

## Democracy and Foreign Policy\*

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I want to begin with some simple statistics that illustrate what may be the most significant thing historians of future centuries will remember about the one through which we've just lived. In 1900 the world contained no democracies, if we can define that term, as the human rights organization Freedom House does, to mean states in which universal suffrage produced competitive multiparty elections. Not even the United States or Great Britain qualified, since both at that time denied the vote to women and, in the case of the U. S., to African-Americans and other minorities as well. Half a century later in 1950, after two world wars, 22 states qualified as democratic according to the Freedom House standard, comprising some 31% of the world's population. But by the year 2000, after a dangerous and protracted cold war, there were 120 democracies, which meant that 63% of the earth's people now lived under democratic rule.<sup>1</sup>

The history of states goes back about 500 years, and the history of empires goes back about ten times further. Democracies in the modern sense, then, have therefore existed only for something like one fiftieth of the history of human governance – and for only about a third even of Yale's history. For democracy to have spread so far and so fast is, by any standard of historical judgment, a remarkable development. It's all the more remarkable that it did so in a century filled with so much violence, for at no other time had people perfected the techniques of killing one another with so much efficiency, and on such a scale.

How was it, then, that the predominantly democratic world that exists today arose from such unpromising circumstances? What has been the role of the United States, if any, in bringing all of this about? These are themes I want to try to address in this lecture. I'll have something to say at the end of it about where we may be going from here.

### I.

The traditional American explanation for the spread of democracy goes something like this. The Founding Fathers, drawing upon their admiration for ancient Greek precedents while fearing the loss of their liberties within an all too contemporary British Empire, imported long-dormant seeds of democracy into a new world, where they immediately took root and flourished. The resulting democratic ideology then exported itself back to Europe, where it quickly undermined the most powerful continental empire – that of France – and set in motion a more gradual but no less significant political evolution within Great Britain itself. So when Woodrow

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<sup>1</sup>Freedom House, *Democracy's Century: A Survey of Global Political Change in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (New York: Freedom House, 1999), available at: <http://www.freedomhouse.org/reports/century.html>. I have used revised statistics from the website, which show 120 democracies in the year 2000, rather than the 199 cited in the original published report.

Wilson brought the United States into World War I in 1917 with his call to “make the world safe for democracy,” he was only continuing on a wider scale the process of democratic transplantation that Thomas Jefferson began in 1776 when he had proclaimed that “all men are created equal.” The American Revolution was, thus, was the most potent of all revolutions, which explains why so much of the world today follows its example.

There are, however, several problems with this explanation. First, the Founding Fathers were far more republican than democratic in their thinking: to the extent that ancient precedents shaped it, they came more from Rome than Greece. Second, the idea of a competitive multi-party system badly frightened these leaders, and the prospect of universal suffrage would have astounded them. Third, the history of the United States during its first century would hardly have inspired democratization elsewhere. One of its central features, after all, was the persistence of slavery long past the time it had ceased to exist in most other advanced societies, together with the fact that one of the bloodiest wars of the 19<sup>th</sup> century had been required to eradicate it. For decades afterwards, the American practice of democracy retained glaring inconsistencies: Wilson himself, who spoke so grandly of extending democracy throughout the world, had not the slightest intention of extending that same right to the former victims of slavery at home.

So let us scrap this traditional explanation of democratic diffusion and consider another one. It falls within the category of what we might call historical tectonics: those great underlying forces in history that are set in motion by no person and no state, but that nonetheless move all persons and states, rather as the great continental plates move all of us about on the face of the earth. Two in particular might plausibly have paved the way for the expansion of democracy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The first of these was the emergence, in the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution, of an open market system which broke down the old patterns of mercantilism by which states had sought, however ineffectually, to control the economic lives of their citizens. The free exchange of commodities, according to this argument, cannot help but promote the free exchange of ideas: politics follows economics. The second tectonic shift was the communications revolution of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century – I mean here the expansion of literacy together with the development of mass-circulation newspapers and, in the telegraph and telephone, the first primitive forms of instant electronic communication – all of which made it harder than it had been for states to conceal information, or to keep people from sharing it among themselves. “The impulse of democracy, which began in another century in other lands, has made itself fully felt in our time,” Lord Salisbury acknowledged in 1897, adding with evident relief that “vast changes in the centre of power and incidence of responsibility have been made almost imperceptibly without any disturbance or hindrance in the progress of the prosperous development of the nation.”<sup>2</sup>

