

REFLECTIONS FROM THE EDITOR

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In this issue of *Reflections*, several authors tell of their experiences in other countries, reminding us of the global implications of our professional work. One aspect of our relations with countries across the globe has emerged over the past few months -- the desire to spread democracy to areas of the globe that currently do not enjoy it. The idea of democracy is a protean one. Most commonly it refers to the way leaders are determined, as in democratic voting over the past few months in the United States, Afghanistan and Iraq. In the Middle East, democracy has become inextricably linked to the interests of the United States, and has taken on a suspicious cast that few of us in this country can understand. Our view of democracy as the highest achievement of a political order is grounded in our own story about the establishment of democratic institutions in this country. The colonists rebelled against a tyrannical English government whose representatives attempted to deprive us of our natural right to determine our own destiny. And so we went to war. According to this, our founding narrative, democracy is the product of heroic sacrifice and must be maintained with the utmost vigilance.

Currently we are embarked on a different mission: democracy must be exported, sometimes after military campaigns, to places where people have not had the chance to enjoy the natural rights to a voice in their own governance. Those who doubt the possibility of armed struggle leading to democracy should think of our own Revolutionary War. It is surprising that supporters of current policies in Iraq have not reminded us of this more often.

Yet our historical narrative is limited in its resonance for current and contemplated

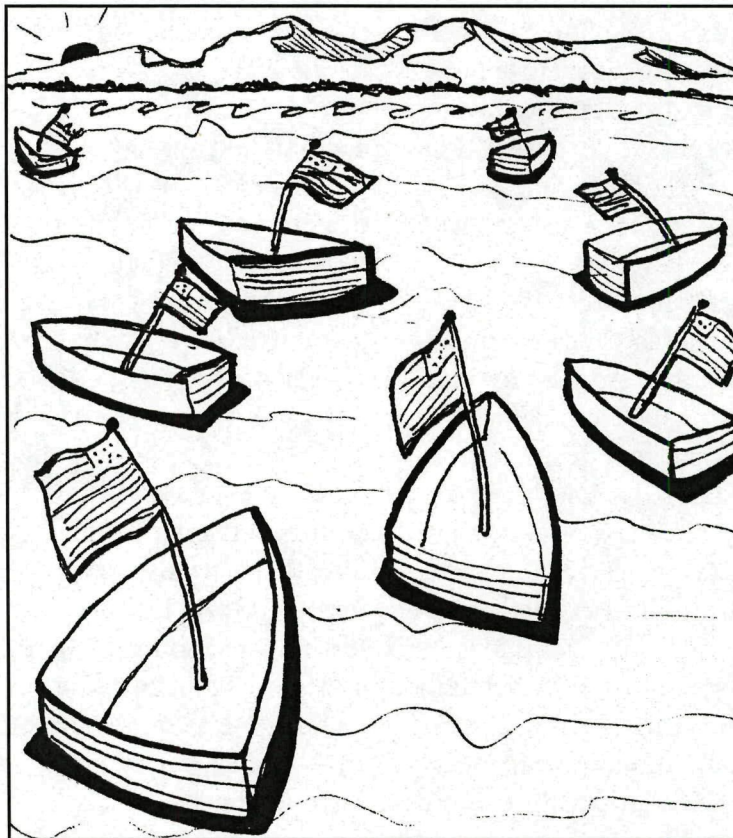
actions taken to promote democracy in the Middle East. It seems paradoxical to argue that it must be achieved for a country through outside military intervention. Voting at the behest of the United States, after being attacked by the United States, may indeed be, as the current administration maintains, a triumph of democracy over oppression. We must each decide as we will about the truth of that assertion. But the notion that other countries in the Middle East will inevitably enjoy the benefits of democracy as a result of our actions, as this administration further maintains, seems to borrow from a public health model, as though the democratic process is so compelling as to somehow be contagious. Reformers in the Middle East have expressed alarm that democracy has become "tarnished if seen as a euphemism for meddling by Americans or others whose backgrounds, values or religious beliefs clash with those of the region."¹ In spite of current hopes that the model of Iraq will become irresistible across countries in the Middle East, from "Morocco to Jordan to Bahrain," we should be very careful not to connect such advances with U.S. power; this linkage can only backfire and lead to more violence.

This unfolding narrative of the United States mission in the Middle East harkens back to earlier times, when our foreign policy was linked to the spreading of democracy to various parts of the globe. In these instances, the needs of capitalism and the glories of democracy were inevitably coupled. Woodrow Wilson wanted to export American ideals and American products to Latin America, as did McKinley to Cuba and the Philippines. The language of mission has not changed since the 19th century, when our political leaders pointed to the differences between the free institutions of the United

States and the tyrannical ones of Europe. The belief that the United States has a mission to bring democracy to other parts of the world is an old one; it resurfaces periodically and consistently in our foreign policy. It speaks to a deep yearning to be a unique and special people. Its fits with our story about ourselves as akin to a city on a hill, a beacon to the rest of the world. As a rallying cry, it is unsurpassed. Perhaps now is the time to question whether some of the discordant themes drawn from our collective narrative about democracy call for a different ending.

Endnotes

¹ Tyler Marshall and Sonnie Efron. "Rhetoric of Reform Discomfits the Mideast," *Los Angeles Times*, February 6, 2005, pA13.



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