly worried that alternatives to liberal democracy will gain currency, and lawmakers on both sides of the aisle concur. Senator Mitt Romney, for instance, cautions that the alternative offered by China and Russia is “autocratic, corrupt, and brutal,” while Bernie Sanders has called for solidarity among democracies in the face of an “authoritarian axis.”<sup>15</sup>

To overcome its geopolitical rivals, the United States should go beyond building a stronger military or enforcing economic rules; it must double down on its support for democracy around the world. Authoritarian powers are working to subvert democracy where it exists, snuff it out where it is new, and keep it away where it is lacking. They see their assault on democracy as a

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<sup>14</sup> Portions of this section draw on Richard Fontaine and Daniel Twining, “Standing up for Democracy,” *Foreign Affairs*, July 2018. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2018-07-18/standing-democracy>

<sup>15</sup> Richard Fontaine, “The Shutdown is Great News for Russia,” *The Atlantic*, January 19, 2019. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/01/shutdown-hurts-american-democracy-and-helps-russia/580813/>.

matter not of differing values but of strategic advantage; they can enhance their own power by eroding the internal cohesion of democracies and the solidarity of democratic alliances.

The importance of democracy to U.S. interests helps explain recent Chinese and Russian activities. Both Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping see a contest of systems under way between liberal democracy and centrally guided rule. Xi offers China as an alternative model for developing countries that can deliver economic modernity without political choice, while Putin argues that Western democracies are decadent, lacking the discipline and vigor of his technologically empowered dictatorship. Both project their authoritarian models in order to subvert free societies, weaken U.S. alliances, and gain geostrategic advantage.

Sensing that a divided United States poses less of a threat to Russia, Moscow seeks to damage the democratic practice that lies at the core of American life. Through disinformation and interference, it works to sow distrust in elections and institutions, pit social groups against one another, and undermine the notion of truth on which democratic discourse depends. In dozens of Western countries, Russia has employed cyberattacks, fake news, propaganda, and social-media manipulation to undermine open societies, while providing material support to illiberal social and political groups, including radical populists on both sides of the ideological spectrum.

China takes a more subtle, long-term approach. In countries such as Australia and Greece, Beijing has used its economic weight to lean on corporations and civil society groups to limit speech China finds objectionable. Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative threatens to catch countries in a web of debt dependency and increased corruption. Similarly, China's development of a new "digital Silk Road," a plan to promote information technology connectivity across Eurasia, may well export Beijing's Orwellian domestic surveillance regime. Through such moves, China is deploying what the National Endowment for Democracy terms "sharp power," designed to "pierce, penetrate, or perforate the information and political environments in the targeted countries."<sup>16</sup> Beijing is building political influence in target countries and constructing an expansive, illiberal sphere of influence that is hostile to U.S. leadership.

While the vectors of this contest span multiple domains, new threats to existing democracies reside in a sophisticated new set of technological tools—some of them now maturing, others poised to emerge over the coming decade—that seem destined to wind up in the hands of autocrats around the world.<sup>17</sup> Automated microtargeting, facial recognition, the next generation of state-controlled bots, deep fakes, AI-enhanced surveillance tools and advances in natural language processing will allow strongmen and police states to bolster their internal grip, undermine basic rights and spread illiberal practices beyond their own borders. China and Russia are poised to take advantage of this new suite of products and capabilities, but they will soon be available for export, so that even second-tier tyrannies will be able to better monitor and mislead their populations.

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<sup>16</sup> "Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence," *National Endowment for Democracy*, December 2017. <https://www.ned.org/sharp-power-rising-authoritarian-influence-forum-report/>

<sup>17</sup> This section draws in part on Richard Fontaine and Kara Frederick, "The Autocrat's New Toolkit," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 2019. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-autocrats-new-tool-kit-11552662637>

The internet dispersed data, but new technological advances can concentrate its power in the hands of a few. With more than 30 billion devices expected to be connected to the internet by 2020, each one generating new data, those who can control, process and exploit the information rush will have a major advantage. A regime bent on stability may feel virtually compelled to do so. Dictators from Caracas to Pyongyang will seek to exploit the enormous potential for political misuse inherent in the emerging technologies, just as they have over the decades with radio, television and the internet itself. Democracies will need to be ready to fight back.

The implication for American interests, and not only our values, should be clear. Also plain is the need for cooperation among the liberal states. At Westminster, Reagan referenced the efforts of German stiftungs, which predated American ones. In the last decade, countries that have started or strengthened their efforts to support democracy include Brazil, India, Indonesia, Japan, and South Africa. Traditional supporters like Denmark, Germany, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and Britain remain highly active. Such developments invite multilateral cooperation.