But there’s a problem with this explanation as well, for it’s possible to argue that it was precisely these two tectonic forces – market capitalism and mass communications – that paved the way for the most appalling authoritarian excesses of

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<sup>2</sup>Andrew Roberts, *Salisbury: Victorian Titan* (London: Phoenix, 1999), p. 662.

the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Karl Marx anticipated the mechanism with his claim that because capitalism distributes wealth unequally, it also encourages social alienation; and most historians would see in such alienation, as it manifested itself during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the roots of both communism and fascism. The success of these movements, in turn, owes much to the skill with which their leaders – Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, and especially Hitler – exploited the new means of mass communication. The tectonic explanation gets us little further than Jeffersonian transplantation in helping us to understand the spread of democracy, therefore, since it also helps to explain the spread of authoritarianism.

It's always worth remembering, as Yogi Berra didn't say but should have, that history isn't history until after it's happened. To see the logic of this, step into your nearest available time machine, set the dial back to any point in the past you choose, and check to see how many people there were then who accurately predicted what's happening now. Drop in, for example, on the ceremonies surrounding the Yale bicentennial a hundred years ago. How likely it would have seemed on that occasion – when no one in the world had a truly democratic form of government – that two-thirds of the world's population would have such governments by the time of this occasion? Had you suggested such a thing to the dignitaries assembled on this campus in 1901, the answer would have been, I imagine, something like: "don't bet your top hat on it."

## II.

Let us switch, then, to an explanation which, while it does not neglect the impact of either the American example or the underlying tectonics, does not depend upon them either: it has to do with the role of contingency in history. Because great events determine so much that happens afterwards, we tend too easily to assume that they could only have happened in the way that they did. A prime example is World War I, or the Great War as it was known until an even greater one came along. Without this catastrophe, we can safely surmise, the remaining history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century would have been very different. But because we cannot know the nature of those differences, we too often rely on the dubious doctrine of inevitability in seeking to explain the origins of the war, and its subsequent evolution.

That makes one of its most important consequences – the emergence of Woodrow Wilson as the first world leader with a global democratic vision – seem far more predetermined than it actually was. After all, no one had expected a major European war to break out in the summer of 1914. Once it had, hardly anyone anticipated that it would still be stalemated three years later, or that the United States would then enter it and help to bring about an allied victory. Certainly Wilson had not foreseen, when he entered the White House in 1913, that he would be shaping a European peace settlement in 1918-19: it would be the greatest irony, he commented shortly after taking office, if his administration should find itself involved in any significant way in European affairs.

Wilson's commitment to "make the world safe for democracy," therefore, grew more out of circumstances than destiny. He seized an unexpected opportunity to project national power onto the international scene, but he had no plan in place to

implement his lofty vision. His reasons for invoking it, indeed, were less than lofty: he was trying to win the support of a still isolationist country for a war aimed at restoring the balance of power in Europe. The easiest way to do that seemed to be to portray adversaries as autocrats and allies as democrats, despite the fact that among these allies, had he not been overthrown only a few weeks earlier, would have been the greatest autocrat of them all at the time, the Russian tsar. What Wilson was doing, in short, was enlisting idealism in the defense of realism, a technique Jefferson would fully have understood.

It took another unexpected event – the triumph of Bolshevism in Russia several months later – to transform Wilson’s tactics into a highly effective grand strategy. For although Wilson had welcomed the tsar’s collapse, he had been horrified when the resulting chaos allowed a tiny band of revolutionaries to seize control of that country, withdraw it from the war, and then challenge the legitimacy of the existing social order everywhere else. Wilson and other allied leaders took the Bolshevik Revolution sufficiently seriously that, during the final year of the fighting, they gave almost as much attention to containing its effects as to defeating Germany.

That was the context, then, in which Wilson made his Fourteen Points speech of January, 1918, arguably the most influential public pronouncement by any leader at any point in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For in seeking to counter the attraction of Bolshevism, Wilson pushed himself into proclaiming two great interlocking principles that would shape the American approach to the world for decades to come: political self-determination and economic integration. People should have the right, he insisted, not only to choose their own forms of government, but also to benefit from the open markets that would ensure their own prosperity. The world was now to be made safe for *both* democracy and capitalism.

In making this connection, Wilson was grounding his idealism in a more compelling realism than even those consummate realists, Marx and Lenin, were able to achieve. It’s true that they, like Wilson, saw themselves as seeking democracy – what else would a classless society be? – but they did so by relying on dictatorships, whether in the management of politics or economics, to bring that condition about. They believed, almost as a matter of religious conviction, that coercion in the short run would produce liberation in the long run; that means disconnected from ends would not corrupt ends. It proved to be one of the costliest leaps of faith in all of history.

