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International Herald Tribune

PARIS, 8 December 2005

**SPREADING DEMOCRACY: A SHARED TRANSATLANTIC
GOAL OR A DANGEROUS APPLE OF DISCORD?**

Lecture in the International Seminar for Experts “The European Security and Defence Policy and the Transatlantic Relationship – How to Strike a New Balance?”, organised by the Cicero Foundation in the series *Great Debates*, Paris, 8 – 9 December 2005

Introduction

You ask whether the Bush administration’s program for spreading democracy will prove a cause for transatlantic discord. My answer is yes, in part, and in the short term, for superficial and transient reasons. It will reawaken the conflict of policy perceptions that have been alive since (or even before) the invasion of Iraq. In the long run it will produce something entirely different. Assuming that it is not abandoned by a Democratic administration, which I would think unlikely, or its early failures cause its more or less explicit abandonment, it risks to provoke a crisis as important as those we knew, to our sorrow, in the 20th century.

So let me explain this dramatic comment. The former Israeli government minister and onetime Soviet dissident Natan Sharansky is said to have made a great impression on George W. Bush in 2004 with his book claiming that international stability is possible only in conditions of international democracy. It was said to have inspired the president’s second-term espousal of a foreign policy of global liberation, and his declared conviction that only the achievement of this condition will guarantee America’s permanent safety.

The idea was taken up in a big way by groups already active mainly in the states part of the former Soviet Union. These run from the quasi-official Nato Endowment for Democracy with its Democratic and Republican-run components; Freedom House; a number of NGOs run or sponsored by the neo-conservative institutes and think-tanks in Washington; George Soros’s Open Society Institute (active in this field in the Balkans and Eastern Europe for many years and usually regarded with suspicion by the conservatives); and a number of other NGOs less well known or in some cases connected with ethnic or national exile groups going back to the 1940s.

The US Committee on NATO, headed by a former Lockheed executive, and before that Army career officer, Bruce Jackson, wants to sell airplanes to NATO but also wants to expand NATO into the ex-Soviet space and – it is alleged -- to organize the newer and more Atlanticist members into a bloc that will reduce or eliminate “old European” influence in the alliance, turning it more and more into an auxiliary to American military operations. Some of the members of these groups already claim

responsibility for the so-called “color revolutions” in Georgia and Ukraine (as well as the overthrow of Slobodan Milosevic in Serbia), and are active now in Belarus and Kyrgyzstan. To hear some of their enthusiastic members, Azerbaijan, Iran, Russia itself, China and Cuba will come next. And tomorrow the world!

The idea of creating the universal reign of democracy, or at least to create a “Democracy caucus” inside or outside of the UN to confront (and eventually overcome!) the non-democracies is a version of those romantic myths concerning human progress and man’s “natural” virtue and purpose that have been part of western cultural legacy since the Enlightenment. The United States, as the last offspring of the Enlightenment, despite the present administration’s discomfort with that inheritance, is the nation most susceptible to the myth of primal innocence. The administration, like most of the American policy class, it must be said, takes for granted that democracy is the political condition towards which mankind instinctively and necessarily progresses. They believed that removing Saddam Hussein and his apparatus of repression would permit democratic institutions naturally and spontaneously to spring up – although most of them have noticed this has not happened. The belief that a natural progression exists in history towards is a naïve version of the notion of innocence corrupted by civilization, an idea with Biblical as well as Enlightenment sources. It explains the popularity of Francis Fukuyama’s argument that with the triumph of liberalism, restoring our “natural” condition of virtue, history had come to an end.

Let me say something about the rationale for this policy. The Bush administration’s supporters have described the president’s freedom policy as a new version of Wilsonianism, inspired by the 28th president’s attempt, following the 1914-1918 war, to shape a new international order of permanent peace. The edifying ideals of the Wilsonian system have in general tended to disguise the basic unrealism of Wilsonian policy, as actually practiced. It is progressive and utopian in nature and was a failure when tried. In the conditions that prevailed in Europe at the end of the first world war, Wilsonianism not only failed, but in important respects worsened the international situation in much of Balkan, Central and Eastern Europe, creating problems that contributed to the coming of the second world war.