Washington needs to recast threats to democracy—and their solutions—as challenges to be faced in cooperation with its allies. Russian meddling in Europe should be an issue for NATO, while Chinese interference in Australia should be dealt with as part of U.S.-Australian treaty commitments. By viewing such external assaults not just as matters of domestic politics but also as attacks on alliances, Washington and its partners can better share information and resources and coordinate joint responses. They can approach a common view of the authoritarian challenge and collaborate in the support of democracy.

## **The Action**

Had Reagan's Westminster speech merely articulated the case for democracy, it would be remembered today as one of many well-written and inspiring presidential addresses, but as little more than that. It was, on the contrary, much more: It represented a plan of action. "The objective I propose is quite simple to state," Reagan announced. It was "to foster the infrastructure of democracy, the system of a free press, unions, political parties, universities, which allows a people to choose their own way to develop their own culture, to reconcile their own differences through peaceful means." The institutions to which his speech gave rise – the NED, IRI, NDI, CIPE and the Solidarity Center – endure to this day, and their work around the world remains vital.

Today, amid questions about democracy promotion and the attractiveness of democracy itself, the task that animated President Reagan's plan of action in 1982 re-emerges. To push back against modern authoritarian influence, the United States should make existing democracies more resilient, protect and support fragile democracies, and expand democratic choice in countries where it is today unknown.<sup>18</sup>

The top priority should be to make open societies more resilient and capable of defending themselves against external threats. During the Cold War, U.S. grand strategy revolved around protecting democratic strongpoints in Asia and Europe. Today, the United States must first defend itself against autocratic penetration and subversion, while also looking to protect allies

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<sup>18</sup> Fontaine and Twining, "Standing up for Democracy," *Foreign Affairs*, July 2018.

and partners such as Australia, France, Germany, Mexico, and the United Kingdom. Just as Washington would view any military intrusion into these countries as an unacceptable infringement of their sovereignty, so too must it view political interference as a hostile act worthy of a collective response.

The second priority should be to protect fragile nascent democracies—countries that have recently democratized, but where democracy is still under assault from internal or external forces. Ukraine is an important example: both its government and a majority of its population support democratic consolidation and integration into the West, yet Moscow is pursuing hybrid war to subvert the country's sovereign institutions. Other important fragile democracies include Bangladesh, Georgia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Armenia and Tunisia, which face threats as diverse as Russian aggression, Chinese economic coercion, and violent non-state extremism.

The third priority should be encouraging democratic openings in autocratic environments. Washington may lack the leverage to mitigate repression in countries such as China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia, but there are other places where democratic practice may find more fertile ground, including Angola, Belarus, Central Asia, and Sudan. Washington's objective in these countries should be not to foment regime change, but to support local actors working to incrementally expand democracy.

When it comes to the hardest cases, it will be critical not to give authoritarian challengers a free pass on internal repression. U.S. leaders have traditionally spoken out in favor of human rights and democracy in closed societies, including those with regimes with which they must do business. Yet today, U.S. officials often defer to the governments of authoritarian countries, which are treated as unitary actors despite the fact that these undemocratic regimes do not speak for their citizens. In this contested space, Washington must consistently speak up for human rights, political freedoms, and minority protections, both generally and with respect to specific countries. The people of those nations will remember it, just as so many in Central and Eastern Europe recall Reagan's stirring words.

Finally, we should take a page from Reagan's playbook when it comes to questions of sequencing and pragmatism. To promote democratic values is not to call for immediate elections everywhere, even when the exercise of such franchise is likely to bring into power an illiberal regime. "One man, one vote, one time," is not democracy. At Westminster, Reagan asked "only for a process, a direction, a basic code of decency, not for an instant transformation." America should urge countries forward, friend and foe alike, understanding that the attainment of full democracy takes time.

### **The Necessary Confidence**

Reagan was right about the *idea*: democracy is no fragile flower. But put into practice, democracy today looks disconcertingly fragile indeed. According to the most recent Freedom House report on Freedom in the World, democracy faced its most serious crisis in decades in

2017, which saw the 12<sup>th</sup> consecutive year of decline in global freedom.<sup>19</sup> Since the decline began in 2006, 113 countries have seen a net decrease in basic freedoms – free and fair elections, minority rights, freedom of the press, and rule of law – compared to only 62 countries experiencing a net improvement. In 2017 alone, 71 countries suffered net declines in political rights and civil liberties, with only 35 seeing improvements.