Wilson was far more practical. He sensed the need for *simultaneous* advance toward social and material well-being. He saw the danger of seeking one while postponing the other. He understood that economics sustains politics even as politics disciplines economics; that the relationship is symbiotic, not separate. There was, to be sure, nothing new about such thinking: it had been the basis for British liberalism throughout much of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and for American progressivism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. But it was one thing to have it said by John Bright or Herbert Croly in a book or from a lecture platform. It was quite another to have it proclaimed by the most influential man in the world, as by the final year of the war Wilson had become. Or by the man of the century, a distinction future historians may well regard Wilson as having merited.

## III.

But get back into your time machine for a moment, and run a reality check on that last proposition. Set your dial for 1920, Yale University, and the ceremonies dedicating the Woolsey Hall memorial to the dead of the Great War. Would Wilson have looked, to anyone there, like the man of the century? I very much doubt it, for not only had he failed to get the settlement he wanted at the Paris peace conference; he had not even managed to sell membership in the League of Nations – the institution critical to sustaining his global vision – to his own people. He would die broken in health and embittered in spirit four years later, with the events that would ultimately vindicate him nowhere in sight on the horizon.

Given the American withdrawal back into political isolationism in the 1920s and then into economic isolationism in the 1930s; given the demoralizing failures of both capitalism and democracy in Europe during those years; given the rise of authoritarian alternatives in the consolidation of communist rule in Russia, the emergence of fascism in Italy and Germany, and the rise of militarism in Japan: given all of these things, it was possible on the eve of World War II for many people to say and for more to believe that authoritarianism, not democracy, was the wave of the future. The organization America First, which attracted so much support on this campus after the fighting broke out in Europe in 1939, had as its goal insulating the United States from the rest of the world, not inspiring or leading it.

We tend to remember World War II today as a good war, in the sense that it so thoroughly crushed the challenges to democracy that the Axis states had mounted, and so decisively propelled the United States into the position of global hegemon. As a consequence, it's easy to forget two things: that the outcome of the war, until at least half of the way through it, was by no means assured; and that victory, when it finally did come, guaranteed little about the future safety of either democracy or capitalism.

Recent scholarship has tended to confirm, for World War II, what the Duke of Wellington said about the Battle of Waterloo: that it was “the nearest run thing you ever saw.”<sup>3</sup> The reasons for this reside not just in the improbable coincidence of the democracies having leaders like Winston Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt, who rose magnificently to occasions neither of them could have anticipated; nor in the amazing shortsightedness of Adolf Hitler in declaring war on *both* the Soviet Union and the United States within a six month period of time; nor in the unexpected tenacity of the British, the remarkable fortitude of the Russians, the awesome technological prowess of the Americans, and the increasingly frequent military incompetence, as the war wore on, of the Germans and the Japanese. All of these things had to come together to produce victory, along with the incalculable *moral* effect of fighting enemies that had come to be seen as truly evil.<sup>4</sup>

Even so, the end of the war was no clear triumph for democracy or capitalism. For despite the fact that Roosevelt, in the Atlantic Charter, had sought to revive Wilson's vision, victory had come only through collaboration with an ally who in no

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<sup>3</sup>Elizabeth Longford, *Wellington* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1992), p. 333.

<sup>4</sup>For an excellent recent book that stresses how easily the war could have gone the other way, see Richard Overy, *Why the Allies Won* (London: Pimlico, 1995).

way shared it. Stalin's Soviet Union had not engaged, as had Hitler's Germany, in purposeful genocide; but its record was bad enough. During the decade from 1929 to 1939 it had managed, through the brutalities associated with the collectivisation of agriculture, the resulting famine, and the purges that followed, to kill something like twice the number of people who died in the Nazi Holocaust. And yet the war's outcome left this regime controlling half of Europe. The famous pictures of Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin posing amicably together reflected no vanquishing of autocracy by democracy, therefore, but rather the desperation with which democracy had hung on by the skin of its teeth.

Fast forward your time machine, then, to 1950, Yale University, and the Woolsey Hall ceremony adding the World War II dead to lists of those killed in earlier wars. Ask the attendees on that occasion about the future they saw ahead of them. I suspect that, for many of them, it would not have been that of Wilson, but rather the one laid out in George Orwell's novel *1984*, published only the year before. Big Brother was, of course, Stalin transparently disguised. The very indispensability of his role in defeating fascism now made communism seem close to invincible: with Mao Zedong's recent victory in China, that ideology dominated a huge stretch of territory extending from the Baltic to the Pacific. There were, to be sure, some 22 democracies in the world that year, but there were twice as many regimes that would have qualified, by the Freedom House standards, as either authoritarian or totalitarian.<sup>5</sup> The world was hardly safe for democracy yet.

