

# Democracy's Trojan Horse

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**J**UST before the new century began, Marc Plattner, co-editor of the influential *Journal of Democracy*, wrote of the brave new globalized world coming into existence:

A borderless world is unlikely to be a democratic one. For while the idea of 'world citizenship' may sound appealing in theory, it is very hard to imagine it working successfully in practice. Indeed, some aspects of globalization 'point to a long range danger to democracy.'

While Plattner is uneasy about these developments, other observers, such as Strobe Talbott, largely discount the risks. An entire industry of transnational agencies and non-governmental organizations is pushing forward changes designed either to deny or override the national sovereignty of democratic states against surprisingly muted or inchoate opposition. Taken together, these changes amount to a serious political and intellectual challenge to democratic sovereignty vested in the liberal democratic nation-state.

It is a distinctly new challenge. Until now, democrats have faced two major opponents: pre-democrats and anti-democrats. The pre-democrats, adherents of some form of *ancien régime* (of throne, altar, tribe or clan), have been mostly vanquished over the past several hundred years. Since 1917, three anti-democratic ideologies have presented an alternative vision to liberal democracy: Nazism/fascism, communism, and today militant Islam or Islamism.

The radical Islamist threat is both deadly and serious, and it could last for a considerable period of time. Islamists might gain powerful weapons and thereby cause much death and destruction. Nevertheless, it is in the highest degree unlikely that they will in the end conquer liberal democracy.

Yet, the twenty-first century could well turn out to be, not the democratic century, but the 'post-democratic' century—the century in which liberal democracy as we know it is slowly, almost imperceptibly, replaced by a new form of global governance.

The ideology and institutions already exist in embryonic form and are developing rapidly. The philosophical basis for global governance begins with the premise that all individuals on the planet possess human rights. International law is the paramount authority that determines those rights, while international agreements establish and expand new rights and norms. International institutions (for example, the UN, the International Criminal Court and the World Bank) monitor, adjudicate, negotiate, cajole and administer the international agreements and laws in varying degrees. International non-governmental organizations (NGOs) claim to represent 'global civil society', or the 'peoples' of the planet. And the NGOs work with international institutions and participate in international conferences helping develop the new norms for global governance. Moreover, global governance is not really 'international', but 'transnational' in the sense that it is not concerned strictly with relations between nations, but with political arrangements above and beyond nation-states. Indeed, it could also be described as 'post-international.'

The global governance regime is promoted and run by complementary and interlocking networks of transnational (mostly Western) elites, including international lawyers, international judges, NGO activists, UN and other international organization officials, global corporate leaders and some sympathetic officials and bureaucrats from nation-states. These transnational elites are, for the most

part, ideologically compatible. They could be described as 'transnational progressives' (many are part of the generation of 1968) supporting what they perceive as 'progressive' causes across national boundaries (that is, supporting the 'other', the oppressed, minorities and opposing the death penalty, unilateral military action by the United States, and so on). Denationalized corporate elites who are non-ideological, but seek economic advantage, often have a symbiotic relationship with the transnational progressives. Global governance is not to be confused with world government. Nation-states (both democratic and undemocratic) continue to exist, but their authority is increasingly circumscribed by the growing strength of the global institutions, laws, rules, networks and ideological norms noted above.

Unlike democratic sovereignty, global governance can provide no straightforward answers to the most important questions of political science (who governs? where does authority reside? how are rulers chosen?) In a democracy, authority resides in a self-constituted people ('government by consent of the governed'). These self-governing people choose their rulers through elections and can replace them if they are not responsive to the people. The people limit the power of rulers through a constitution and basic laws. Bad laws can be changed by elected national legislatures.