Even within some democratic nations, democratic ideals are wavering. A 2019 Pew Research Center survey of 27 democratic countries found that 51% of the people polled are dissatisfied with how democracy is working in their country, mostly due to corrupt politicians, unfair courts, and lack of economic opportunity or public safety.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the 2018 Corruption Perceptions Index, published by Transparency International, found that more than two-thirds of countries scored below 50 in a scale of zero (highly corrupt) to 100 (very clean), and that the vast majority of countries made little to no progress in corruption levels.<sup>21</sup>

Many in Washington now believe that the autocratic resurgence is simply a fact of life. Pointing to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, they argue that the United States has a poor record of promoting human rights and democracy and say it should be careful what it wishes for. During the 2010 Arab Spring, for instance, the fall of autocrats ushered in not liberal democracy but instability and violent extremism. As a result, the amount of Americans believing the Arab Spring would lead to lasting improvements dropped from 42 percent in April 2011 to 25 percent two years later.<sup>22</sup> Nearly two-thirds of those then polled prioritized stable governments as a long-range foreign policy goal, while only 28 percent saw democracy as a priority.<sup>23</sup> The post-Soviet countries of Europe, it is sometimes argued, have turned out to be the easier cases; dictatorships elsewhere often lack the necessary preconditions for democracy to flourish.

Perhaps. And yet in 1982, many similarly believed that Communist dictatorship was a fact of life. History showed otherwise. In 2019, global support for democratic ideals remains strong. Chinese respondents in one survey were three times more likely to want their government to become more like the American system than less.<sup>24</sup> Seventy percent of Brazilians surveyed liked American ideas of democracy, feeling generally disappointed with their own democracy. And twice as many Egyptians surveyed liked American ideas of democracy as those who disliked them. The ground in which democratic flowers grow remains fertile.

While the United States supports the growth of democracy abroad, it must quite clearly attend to its own. In January 2018, amid a U.S. government shutdown, China’s official news agency

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<sup>19</sup> “Freedom in the World 2018, Democracy in Crisis,” *Freedom House*, 2018.

<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2018>

<sup>20</sup> Richard Wike, Laura Silver, Alexandra Castillo, “Many across the globe are dissatisfied with how democracy is working,” *Pew Research Center*, April 2019.

<sup>21</sup> “Corruption Perceptions Index, 2018,” *Transparency International*, 2018.

<sup>22</sup> “On Eve of Foreign Debate, Growing Pessimism about Arab Spring Aftermath,” *Pew Research Center*, October 2012.

<sup>23</sup> “Public sees U.S. power declining as support for global engagement slips, Section 3: Long-Range Foreign Policy Goals,” *Pew Research Center*, December 2013.

<sup>24</sup> Mark Hannah, “From Democracy Promotion to Democracy Attraction: How the World Views American-Style Democracy,” Eurasia Group Foundation, May 2019. <http://egfound.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/1905-15-Modeling-Democracy-Interactive-.pdf>

published a commentary saying, “What’s happening in the United States today will make more people worldwide reflect on the viability and legitimacy of such a chaotic political system.”<sup>25</sup> In January 2019, during yet another shutdown, the *Global Times*, Beijing’s jingoistic, English-language outlet, doubled down. “Americans boldly portray their democracy as a global model and sell its standard worldwide,” the newspaper said. But “the government shutdown has been going on for nearly three weeks and involves 800,000 government employees not being able to work normally. This is too much even for the US. Developing countries that are exploring a development path can hardly afford it.”<sup>26</sup>

Those shutdowns ended, and certainly did not on their own puncture the democratic balloon. But combine episodes like those with fiscal cliffs and battles over raising the debt limit, salt in the effect of sequestration and an inability to pass basic legislation, and there exist the makings of a narrative that is bad for America, and bad for the cause of democracy. Our leaders should support democracy abroad. They should also demonstrate that it works at home.

This, in turn, requires a measure of confidence that has seemed to slip from America in the past few years. Less certain of our own convictions, less convinced of our own tendency to succeed, there is a temptation to turn inward, let others sort out their own problems, and muddle along. Nothing would be worse for American interests or the universal values we hold so dear.

“What kind of people do we think we are?” Reagan asked in 1982. His answer was clear and stirring. We are “free people, worthy of freedom and determined not only to remain so but to help others gain their freedom as well.” That’s not a bad starting point for locating American identity in the world of 2019.

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<sup>25</sup> Liu Chang, “Commentary: Gov’t shutdown exposes chronic flaw in U.S. political system,” *Xinhua*, January 2018. [www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-01/21/c\\_136912263.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-01/21/c_136912263.htm)

<sup>26</sup> “US shutdown reveals flawed democracy,” *Global Times*, January 2019. [www.globaltimes.cn/content/1135224.shtml](http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1135224.shtml)