#### IV.

So did the Cold War make it so? That's an intriguing question, because promoting democracy is not exactly what the Cold War was noted for while it was going on. And yet the Freedom House statistics – the jump from 22 democracies in 1950 to 120 by the year 2000 – suggest some connection between the Cold War and the expansion of democratic governance: this did not all happen after that conflict ended. So did democracy spread because of the Cold War, or in spite of it? Correlations, it's worth remembering, aren't always causes.

The "in spite of" arguments will be familiar to you. They emphasize the division of most of the postwar world into Soviet and American spheres of influence; the extent to which that influence constrained the autonomy of those who fell within it; and especially the means by which Washington and Moscow chose to conduct so much of their competition – the nuclear balance of terror. This seemed the ultimate affront to democracy, because it risked the denial of life itself in the pursuit of geopolitical stability. The United States would win, one Air Force general is said to have commented, if after a nuclear war there were only two Americans left. "You'd better make damn sure, general," a civilian aide replied, "that one is a man and the other a woman."<sup>6</sup>

Critical to the "in spite of" argument is the assumption of moral equivalency: the claim that the two Cold War systems were equally repressive. It's easy to forget now what a popular position this once was. It grew out of the anti-Vietnam War and

<sup>5</sup>See note 1 for the source of these statistics.

<sup>6</sup>William Kauffman relates this story in an interview for the CNN television series *Cold War*.

anti-nuclear weapons protests of the 1960s and 1970s. It informed much of the revisionist historiography on the origins of the Cold War that was being produced during those years. It was why Ronald Reagan felt obliged so pointedly to characterize the Soviet Union, in 1983, as an “evil empire.” And as late as 1984 – Orwell’s year – it was still possible for that exquisite barometer of academic self-indulgence, the Oxford Union, to debate the proposition: “Resolved, there is no moral difference between the foreign policies of the U.S. and the USSR.”<sup>7</sup>

Such arguments began to lose their credibility, though, as people like Andrei Sakharov, Vaclav Havel, Lech Walesa, Pope John Paul II, and ultimately Mikhail Gorbachev himself made it clear that *they* saw a considerable moral difference between the democratic governments that were flourishing on one side of the Cold War divide, and the autocratic regimes that were hanging on, increasingly desperately, on the other side of it. It became far more difficult to blame the Americans and their allies for maintaining an anti-democratic system when their erstwhile adversaries were so eloquently condemning – and effectively dismantling – their own. Even before the Cold War ended, then, moral equivalency arguments had lost much of their appeal: today hardly anyone makes them.

A more serious objection to the claim that the Cold War fostered the growth of democracy has to do with the underlying tectonics I mentioned at the beginning of the lecture. If late 19<sup>th</sup> century improvements in marketization and mass communication continued throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> – as they surely did – would they not have incubated democracies quite effectively whether there had been a Cold War going on or not? Is not what happens beneath the surface of events ultimately more significant than the events themselves?

The problem here, though, is the evidence from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that marketization and mass communication could as easily incubate authoritarianism. Using them to explain democratization during the Cold War requires showing that these processes had somehow changed: that at some point they began to reward only lateral but no longer hierarchical forms of political organization. I think it’s possible to make that case, but only by bringing in what my political science colleagues would call exogenous variables. Did markets themselves generate safeguards against their own excesses, or did states learn, from the painful experience of the 1930s, that they had better impose these? Did the means of communication shift all that dramatically in the 1940s, or was it the war that sensitized people to their possible abuses? Tectonic determinism is always difficult to confirm, because the tectonics tend to manifest themselves in particular contexts, the effects of which can’t always easily be distinguished.

There has been one attempt to link democratisation to technological advance by way of the Cold War, though: it’s what we might call the Teflon argument. The older people here will recall the justifications the National Aeronautics and Space Administration used to make for the space program when budgets looked likely to be cut: without it, we were told, housewives would never have had Teflon, since this better method of frying bacon had evolved from the need to avoid frying astronauts as their space capsules re-entered the atmosphere. The Teflon explanation has been

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<sup>7</sup>John Lewis Gaddis, “On Moral Equivalency and Cold War History,” *Ethics and International Affairs*, X(1996), 131-48.

expanded in various ways: without the inducements the Cold War provided to develop the necessary technology, it's often said, we would never have had such innovations as jet-powered airliners, interstate highways, 500-channel satellite receiving dishes, mobile phones, and of course the internet, which began as a supplementary command and control network for the Pentagon in the event of nuclear war. And without these things, we could never have had globalisation, which in turn has promoted democratization. Or so the argument runs.