It may be feared that it will do the same thing today. The Bush administration likes to call its neo-Wilsonianism as “freedom on the march” and considers it a triumphant riposte to the terrorist attacks of 2001. The Yale scholar John Lewis Gaddis has written that the attacks shattered “the boundaries between everyday existence and a dangerous world, [as well as] the assumption of safety that had long since become part of what it meant to be an American.” He compared the event with the British attack on Washington and burning of the Capitol in 1814. That event had confirmed the policy of isolating the nation from Europe that had been recommended by the founding fathers.¹

¹ Gaddis went on, less convincingly, to compare George W. Bush’s invasion of Iraq in 2003 with the policy followed by successive American presidents after 1814, characterized by Gaddis as “preemption, unilateralism, and hegemony.” This meant annexation of Spanish Florida, expulsion of the Seminole Indians across the Mississippi, annexation of Texas, war with Mexico, and seizure of California and the “derelict territories” of present-day Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, Utah and Nevada. Surely all of this was very distantly linked, if at all, with the War of 1812 with Britain. The more convincing comparison would be invading Iraq in 2003 because of the Trade Towers and Pentagon attacks, which had nothing to do with Iraq. But perhaps that was the point Gaddis inadvertently was making.

Today's events in Iraq do not bear the weight of the historical analogy, but Gaddis was certainly right in what he said about the shock felt in the United States in 2001, pointing towards another explanation, drawn from history, of where the United States is today and why its proclaimed aim to transform the politics of the Middle East is a false solution. This is the historical American commitment, and emotional and moral commitment, to isolation from Europe, always conceived as a source of danger and cultural and moral corruption.

Even before the world war, industrial, economic and communications developments had undermined the policy of isolation from Europe. Wilson's proposals provided a response to that, in that his commitment of the United States to the war against the Central Powers was defined as a struggle without quarter to make the world "safe for democracy," which redefined the war in a manner that gave it a millenarian quality, to make a permanent change in the nature of international society.

It was now a struggle to perpetuate American security by recreating American institutions on a world scale, which would exclude or outlaw the competition and conflicts of international society as it existed by placing them within a new structure of international law and the parliamentary institutions of a new international federalism. If the United States could no longer remain secure behind its oceans, the world would have to be changed so it no longer threatened the United States. Wilson said it himself: his aim was to make the world safe for democracy - American democracy. This was the real if unavowed (or unarticulated) significance of Wilson's program. However as history has subsequently indicated, this would not have worked even if the United States had become a member of the League of Nations.

Wilson's second great principle of reform contributed to making that impossible. This was his conviction that a peace settlement based on the principle of universal national self-determination would end the destructive role nationalism had played in Europe's past. He expected that it would create satisfied nations, to become members of Tennyson's "Parliament of Man, the Federation of the World," where the "war-drum throbbed no longer and the battle-flags were furled."

His views on national self-determination unfortunately had been arrived at in extensive ignorance of the actual ethnic, religious, historical and territorial complexities of the nations and national communities formerly part of the defeated Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires. This reflected Wilson's very American determination not to be confused by reality or bound by the past (not to be "reality-bound," as another White House was to say nine decades later). He refused to have the history of the Congress of Vienna studied for the lessons it might offer the peacemakers of 1919. He thought good will and a fresh look at the problems by "dispassionate scientists," and by Americans distant from the emotions and obscurantisms of Europe, could resolve it all. (As early as 1912 he had said to a journalist that he believed God had chosen the United States "to show the way to the nations of the world how they shall walk in the paths of liberty." [LA]44)

Reality, however, had its way, and the effort to apply the principle of national self-determination left controversial national claims unsatisfied, with large numbers of ethnic nationals on the wrong side of new frontiers (which was inevitable, without large-scale population transfers). Many spent the following years agitating to recover "lost" territories or resisting the authority of "artificial" new states, contributing to the

rise of ethnic hatreds and proto-fascist movements, inviting Nazi and Italian Fascist exploitation, hastening the arrival of a second world war, ostensibly caused by German claims on the ethnic German borderlands of Czechoslovak Bohemia and on formerly Prussian territories in post-1918 Poland, including the great Hanseatic port of Gdansk.

