

Democracy is not enough

Devin Talbott

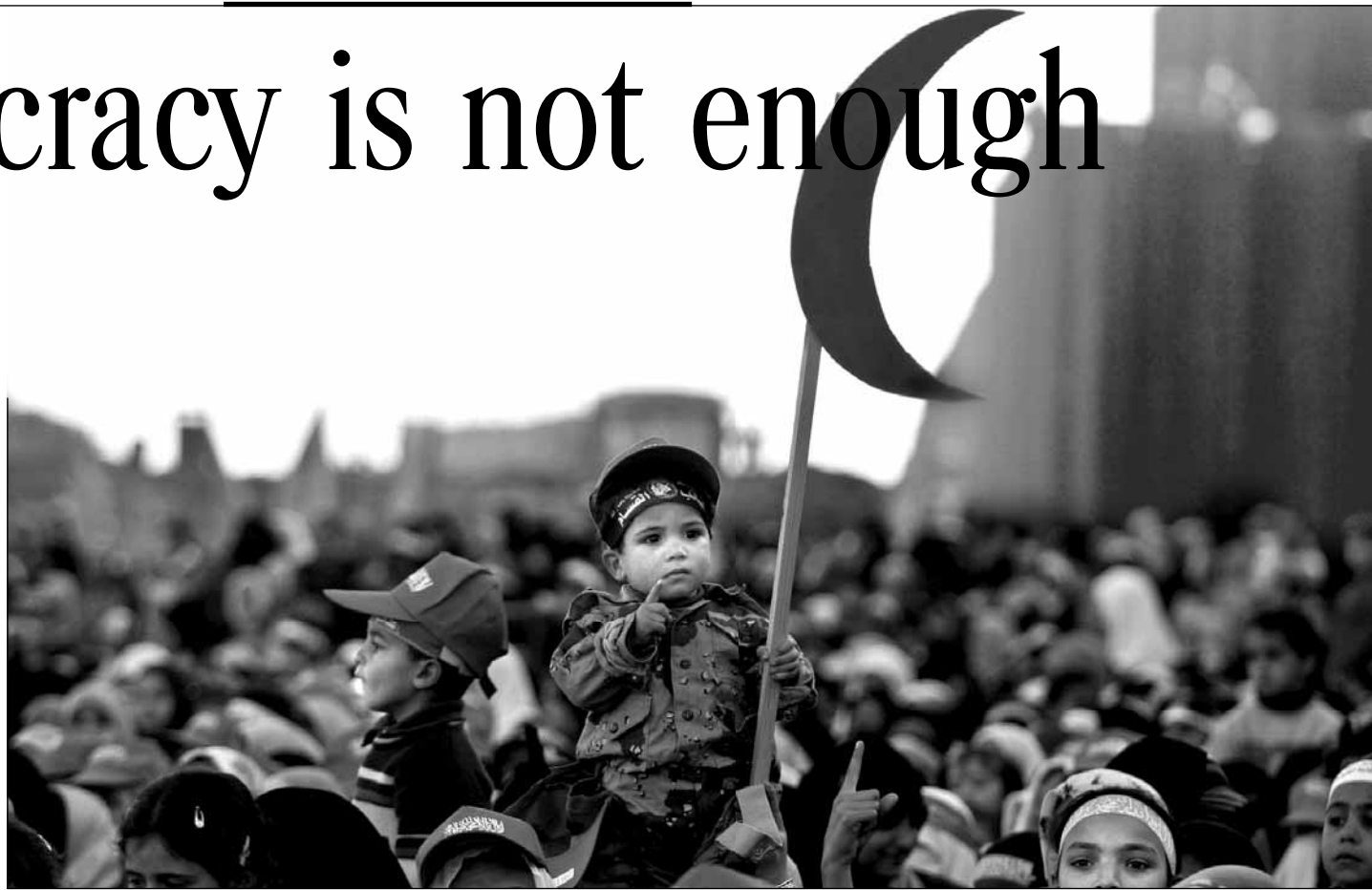
'Be careful what you wish for.' That was already a common refrain among critics of the Bush administration's policy of promoting democracy abroad before Hamas' electoral victory last month.

Hamas' victory in the Palestinian election has left a lot of people in Washington hedging and scrambling to rationalize the electoral triumph of a terrorist organization. Many contend the election was more a referendum on a corrupt Fatah party than an endorsement of the victor's violent practices. Perhaps the newly won administrative responsibility will force Hamas to moderate its militant ideology. Or, the international community can sever foreign aid and isolate the new regime.

Explaining the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad — a fire-breathing radical — as president of Iran last year has proved equally challenging. Yet Iran was hardly a model state before this most recent election. President Bush's designation of Iran as part of the "axis of evil" predated the hard-liner's victory by more than two years. The supposedly "centrist" candidate whom Ahmadinejad beat in last year's election — Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani — had a well-deserved reputation for corruption and during his own tenure as president, Iran sponsored terrorism, violent opposition to the Middle East peace process and a covert nuclear-weapons program. If Rafsanjani were president today, his government would have been a major headache on all counts.

The recent Iraqi elections saw the theocratic United Iraqi Alliance garner more support than the secularist candidates — much to the consternation of the U.S. government. The UIA coalition, closely aligned with Iranian clerics, includes the supporters of Moqtada al-Sadr, one of the earliest and most stubborn leaders of the insurgency. The electoral success of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Hezbollah in Lebanon provide further examples of organizations with violent pasts now enjoying political legitimacy through the ballot box.