I don't think much of it, though, for a couple of reasons. First, it reverses chronology: the movement toward democratization was well under way before most of these innovations were. Second, it assumes that what people have is more important than what they think. The perils of this approach became clear in 1999 when the *New York Times* columnist Tom Friedman published his "Golden Arches Theory of Conflict Resolution," which noted that no state with a McDonald's franchise had ever gone to war with another one. Unfortunately the United States and its NATO allies chose just that inauspicious moment to begin bombing Belgrade, where there were an embarrassing number of golden arches.<sup>8</sup>

All of these "in spite of" arguments – and, in their own way, the Teflon and Golden Arches explanations as well – disconnect democratization from the mainstream of Cold War history. They build a wall between domestic politics and geopolitics that seems unlikely to have existed in the minds of people at the time. They strike me, for that reason, as less than plausible. So what if we were to take seriously the alternative position, however unlikely it might seem, which is that the Soviet-American superpower rivalry actually *promoted* democratization? That the diffusion of democracy is at least in part an offspring, even if an unexpected one, of the Cold War itself?

## V.

The case in favor of this argument would focus on the role of the United States, and especially on the differences in the way it handled its responsibilities in the two postwar eras. I spoke earlier of Wilson's insight that economic and political progress had to proceed simultaneously; that just as one could not expect prosperity without open markets and unconstrained politics, so one could not postpone prosperity – as Marxism, Leninism, and ultimately Maoism also attempted to do – and still expect to get democracy. Wilson's countrymen had not embraced this logic, though, after World War I, and as a consequence the United States made no sustained effort to implement his vision. It did after World War II. What made the difference?

Part of the answer, I'm sure, was simply guilt: despite their power the Americans had done so little to prevent the coming of the second war that they were determined after it was over not to repeat their behavior after the first war. But part of the reason also was that the world of the early 1920s had seemed relatively benign: there were no obvious threats to American security. The world of the late 1940s, in contrast, seemed anything but benign. We can of course debate the accuracy of the view that Stalin posed as great a threat to the European balance of power as Hitler

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<sup>8</sup>Friedman made this claim in *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1999).

had: the few Soviet documents we have are inconclusive on that point, and even if we had all the documents my fellow historians would still find ways to disagree as to what they showed. For our purposes here, though, what's important is not what Stalin's intentions really were, but what American leaders *believed* them to be. About that there's little doubt, and as a consequence the Truman administration had resolved, by 1947, to act very differently from the way in which its predecessors had acted a quarter century earlier.

What it did was to transform Wilson's idea of a world safe for democracy and capitalism into a strategy of containment, and then to sell it – as Wilson had never managed to do – to the American people. Stalin certainly helped, for although planning for the United Nations and the Bretton Woods system preceded the onset of the Cold War, it's not at all clear that the United States would have sustained these commitments to internationalism had there been no Soviet threat. There certainly would have been no Truman Doctrine, no Marshall Plan, and no North Atlantic Treaty Organization. And I suspect there would not have been, as well, what now looks to have been the single most important contribution the Americans made toward global democratization: that was a new and remarkably ambitious effort at democratic transplantation, aimed this time at two of the most persistently authoritarian cultures on the face of the earth, those of Germany and Japan.

Only Americans, I think, would have attempted something as rash as this. Only an innocence bordering on ignorance of the countries involved could have led them to consider it. Only authoritarian proconsuls like General Lucius Clay in Germany and General Douglas MacArthur in Japan would have bypassed a Washington bureaucracy more attuned to the punishment of defeated enemies than to their rehabilitation. Only the willingness to make distasteful compromises – to cooperate with recently hated adversaries – could have made the new policy work. And only the realization that a greater adversary was arising out of Eurasian heartland, and that the Germans and the Japanese, if not quickly integrated into the system of Western democratic states, could wind up as allies of the new enemy – only this, I think, could have provided a basis for justifying this new policy to the American people and to those other American allies who had themselves suffered at the hands of the Germans and the Japanese.<sup>9</sup>

Each of these improbabilities had to intersect with and reinforce the other in order to produce an effect we today take for granted: that these two formerly authoritarian states are now, and have long been, safe for democracy and capitalism. It was, however, another of Wellington's "nearest run things." The course of events could easily have proceeded otherwise. To see how, reset your time machine but now in the counter-factual mode that allows you to change a single variable, re-run a subsequent sequence, and see what difference this made.

