

Review - US Foreign Policy and Democracy Promotion

Written by Alessandro Badella

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ALESSANDRO BADELLA, MAY 26 2015

US Foreign Policy and Democracy Promotion: From Theodore Roosevelt to Barack Obama

Edited By: Michael Cox, Timothy J. Lynch and Nicolas Bouchet

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Academic literature in International Relations has been looking with growing enthusiasm at democracy promotion as a research field. While in the past, as the editors lament, “democracy was never, ever, [considered] a major American foreign policy aim” (1), by the end of the Cold War, due to the unipolar world system and growing Western investment in ‘democratic aids’ in non-democratic countries, democracy promotion has become an important component of US (and Western) foreign policy. Along with other relevant works on democracy promotion in US foreign policy history (above all see Smith 2012), *US Foreign Policy and Democracy Promotion* seeks to describe how the ‘democratic discourse’ entered and is entering US action abroad. From Theodore Roosevelt’s “national mission” (40-42) to Wilson’s commitment in Europe and Latin America (53-63), from F.D. Roosevelt’s “Four Freedoms” (76-78) to Carter’s “age of limits” (121-124), from Clinton’s “democratic enlargement” (164-170) to Obama’s “stepping back” and “stepping up” (198-204), democracy promotion has been always vividly present in US foreign policy. As the editors recall, “trying to understand American foreign policy through the twentieth century without reference to American democracy [is] almost impossible” (1-2). This is exactly what T. Smith points out in his wide-ranging first chapter (13-36): liberal internationalism, or foreign intervention to pursue liberal goals, is part of US foreign policy tradition and, even if re-interpreted or scaled down, has never been abandoned.

While pursuing the certainly difficult task of giving an overview of US democracy promotion, this book is divided into different sections that cover different American presidencies, from T. Roosevelt to B. Obama (even if some are missing: D. Eisenhower, R. Nixon and George H.W. Bush). Each chapter tries to reflect on the divide between the presidential theoretical and ‘paradigmatic’ commitment to democracy promotion, according to the president’s embracement of one or another foreign policy doctrine, and their score (in practical terms) in democracy promotion worldwide. The divide between the presidential rhetoric on democracy promotion and its practical relevance in US foreign policy has covered the entirety of American history. For example, if we look at Carter’s years (121-137), Carter’s commitment to a more ethical foreign policy, focused on restoring US international prestige after the intervention in Vietnam through supporting the respect of human rights, seemed to be evident, but he was forced to underplay this approach in order to cope with international backlash against US interests (such as the revolutions in Nicaragua and Iran). Even more recently, as Lynch noted (178-193), George W. Bush with his renewed emphasis on the external democratic ‘enforcement’, faced the need to preserve US relations with non-democratic countries that are vital to US global and regional interests. From a general perspective, every American president “face[s] difficult choices when [he] comes to balancing American core interests with its underlying values” (4).

The historical outlook presented in *US Foreign Policy and Democracy Promotion* seems to avoid any particular ‘paradigmatic’ approach in the study of this IR field (for a literature review on the relations between the study of democracy promotion and the major IR theories, see Wolff & Wurm 2011). As the editors admit, they do not intend to concern the reader with “too much theory” (4). However, with a more closed look, the structure of the book clearly reveals the author’s attraction for the “analytic eclecticism” (Sil & Katzenstein 2010: 19-22; Kurki 2008: 285), which has also been recently used by democracy promotion scholars. In particular, what is relevant here is the fact that, as the authors show, national interest and specific components of US foreign policy have always had the power to

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influence (in one direction or another) the role and the application of the 'democratic discourse' in American foreign policy. This is what some senior scholars have called "conflicting objectives" in democracy promotion (Wolff et al. 2013; Wolff & Spanger 2013; Grimm & Leininger 2012). This book is built around the observation of the gap between presidential perception of democracy in IR and the effective implementation of US democratic foreign policy, or the "norms versus interests" dilemma (Schewe & Wolff 2013), which recalls a "semi-realist approach" (Carothers 1999: 16), as decision-making in democracy promotion suffers from the influence of economic or strategic interests, which can prevail over moral commitments.

Obviously, when using this 'eclectic' perspective, presenting a comprehensive and exhaustive analysis of the causes beyond the decision on how, when and why promoting democracy in one or another circumstance or case, is a difficult task. Authors have tried to present some relevant case studies, using US relations with Latin American regimes, China or the Soviet Union as 'workshops' to explain the shift and criticality in US democracy promotion worldwide. Some other cases are briefly mentioned, as this book is not intended to be a case study. However, *US Foreign Policy and Democracy Promotion* has the force to help the reader at least in two ways. Firstly, this work is a good and complete introduction to the history and evolution of US democracy promotion worldwide, while showing that "the United States will forever be compelled to 'promote' its values, sometimes enthusiastically, sometimes not" (11). Secondly, for democracy promotion scholars and experts, this book provides an interesting overview on how different US presidents have interpreted the relations between US external action and democratic (or liberal) values, and it is a ready-to-use handbook for approaching the study of US democracy promotion or its particular application in certain contexts and areas of the world.

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