

Moral Foreign Policy May Not Be Prudent Foreign Policy.
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We Americans love our democracy. For all of our faults, most of us live in a society governed by rule of law, a society where we can walk the streets of our towns in safety, and where we are equal under the law regardless of gender and race. We are governed.

We do have an underbelly, however. Some of our inner cities house people for whom this is not so. Despite this, our imperfect society is a work in progress, because we do try to make the system better and the system does ultimately work---for us.

We have bought into Winston Churchill's comment that we have the worst possible system, except for all the others. Therefore, we lean on all the other countries of the world, many of them autocracies, to smarten up and hold an election. We sneezed, and now Egypt has pneumonia. Liberal democracy is not yet a work in progress for them.

When it comes to America's foreign policy, we have conflicting modes of operating.

Do we promote our ideals or support long-term pragmatism? For example, we would like to promote a western style democracy in Saudi Arabia. But how can that happen in a fundamentalist Muslim kingdom? Were they to overturn their monarchy, what then would become of the multilateral cooperation between states that supports the world's economy? How would we (or they) protect the petroleum industry so essential to us all, and how satisfactory would the outcome be for them? Don't expect freedom

Violent revolutions never breed a liberal democracy. Even our own revolutionary beginnings gave us a democracy, but it did not become a liberal democracy until the slaves were emancipated and women given the vote. The Saudis are most unlikely to emancipate their chattel workers from around the world, nor their own women. The only thing a revolution would give them is anarchy and some violent score settling.

In our scorn for dictatorships, admittedly often unpleasant, we fail to respect the other aspect of such societies: their stability. We have forgotten that the first duty of a government is to govern. Governing (except for the ideologically based systems of Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot) provides rule of law, public safety, public services, and over time increasing modernization that in some cases morphs into participatory government.

It did so in Taiwan and South Korea. It was doing so in Iraq under the monster, Saddam, and before that, in Iran under the Pahlavis. These flawed countries were getting better. But premature elections in Iran and Iraq gave us the Islamic Republic in the first and a violent, illiberal democracy in the second. Iraq is in chaos and a widening civil war and is governed much worse than under Saddam Hussein. It may ultimately devolve into what political analysts feared most when we invaded: a breakup into its original three disparate parts.

Robert D. Kaplan, one of my favorite geopolitical experts, has recommended rereading Samuel P. Huntington's 1968 masterpiece, Political Order In Changing Societies

Huntington's first sentence was: "The most important political distinction among countries concerns not their form of government but their degree of government."

This has outraged the Washington political elites (idealists) for decades. Huntington says that strong democracies and strong dictatorships have more in common than strong democracies and weak democracies. We have forgotten this.

Throughout the Cold War, when we talked less about democracy (preferring the term "freedom"), we supported all the strong dictatorships outside of the Soviet sphere. Some of them, such as Taiwan and South Korea, transformed themselves into democracies after they had developed healthy economies and literate populations (middle classes). However, premature elections (Egypt, Afghanistan, Iraq) without a

healthy economy and institutions to support democracy can only lead to conflict and anarchy. We can add Libya to that list, and might be adding Syria as well.

Going all the way back to Plato's observations, political order comes before everything else. Popular democracy without political institutions such as division of powers, literate population, a flourishing economy, and society-wide experience with self-government, is not the road to a well-governed society.

680 words

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