Begin with the death of Franklin D. Roosevelt in April, 1945, but change just one thing: the new president, Harry S. Truman, decides to stick with and apply to both Germany and Japan the harshly punitive occupation policies laid out by the late president's influential Treasury Secretary, Henry Morgenthau, Jr., which FDR had at

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<sup>9</sup>The best discussion of the American democratisation of Germany and Japan is in Tony Smith, *America's Mission: The United States and the Worldwide Struggle for Democracy in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 146-76.

one point himself endorsed. The scenario then proceeds as follows. After the sacking of Generals Clay and MacArthur, the American occupation authorities in Germany and Japan dutifully follow Washington's orders. The Germans and the Japanese quickly come to resent the resulting repression, combined with starvation, and communists in both countries begin to gain support for their view that the right to eat is more important than the right to vote. The resistance they generate makes the occupation so difficult to administer that the new Republican majority in Congress resolves early in 1947 to "bring the boys home" and to "stop pouring money down foreign ratholes."<sup>10</sup>

Truman and his advisers belatedly try save the situation by devising various plans which they name for themselves, but when the Soviet blockade forces the Western powers out of Berlin early in 1948, American authority crumbles throughout West Germany and the spillover effects are felt in Japan as well. Coordinated coups bring both countries into the communist camp that summer, just on the eve of a Democratic National Convention which feels it has no choice but to replace Truman with the only American who seems to have a chance of cutting a deal with Stalin, the former vice president Henry A. Wallace.

Having run successfully on the platform "He'll keep us out of the Cold War," President Wallace follows the example of Neville Chamberlain ten years earlier and negotiates "peace in our time" with a Soviet Union that, now that its ally Mao Zedong has triumphed in China as well, dominates the entire Eurasian continent. George Orwell's book is of course suppressed, but still it's his vision, not Wilson's, that turns out to have been the wave of the future. And at the end of our counterfactual time machine sequence, which is of course the Yale tercentennial in 2001, a group of distinguished professors are lecturing knowledgeably on the theme: "Authoritarian Vistas."

Outrageous, you say? Off the wall? Well, no more so, I think, than what any American would have said at the beginning of the 1940s, if told what the Americans would actually have accomplished by the end of the 1940s. *That* scenario would have seemed, not just counter-factual, but fantastical.

## VI.

Those of you who are into chaos theory – or Tom Stoppard's theatrical renderings of it – will know about something about "butterfly effects": those tiny perturbations at the beginning of a process that can make an enormous difference at the end of it. The term originated in meteorology with the suggestion that a butterfly fluttering its wings over Beijing can, in theory at least, set off a hurricane over Bermuda: that's why weather forecasting is so difficult. It's since extended into the realms of physics, mathematics, paleontology, economics, and now even into politics with the very recently discovered Florida butterfly ballot.

What's implied in all of this is something historians have known all along but haven't always explained well: that under certain circumstances small events can set

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<sup>10</sup>Which is what the newly-elected British Labour government did in fact decide to do with respect to India and Palestine that same year.

in motion much larger ones; that the relationship between causes and consequences isn't always proportionate; that there are great turning points in the past, and that the points upon which they turn on can be exceedingly small. The 1945-47 period was just such a turning point, I think, for Wilson's vision of a world safe for democracy and capitalism. Until that moment, the cards had seemed stacked against it. Even victory in World War II had not reversed a trend that seemed more likely to lead to authoritarian vistas than to democratic ones. But after 1947, the authoritarian tide – if you will pardon this profusion of metaphors – began to recede. What it left behind was a slowly emerging democratic world.

For if two of the most authoritarian states in history were on the way to becoming democracies – and if they were recovering their economic strength as they did so – then that was as powerful a demonstration as can be imagined of the *practicality* as well as the principled character of Wilson's vision. The Soviet Union had nothing with which to counter it: all it could offer was an ideologically based promise that seemed increasingly at odds with practicality. It would take years – indeed decades – for the contrast so become so clear that it began to shape the Cold War's outcome; but in the end it did just that. The nuclear weapons and other instruments of war the super-powers piled up during that conflict did little to determine how it actually came out. But the distinction between a Wilsonian vision realized on one side and denied on the other turned out to be decisive.