In theory, human rights and international law are the moral basis for the global governance regime, but both of these concepts are fluid, porous, and constantly 'evolving'. They are, at any given moment, what transnational elites tell us they are. (For example, at the present time, international agreements maintain that children have an 'absolute human right' to conduct any

correspondence with anyone in the world without interference from their parents, which, strictly interpreted, would gain children the right to communicate with paedophiles on the Internet.) NGOs participate in the writing of global treaties alongside democratic and non-democratic governments, but they are essentially pressure groups, elected by no-one and responsible only to themselves. Nor are the other elites, the international lawyers, judges, activists and officials who participate in the global governance system responsible or accountable to any self-governing 'people'. How can these rulers be replaced? How can 'the governed' repeal bad laws and regulations that their 'governors' have imposed upon them? Global governance provides no democratic answers to these questions.

Global governance is implicitly a grand ideological project (and a utopian and coercive one, with universal aspirations). It is post-democratic in the sense that it originates from but transcends democracy just as the 'postmodern' originates from but transcends modernity. Its success would mean that liberal democracy might very well be replaced with a new form of regime.

### **CHALLENGING DEMOCRACY**

What does the challenge of post-democracy mean philosophically for the advance of genuine democracy in the world, and practically for American global strategy? I suggest that ultimately the greatest challenge to liberal democracy in the twenty-first century will come from within. What I have described as 'post-democracy' is, unfortunately, a serious alternative regime to the liberal democratic nation-state and the principle of democratic sovereignty. Thus, history may not end with the ideological triumph of liberal democracy.

As noted, this alternative regime would consist of networks of overlapping transnational institutions, organizations, agreements, treaties, laws, regulations, and rules; run by transnational elites and informed by a

transnational progressive ideology. This ideology is an amorphous and eclectic mix of soft academic Marxism or Gramscian thinking, social democracy (minus its George Orwell–Tony Blair 'armed democracy' wing), multiculturalism, radical feminism, environmentalism, or whatever else constitutes the latest in progressive thought at any particular moment. That said, the public face of transnational progressivism is slick and PR-savvy. Its sophisticated advocates (for example, Human Rights Watch's Kenneth Roth or Amnesty International USA's William F. Schulz) work with corporate heads, foundation officials, American, EU and UN bureaucrats who provide the funding, and with whom they are locked in a symbiotic relationship.

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If this sounds incoherent, a good part of the strength of post-democracy lies in its incoherence. By disguising what and how political decisions are made, it renders them unstoppable and perhaps irreversible. As noted earlier, global governance provides no serious democratic means for the 'governed' to repeal decisions (that they may find repellent), but that their new 'governors' have, nevertheless, imposed upon them without their consent.

Another strength is that post-democracy has support from elites of the Right as well as the Left. It should not surprise us that the transnational project has been rhetorically (and sometimes financially) embraced by many multinational American-based corporations. It is perhaps understandable that transnational corporations should seek to emphasize that they are

global rather than national entities. Yet it was also rather unseemly for the corporate counsel of Motorola to denounce as 'nationalistic' Ralph Nader's suggestion that American-based corporations begin their stockholders' meeting with 'The Pledge of Allegiance' to the 'country that bred them' and 'defended them'.

Likewise, it was unseemly, when the late Carl Gerstaecker, Chairman and CEO of Dow, wrote several decades ago that he dreamed of establishing the world headquarters of this American chemical giant on the 'truly neutral ground' of an island 'beholden to no nation or society'. Of course, Dow, Motorola and a host of other corporations, whose executives have made foolish comments about their company's relationship to America are, indeed, 'beholden' to the American nation. Without American sovereignty, mores, culture, laws and military power, they would be neither prosperous nor protected. It should not surprise us that corporations that accept the progressive agenda at home (racial/gender preferences, multiculturalism, etc.) are willing partners of NGOs who promote this agenda abroad.

If present patterns of discourse continue, in the end, the transnational regime would claim to be the ultimate fulfilment of democracy. Democracy, it would be explained, has simply 'evolved', like 'human rights' and the 'new international law'. In some respects the European Union is the model of post-democratic governance. If there is one thing that both friends and foes of the European Union agree upon, it is that the EU has a 'democracy deficit'. Although power is, technically, supposed to reside with the member nation-states through the Council of the EU (that is composed of representatives from the nation-states) and the European Parliament (elected by citizens in the nation-states), in actuality a great deal of the authority is wielded by the unelected bureaucracy—the European Commission (EC) in Brussels. The EC has a monopoly on initiating legislation—▶

in essence, an advance veto. In contrast, the Council and Parliament— theoretically responsible to voters— can only withhold approval of policies already formulated by the Commission, something they rarely do in practice.