Challenges abroad bearing democratic imprimaturs are hardly limited to the Middle



AP file photo

Palestinian supporters of Hamas take part in a rally for candidates before the recent elections.

East. Evo Morales recently won the Bolivian presidency promising to decriminalize coca production, which would mean more cocaine hitting American streets. Morales modeled his winning campaign on the Yankee-bashing populism of Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez. Chavez, a constant critic of the Bush administration and protégé of Fidel Castro, has won broad popular support among the poor while steadily clamping down on his political opposition and the press.

Further complicating this trend, anti-Americanism is often a crucial element — if not the winning issue — of many of these popular movements. Democratically elected governments from La Paz to Tehran are, at best, vocal critics of the West and, at their worst, clear threats to the U.S. and its allies.

So the Bush administration finds itself in the uncomfortable position of championing an ideal, the realization of which has consistently

produced more problems than it has solved.

Part of the problem is that the administration has oversold the spread of democracy, which it offers as not only its most ambitious, overarching foreign policy objective, but also as the long-term cure to the threat of terrorism.

The result is a divisive debate here in the U.S. Supporters of the president's focus on the process cite elections in volatile areas of the world as a vindication of the administration's policies. The other side points to the election results — the rise of belligerent, anti-American groups — as evidence of the dangers of exporting democracy.

Each side has a point, but by focusing on the immediate, both miss the potential for sustainable, long-term achievement. Democracy is a process, not an end-state. It is a means and one that can produce radically different ends.

This is a critical distinction. Democracy is not a panacea. It is one piece of a collection of

mechanisms that promote a free, peaceful society; a necessary piece to be sure, but hardly sufficient. A healthy, open democratic state requires more than just elections; it requires the rule of law, an independent press, a free market, minority rights, religious tolerance, and an active citizen sector. In most of the democratically sanctioned challenges we face abroad, many of these crucial elements are in short supply.

Understood as such, the focus of American efforts — military, diplomatic, developmental — can be better directed to promote not just the process itself, but the other essential elements required to produce a truly open, democratic state.

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Reforming Congress: A few suggestions

Tom Elliott

To address the flurry of embarrassments, Congress has instinctively leapt for its most trusty failsafe — legislation. In full "he made me do it!" mode, Democrats and Republicans have produced competing proposals to straddle K Street with new regulations.

But this will only worsen what's already wrong, as the immortal practice of influencing government will just be pushed further underground. To fix a problem, one must attack its causes, not symptoms. Jack Abramoff is a symptom of Congress; unwieldy congressional power is the cause.

Fixing things means stripping Congress of power — the power to micromanage what should remain private sector decision-making, the power to reward corporations or

groups of people with preferential tax treatment, the power to shield itself from competitive elections. Only by taking it all away will Congress be sufficiently unsexy and difficult to manipulate for nefarious self-promotion that corruption could potentially become slightly less pervasive.

The following are 10 such suggestions at reform:

1. Outlaw all earmarks, pork, etc. If a representative thinks that a bike path or a museum celebrating cowboy hats is of such importance that taxpayers from all 50 states must contribute, by all means let him pitch it on the floor.

2. Forfeit Congress' pay if the federal budget is not passed on schedule.

3. To return the federal government to its intended form as a bottom-up system, every proposed bill

must be initiated with individual citizens. Require 1,000 signatures before Congress is permitted to consider each bill. This will also ameliorate the onslaught of excessively patronizing politicians. If Americans want a smoking ban, we'll ask for one, thank you very much.

4. Every piece of legislation must be preceded with language explaining which part of the Constitution grants them the authority to execute this law. (Rep. John Shadegg, R-Ariz., sponsors such a bill.)

5. Before candidates for the House or Senate can be considered, they must pass a test demonstrating a rudimentary understanding of the Constitution.

6. Politicians will be limited to two press conferences and two media appearances per month. (Sorry Sen. Charles Schumer, D-N.Y. — but this has been a longtime coming.)

7. Just 70 years ago the Federal Register — the publication of all federal laws — amassed a little more than 2,000 pages. Today, it's nearly 80,000. Enough. Please.

From here on out, if a new bill is signed into law, Congress must find an equal-sized section of the Federal Register to remove. This should ensure that liberty is not further needlessly eroded.

8. Implement a flat tax. Remove every tax credit, deduction and write-off. If the tax code is inviolable and its purpose is simply to finance the government and nothing more, most lobbying groups will have little reason to exist. Also, enact a federal taxpayer bill of rights. If the government collects more than is required to finance its operations, the surplus will immediately be returned to taxpayers.

9. Outlaw corporate subsidies.

If a business can't survive on its own, it shouldn't. With one flat, reasonable, inviolable rate for corporations, most industry lobbying groups should be able to rest easy.

10. Repeal McCain-Feingold and every other campaign finance gimmick that proclaims itself to "fairness" but in reality serves no purpose other than as an incumbency protection racket. Outlawing gerrymandering would help, too.

With the fame-seekers out the picture, the actual running of the government — the mundane tinkering that ensures there's no overlap among agencies, inefficiencies, etc. — will be left to those who would otherwise find themselves debating ethanol subsidies on wonkish blogs.

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