Wilson's influence was nonetheless vast. It caused Franklin Roosevelt to put the State Department to work in 1941 to draft a new League, the UN, to succeed where the League of Nations had failed, this time with the leading role of the United States made explicit in the Security Council, including what, by 1945, were five dependent allies of the United States (Kuomintang China one of them; and of course in the later months of the war Franklin Roosevelt had displayed an unwise confidence that he would be able to "handle" Stalin and a war-depleted Russia).

George W. Bush insists in speech after speech that true safety for the United States will only come when the war against terror is won and international society has been freed to become universally democratic. The corollary of this, which the president clearly does not grasp, is that the United States will never find safety. His is counsel of despair. It is also a counsel of suppressed or sublimated fear of the world outside the United States. The president delivered what was supposed to have been a major address on terrorism and Iraq on October 6, in which he said that the terrorists "believe that controlling one country [Iraq] will rally the Moslem masses, enabling them to overthrow all moderate government in the region and establish a radical Islamic empire that spans from Spain to Indonesia."

Of course this is what some terrorists believe. But does the president? What does it matter that some religion-intoxicated Islamic jihadists believe this fantasy? What they actually are doing is trying to radicalize a backward and largely powerless (and predominantly Arab) society in order to purify it. As the Iranian and Taliban experiences have already shown, there is much internal resistance even to this. And most of the world's Moslem population is non-Arab and lives in Asia and Africa. The fantasy of the jihadists is a very old one, common to backward or oppressed societies: it is to recover a glorious and mythologized past, and smite the oppressor in revenge. It fails because it is utopia. The great Islamic Caliphate of a thousand years ago is gone for good. The Bush administration's credulity with respect to the actual threat of an imaginary new grand Caliphate to the United States of America borders on hysteria.

The appeal to Washington of the new Wilsonianism is the same as that of the old. It provides a facile and sentimentally attractive replacement for the old isolationism. The yearning to return to that security remains, a powerful underground force at work in the American relationship with the world. Its frustration is an explanation for the morbid fear that has been so pervasive a factor in the public and private American reactions to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and all that has followed.

The invasion of Iraq, and what has followed, have revealed the poverty of the thought about international society, and the relation among nations, that has dominated official and unofficial policy discussion in the ideologized Washington of the Bush administration. This is a phenomenon quite apart from the distortions and falsehoods that were deliberately introduced into the Iraq debate, if we are to believe the

testimony of Brent Scowcroft, from the senior George Bush's administration, and Colonel Lawrence Wilkerson from Colin Powell's State Department, confirming that decisions were taken outside normal channels by an alliance of neo-conservative "transformationalists" with the nationalists of the "Cheney-Rumsfeld axis," committed to maximizing American power in the strategic Middle East for their own motives, yet to be fully clarified.²

The "transformationalists," ere also subject to an extraordinarily un-American influence, if I may say so. They have been under the influence of a residue of Trotskyist belief (traceable to the neo-conservatives, many of whose actual or intellectual progenitors were Trotskyists) that history awaits a foreordained and positive conclusion. They also assume the political relevance of Schumpeter's argument concerning "creative destruction" in the development of capitalism, drawing from it the mistaken lesson that to destroy is indispensable to creation, since history is in permanent dialectical development: destruction in the Middle East thus should mean freedom.

In fact, through its determined support for the deregulation and globalization of the international economy, the United States has already made itself the most powerful force of international political, economic, social and cultural destabilization the world has ever known. The ravages are far greater than those of imperialism and colonialism. No one seems to notice. The few who have tried to point this out have been drowned out by official and institutional acclaim for the process Marx and Engles described, with relish, as

In 1990, Michael Camdessus, a former director of the International Monetary Fund, told the Paris newspaper Liberation that "we did not see that dismantling Communism meant the dismantling of the state," thereby causing the former Soviet Union to dissolve into quasi-anarchy and crime. The identical illusion existed with respect to market capitalism. Alan Greenspan in 1997 told an audience at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington that he ("we," he actually said) had assumed that the collapse of Communism in Russia would "automatically establish a free-market entrepreneurial system." "Much of what we took for granted in our free market system," he said, "and assumed to be human nature was not nature at all but culture." What human nature in fact produced in Russia was robber capitalism and pillage of the national economy. It had the same result in an Iraq stripped of government, ruling party, and army. One would think one might have learned from this.