Many Continental European elites are already committed to slowly and steadily building some form of transnational post-democratic regime, that would—as its top priority—limit and constrict the democratic sovereignty of the United States. They would also like to limit the sovereignty of other democracies, particularly those allies of the United States that are outlier democratic nation-states, including Britain, Israel and Australia, who have, in different ways, stood aloof from the European continent's political style and modes of thought.

#### **WHAT IS TO BE DONE?**

But democracy can defeat post-democracy. The first step is the recognition and intellectual conceptualization of the post-democratic threat. To get a firm grip on the post-democratic problem we must think ideologically—even more ideologically than the neo-conservatives have to date. Ironically, the current neo-conservative critique is insufficiently ideological. It offers an incomplete dialectic that abruptly stops after democracy triumphs. Following Hegel (and Kojève and Fukuyama) the critique roughly posits that the dialectic (and thus serious ideological conflict) is completed with the victory of modern democracy.

Ironically, Mao was more perceptive in recognizing that, even after the revolution, the dialectic (that is, history, ideology) continues and that, therefore, 'there is always a right and always a left' and 'things always divide one into two'. Today, democracy begets post-democracy. Thus, we must say to our neo-conservative friends (paraphrasing the Trotsky-Burnham exchange of the late 1930s), 'you may not be interested in post-democracy, but post-democracy is interested in you'.

Fortunately, for practical policymakers the conceptual tools needed to

grasp the serious nature of the post-democratic threat to American principles and American interests are available. The intellectual spade-work identifying and conceptualizing this challenge has already been accomplished by specialists in international law, including John Bolton, Jeremy Rabkin, David Rivkin, Lee Casey, Robert Bork, Jack Goldsmith, John Yoo, Stephen Krasner, Curtis Bradley, Jed Rubenfeld, and Kenneth Anderson. Policymakers need to read, absorb, and build upon their work.

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rights' and 'democratic values' that are susceptible to post-democratic manipulation, but the principle of democratic sovereignty within the institution of the liberal democratic nation-state. Hence, the concept of democratic sovereignty, as a core American value, should be officially incorporated into the National Security Strategy of the United States and promoted by the State Department, the National Security Council and the other institutions of the President's foreign policy apparatus.

Post-democratic challenges to American democratic sovereignty should be clearly identified and resisted. NGOs that consistently act as if they are strategic opponents of the democratic sovereignty of the American nation should be treated as such.

They should not be recognized or supported at international conferences, not permitted to roam battlefields, and not given special briefings or access to US government officials.

In particular, these NGOs should not be given the legitimacy and credibility that comes from a certain status as quasi-allies of American democracy in human rights arguments in non-democratic and developing countries. Most importantly, the post-democratic NGOs and their allies in the self-designated 'international human rights movement' actually harm the cause of genuine human rights. They claim to speak for 'humanity', as other utopian elites once claimed to speak for the 'workers' or the 'people'. Yet, like previous utopian elites, they speak for a particular ideological movement. They purport to support the 'rule of law'. Yet, they denigrate the 'rule of law' as it is actually practised in functioning liberal democracies, while constantly re-inventing new utopian versions of 'law'.

As the United States expands its initiatives to foster democracy abroad, these post-democratic NGOs and 'human rights activists' should not be given federal funds and grants to promote what they will surely claim is 'democracy building', but is, in reality, their own narrow ideological agenda. This issue has direct practical consequences since President Bush has called for a major effort and increased funds to promote democracy and democratic institutions. It is crucial that this initiative and these funds are not co-opted and captured by post-democrats.