Would it all have happened without the Cold War? I rather doubt it, for in the classic tradition of what free enterprise is supposed to do, it was the *competition* that forced the United States, in this critical instance, to do the right thing.

## VII.

What's the right thing to do today, though, in a very different world in which there's so little competition? In which democracy is no longer the exception but the norm? How can the United States use its influence to help ensure that the world of 2101 – the next logical stop on our time machine tour of Yale ceremonial occasions – remains at least as hospitable to democratic institutions as is the present one? Several things occur to me, which I should like to list in ascending order of their importance.

First, *admit our shortcomings*. The Cold War was a brutal time, and the United States committed its share of brutalities in trying to win it. Paradoxically, the further we got from Europe, which was always the main arena of Cold War competition, the less scrupulous we were about supporting democracy: too many people in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East and Southeast Asia suffered as a result. Even in Europe we did not always prefer the democratic alternative, as our record in Spain, Portugal, and Greece clearly demonstrates. Our enthusiasm for capitalism was always more consistent than our enthusiasm for democracy, despite our ideological commitment to the principle that the two went hand in hand.

The historian's equivalent of truth in advertising demands that we acknowledge this, even as we should try to understand the reasons for it. They involved chiefly a lingering pessimism about the climate for democratic transplants – a fear that these might not survive in places where the resentments generated by

poverty or injustice were too great. Some of this pessimism grew out of guilt over the extent to which the United States and its Western European allies had contributed to these conditions, whether through formal or informal imperialism. Some of it reflected a tendency to attribute to the Soviet Union and its allies a far greater capacity than they actually had to win friends and influence people in the Third World. Some of it resulted from a widespread habit within the U.S. government – understandable in a generation of leaders that had survived depression and war – of assuming the worst, even as one hoped for the best.

Three Americans, I think, should get particular credit for having reversed this long history of official pessimism about democratic prospects, although only one of them normally does. Jimmy Carter's achievement in making human rights the centrepiece of his foreign policy and mostly meaning it is justifiably well known. But I would also give credit to Henry Kissinger, who as he neared the end of his years in government, repudiated his own earlier policy of supporting white minority regimes in southern Africa; and to Ronald Reagan, who despite a dubious record in Central America had the imagination, with the Reagan Doctrine, to turn the table on the Soviets and begin demonstrating that it was they, not the Americans, who were more often the imperialists in a post-colonial world. What Carter, Kissinger, and Reagan were all moving toward – even if at different rates and under differing circumstances – was the view that the United States need not fear the choices the Third World, if freed from imperialism, would now make.

My second recommendation, after acknowledging our history, is that we *reacquire our humility*. Even Americans do not normally associate that quality with themselves, but if you go back and study carefully what everyone now acknowledges to have been our most creative period in our foreign policy – the one in which we were transplanting democracy to Germany and Japan, while seeking to revive it elsewhere in Europe – you'll find that we showed a remarkable sensitivity to interests and advice of others. There was no effort to transform the countries we occupied or supported into clients or even clones of ourselves. MacArthur presided, in Japan, over one of the few successful land redistribution projects in modern history. The Marshall Plan wound up reinforcing the European social welfare state. The movement for European economic integration, which we consistently supported, was intended to create competitors to ourselves. NATO was from the start a European initiative, and despite the disproportionate power we've always wielded within the alliance, it was the Europeans who largely shaped its evolution during the Cold War.

We exhibited this openness to the views of others, I think, for several reasons. One was that we often weren't sure what to do ourselves, and so needed all the help we could get. But there was also the sense, at least in Europe, that if we appeared too domineering, the Russians would only benefit from this. Their own arrogance and brutality in Eastern Europe, it was clear from the earliest days of the Cold War, was a liability for them. That made us all the more determined to treat our own allies with respect, to give them reasons for wanting to be within the American sphere of influence, and not to feel that they'd had it forced upon them. We allowed their interests to shape the disposition of our power. In short, we listened.

Since the Cold War ended, though, it seems to me that we've fallen into a different habit, which is that of instructing. This was one of Woodrow Wilson's less

attractive personal characteristics – perhaps growing out of his previous career as a professor -- and it seems now that in its otherwise quite justifiable rediscovery of Wilson, our foreign policy is embracing it too. The Clinton administration expected the world to be impressed by its repeated claims of American “indispensability,” even as it failed to define coherently the purposes for which we were indeed indispensable. The new Bush administration hasn’t done any better: its recent humiliation of South Korea for attempting to remove remaining remnants of the Cold War, together with its unnecessarily abrupt rejection of the Kyoto Protocol at just the moment the scientific evidence on global warming has become compelling, suggest a disregard for the opinions of others that’s quite at odds with how we waged – and won – the Cold War. These tendencies, if I may sound instructive myself, need correction.