In my opinion, this vast new undertaking for spreading democracy will be an apple of transatlantic discord, first of all because it is certain to provoke an aggressive Russian reaction, which already has begun. Vladimir Putin has concluded that there is no reason why the activity of American-financed groups intent on overthrowing his government should continue to be tolerated. It is surprising that it has been tolerated this long.

² Notably the University of Chicago philosopher Leo Strauss, for whom the superior person, capable of seeing beyond the parochial concerns of ordinary citizens, is authorized to take actions the citizenry might not understand or approve, and the German legal scholar Carl Schmitt, who in the 1930s taught the primacy of state over society and the right of certain nations to unchecked hegemonic power. The eminent Harvard political Stanley Hoffmann also has noted the influence of the views on power put forward "by certain Italian fascist theoreticians" of the 1930s...."

On the other hand, I have to say that the neo-Wilsonian program may collapse because of its own inherent faults -- seems to me condemned to failure, for reasons already apparent in Iraq, and in Ukraine and Georgia as well, where new pro-American governments already are in great difficulties. Thus far, Power continues to be held by clan alliances, elections are manipulated, if more subtly than before, state money continues to flow to those clans, the activists who continue to promote the democratic practices they have learned from foreign instructors often find themselves brushed aside – or to risk a worse fate.

This could have been (or was) predicted. The reason is that democracy is not the natural condition of men and women. It is a produced of values learned from historical experience or philosophical speculation. It is difficult to achieve and hard to maintain. It depends on a series of developments in civil society. These include general acceptance in the society of the principle of majority government and alternance, and that political differences must be settled or accommodated non-lethally.

It means agreement that civil law must prevail in disputes involving even the powerful, that the distinction between public and private property must be defended, and that speech and the press must be free. This is a culture, ordinarily the consequence of historical experience and education, not a political program that can be learned from abroad.

Near the end of his long life, the American diplomat and historian George Kennan wrote: “To have real self-government, a people must understand what that means, want it, and be willing to sacrifice for it.” He said that there always will only be a few democracies, adding with stony realism that others must be left “to be governed or misgoverned as habit or tradition may dictate, asking of their governing cliques only that they observe, in their bilateral relations with us and with the remainder the world community, the minimum standards of civilized diplomatic intercourse.”

The second president of the United States, John Adams, wrote: “there never was a democracy that did not commit suicide.” That judgement obviously remains open concerning today’s democracies, and not just Ukraine and Georgia. American democracy could itself commit suicide. The belief in inherent human democracy, and its inevitable arrival, that something new and illusory, as any student of history might suggest. It results from the naïve confidence in automatic human progress that came out of the Enlightenment and inspired the French and American Revolutions. Montesquieu and Hegel, even in the 18th and 19th centuries, judged democracy a system of the past, that had proven inherently too unstable to provide good government.

Only the direct (or indirect) intellectual descendants of the romantic political and social theorist Jean-Jacques Rousseau still believe that man in his state of nature is virtuous and altruistic, a natural democrat. Unfortunately those children of Rousseau include most of the most important and powerful people in Washington today, from the Bush White House and the neo-conservative think-tanks to their Democratic Party counterparts, including the liberal intelligentsia of American (and other) universities. No doubt they would be greatly surprised by this assertion. But I fear that it is true.

Finally, the pessimistic alternative. The democracy project's failure may prove a very costly failure, since it begins in deliberate destabilization of existing political structures. It believes that democracy will follow, but what really will follow risks being chaotic conflict and civil disorder. The intervention in Iraq was the first step in the freedom program. It destroyed a state and destabilized a region. Iraq was to have been the paradigm of democratic transformation. I fear that it could prove the prototype of the chaos the policy actually will produce.

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