For the most part, European support for American policies comes from countries acting as nation-states (for example, Britain, Poland, Italy, Spain, Portugal and Denmark) in opposition to the policy of the European Union. If a 'common European foreign and defence policy' had existed, it would not have supported US action in Iraq. Prudence and principle dictate that US policy tilt toward the democratic nation-states of Europe and away from any further encouragement of the po-

litical (as opposed to the economic) integration of the European Union.

At the same time, the principle of democratic sovereignty means that the United States should not gratuitously oppose the domestic policy of democratic nation-states. For example, the recently announced French secular education policies (banning head scarves and religious symbols in schools) may not be consistent with our notions of religious pluralism, but it is consistent with French democratic and national traditions and it is being implemented within the context of the democratic nation-state. Our State Department should have remained silent on this issue, just as the French government should mind its own business on the US death penalty.

Likewise, friends of democracy on both the Right and Left should be cheered by Sweden's 'No' vote on the Euro, which concerned democratic politics much more than economics. The 'No' vote appears to have been a revolt of the Swedish people against their elites in order to protect their democratic right to maintain the Swedish social welfare state (*Folkhemmet*). We may not favour their policy preferences, but the Swedish vote constituted a victory for 'government by consent of the governed.'

The National Security Strategy rightly promotes free trade as an important foreign policy tool of the United States. It is important that both the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the North American Free Trade Association (NAFTA) remain instruments to liberalize trade among nations and not expand into areas properly left to democratic decision-making. As the American Enterprise Institute's Claude Barfield has warned, the WTO needs to ensure that its judicial bodies do not indulge in 'legislating new rights and obligations through judicial interpretation' that weaken democratic sovereignty and has recommended measures to 'rein in' the WTO's judges.

## AFFIRMING DEMOCRACY

In the end, an affirmation of democratic sovereignty should stand on

principle and morality, as well as interests. Democratic sovereignty is consistent with the morality and universal values of the American Founding. It is consistent with the idea of 'government by consent of the governed' in which that government is limited by a constitution, which is the ultimate source of democratic legitimacy. Surrendering, or 'ceding', or 'pooling' democratic sovereignty beyond the authority of the Constitution and the American people would be 'government without the consent of the people' and would be inconsistent with our democratic morality.

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what passes for the 'international community'. On the contrary, their agenda (on group rights, new definitions of 'human rights', limiting democratic sovereignty, abolishing the death penalty, *et al.*) is, for the most part, simply the views of 'progressive' transnational elites. These are very rarely the views of democratic majorities in democratic nations. Opinion polls suggest that the elites would have difficulty winning majority support for their position on the death penalty in, say, Britain, Australia, Italy, France or Sweden.

This is not to imply that raw majoritarianism within a nation-state is the ultimate moral position. But it is to suggest that the interpretation of what constitutes universal values should not be decided solely by international elites. It is also to suggest that

the definition of 'human rights' is too important to be left to human rights activists, just as the interpretation of 'international law' is too important to be left to international lawyers. Finally, democratic procedures within democratic nation-states are a more effective, more comprehensive, and above all, a more just way of deciding what are universal human values.

The next great ideological struggle for democracy will be against post-democracy. But democrats must recognize that they will be engaged in a two-front war. For even as they struggle violently against the anti-democrats of militant Islam, they will, at the same time, also have to fight peacefully, but fight nonetheless (through intellectual arguments and politics at home and abroad) against the post-democrats of the West. This situation of a 'two-front ideological conflict' is similar to the Cold War, in which serious anti-communists not only fought against the communists but, at the same time, had to engage in an ideological struggle with powerful anti-anti-communist elements among Western progressives, who considered their main adversaries to be Western anti-communist democrats, not the communists themselves, whom the progressive Left chose mostly to ignore.

For better or worse, the conflict between democracy and post-democracy will, in large part, be decided by Americans. In Clausewitzian terms, American opinion (elite and popular) is the 'centre of gravity', the crucial point on which all hinges in the battle between democrats and post-democrats. American foreign policy should stand forthrightly for the principle of democratic sovereignty within the liberal democratic nation-state. As Lincoln knew, democracy's destiny and America's destiny are intimately intertwined. And, we have been there before.

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References for this piece are available on request.*

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