My third suggestion would be to *acknowledge contingency*. If the history of democratisation during the 20<sup>th</sup> century suggests anything at all, it is that this was a contingent, not a determined, process: there was nothing inevitable about it. An improbable combination of circumstances allowed what in the long sweep of history will seem like a relatively small push by the Americans – the democratisation of Germany and Japan – to have very big effects. No theory of which I am aware could have predicted this sequence of events, and that ought to caution us as we assess the prospects for democratisation in the future.

It would be a great mistake, it seems to me, to assume that democracy grows automatically out of any one thing. To say that it depends solely upon support from the United States ignores the uniqueness of the situation in which that support was indeed critical during the early Cold War. To say that it results from economic integration is to ignore the fact that the world was about as integrated at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when there were no democracies at all, as it is now.<sup>11</sup> To say that it grows out of capitalism ignores the role capitalists have played – and not just in Nazi Germany – in supporting authoritarianism. To say that it grows out of allowing people the right to determine their own future neglects the fact that some people are determined to deny other people any future at all: does anyone really believe that democracy, if fully practiced by all sides in the Balkan crises of the 1990s, or by the Israelis and the Palestinians today, would fully benefit all sides? And to say that because democracy turned out to be the wave of the future during the 20<sup>th</sup> century doesn’t necessarily make it so for the 21<sup>st</sup>.

It’s also the case that combinations of causes can have contradictory as well as complimentary effects. We tend to assume the complementarity of Wilson’s great principles, economic integration and political self-determination, because they mostly were during the Cold War. But has not the post-Cold War era already exposed fault lines suggesting that these two tectonic processes are not in fact moving in the same direction? The backlash against globalization that has surfaced so conspicuously over the past couple of years at places like Seattle, Washington, Prague, and Davos, only reflects a basic reality that we should long ago have anticipated: it is that people do not always vote in the way that economists think.

My final suggestion, as we consider what we might do to sustain democracy in the face of these contradictions, is to *remember Isaiah Berlin*. It was my privilege to

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<sup>11</sup>For the arguments for and against this proposition, see Niall Ferguson, *The Cash Nexus: Money and Power in the Modern World, 1700-2000* (London: Allen Lane, 2001), pp. 309-12.

know the great man slightly when I was at Oxford eight years ago, and to witness at first hand his congeniality and conversational brilliance, his interest in everything and everybody, and his emphatic impatience with any effort to look at the world from any single point of view. He was, more than anyone else I've ever met or read about, a true *philosopher of democracy*. As befits a man who loved the distinction between foxes and hedgehogs, Sir Isaiah taught us many different things but also one big thing, and yet he avoided the contradiction this might seem to imply.

I have in mind his concept of the *incommensurability of values*: the idea that while we can and should pursue multiple goods, they are not all mutually compatible. Some will complement one another; some will contradict one another: we cannot, to the same extent and in all situations, have them all. The art of politics – certainly of democratic politics – is the art of balancing incommensurate goods, of making tough choices, of keeping the whole picture and not just part of it in mind, of taking an *ecological* view of our own existence.

For the word *ecology*, in this sense, implies the balance it takes to keep an organism healthy. We understand it well enough when it comes to our plants, our pets, our children, and ourselves: we know how easily there can be too much of any good thing, and how harmful the consequences can be. I'm not sure we know that yet, though, in a political world – to say nothing of an academic world – that so often encourages investments in single causes, even if in the name of democratic principles. For this is, as Berlin reminds us, fundamentally an anti-democratic procedure: “the search for perfection,” he writes, “does seem to me a recipe for bloodshed, no better even if it is demanded by the sincerest of idealists, the purest of heart.”<sup>12</sup>

This is, then, democracy's Achilles's heel: it's a disconnection of means from ends not all that different from the one at the top of the slippery slope that produced, at its bottom, the great anti-democratic movements of the century that has just ended. It's what ought to haunt us as we think about the century that's now beginning, and especially as we try to guess what may lie between us on this celebratory occasion for Yale University, and our descendants a hundred years from now upon the next one.

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<sup>12</sup> “The Pursuit of the Ideal,” in Isaiah Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays*, edited by Henry Hardy and Roger Hausheer (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), p. 15.