

**When Does US Democracy Promotion Work?
Evidence from Burma**

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I. Introduction¹

When the new administration enters office in January 2017, it will be forced to reassess America's approach to democracy promotion. Support for advancing democracy abroad has declined over the last sixteen years. "Few politicians on either the left or right appear committed to supporting democratic reform as a central component of American policy," wrote scholars Shadi Hamid and Steven Brooke in 2010. "Who can really blame them, given that democracy promotion has become toxic to a public with little patience left for various 'missions' abroad?" (Hamid and Brooke 2010). Little has changed in the intervening six years. President Bush's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, which linked democratization with intervention, tainted democracy promotion for many at home and around the world. President Obama, sensing the anti-interventionist mood of the American public, has downplayed the US commitment to democracy both in his rhetoric and strategic priorities. In the White House's 2015 National Security Strategy document, "support emerging democracies" ranked below fifteen other strategic goals (The White House 2015). The next president must decide how to utilize a large and traditionally well-funded democracy-promotion complex of federal bureaus, development consultants, and democracy NGOs.

Simply abandoning democracy promotion is unlikely. The US has an at times inconsistent but long-standing commitment to advancing democracy abroad, which has both normative and strategic elements. There is a broad consensus among US policymakers, both Republican and Democratic, that global democracy enhances peace, stability, and economic prosperity.² Yet the wisdom of American democracy promotion has been stridently challenged

¹ This paper benefited from the comments and suggestions from numerous experts on Burma and democracy promotion as well as the work of a research assistant based on Yangon, Burma.

² See, for example, Condoleezza Rice, "The Promise of Democratic Peace," *The Washington Post*, December 11, 2005. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/12/09/AR2005120901711.html>

over the last decade.³ The flailing and violent partial democracies in Iraq and Afghanistan have compelled many to question the utility of promoting democracy by intervention but also by less intrusive means such as sanctions or democracy aid. The persistent weakness of liberal democracy in the Middle East has led to myriad analyses on the compatibility of Islam and secular pluralism,⁴ shaking Washington's traditional faith in democratic universalism. However, this debate's narrow focus on why democracy has so far struggled in the Middle East obscures a more important question for American policy: when and how does democracy promotion actually work? In this paper, I use a case study of Burma's recent liberalization process to show how US democracy promotion, specifically sanctions and democracy aid, can contribute to democratic transitions.

The paper will proceed as follows. First, I briefly outline the rhetoric and policy of American democracy promotion across its history. Second, I provide a theoretical framework for understanding approaches to democracy promotion (intervention, sanctions and conditionality, and democracy aid) and assess the current academic literature on their respective effectiveness. Third, I analyze the effect of American democracy-promotion policy on Burma's recent political transition, drawing on interviews with Burmese democracy activists, academics, and politicians. Finally, using evidence from Burma, I build on existing arguments about the best approaches to making democracy promotion work.

II. The United States and Democracy Promotion

³ Thomas Carothers, "Is the United States Giving Up on supporting Democracy Abroad?" *Foreign Policy*, September 8, 2016.

⁴See, for example, (Wright 2012; Hamid 2016)

Democracy promotion has a long and deeply ingrained history both in American foreign policy and political culture.⁵ From the Spanish-American War to the 2003 invasion of Iraq and beyond, the advancement of liberty has been a key driver and justification of US action abroad. But the origins of America's democratic ideals are found in the writing of early colonists, who saw their pilgrimage to North America as part a quest for freedom, particularly religious autonomy. At the United States' founding, political and religious liberty constituted the core of the America's democratic identity. While early administrations lacked the military capability to export the American governing model, the rapid expansion of US power throughout the 19th and 20th centuries gave presidents new international capabilities. From President William McKinley (in office 1897-1901) onward, American leaders have routinely employed the language of democracy promotion to justify foreign policy decisions. However, American rhetoric of democracy promotion has often disguised contradictory policies.

America's Emerging Moralism, 1789-1945

John Winthrop's famous description of America in 1630 as "a city upon a hill" watched by the world is a key rhetorical foundation of American exceptionalism. The early European settlers saw themselves and the "New World" they inhabited as a divinely ordained example of freedom to the rest of the world. Over a century later, President George Washington echoed Winthrop's sentiment in a draft of his first inaugural address in 1789:

I rejoice in a belief that intellectual light will spring up in the dark corners of the earth;
that freedom of inquiry will produce liberality of conduct; that mankind will reverse the

⁵ For a detailed overview of America's history promoting democracy, see *US Foreign Policy and Democracy Promotion* (Cox, Lynch, and Bouchet 2013), from which portions of this section are drawn.

absurd position the many were made for the few; and that they will not continue slaves in one part of the globe, when they can become freemen in another.⁶ (Chernow 2011)

However, Washington's most enduring influence on American foreign policy is his Farewell Address, which warned against "permanent alliance with any portion of the foreign world." Washington's normative belief for global freedom was tempered by America's fragile political experiment with self-rule, which needed time to incubate. A decade later, President Thomas Jefferson similarly called for "honest friendship with all nations—entangling alliances with none" in his 1801 inaugural address. Over the next century of American foreign relations, the US expanded its territory but largely adhered to Washington and Jefferson's logic of strategic isolation.

America's shift to globalism—and ultimately its embrace of democracy promotion—began at the turn of the 20th century. In 1898, President William McKinley led the United States into war against Spain in Cuba and its other colonial holdings in the Pacific. After a sweeping victory, McKinley explained the virtues of American action on the campaign trail: "my fellow-citizens, wherever our flag floats, wherever we raise that standard of liberty, it is always for the sake of humanity and the advancement of civilization" (Brewer 2011, 27). McKinley, like many of his successors, distinguished America's "civilizing" mission from European countries, which sought land and power in contrast to American benevolence. This distinction was often not obvious in practice,⁷ but nevertheless fed a national narrative of American altruism.

The presidency of Woodrow Wilson marked an important shift to the explicit language democracy promotion abroad. Wilson, considered by many to be the intellectual founder of

⁶ Washington sent the draft of his first inaugural address to James Madison, who rewrote the speech, eliminating this line (Chernow 2011).

⁷ The US violently suppressed Philippine resistance to its occupation after the Treaty of Paris transferred Spanish control to the US.

American liberal internationalism, argued the US was entering World War I to make the world “safe for democracy.” In an address to the nation, he said the US sought “no conquest, no dominion... We are but one of the champions of the rights of mankind. We shall be satisfied when those rights have been made as secure as the faith and the freedom of nations can make them.”⁸ Wilson’s advocacy of the ill-fated League of Nations and the principle of self-determination cemented America’s commitment to global democracy. However, Wilson also doubted the capacity of non-European peoples to govern themselves. Historian John Thompson argues that, despite his legacy, Wilson had no overarching goal to advance global democracy. Thomson writes that Wilson’s “strategy was designed to ‘make the world *safe* for democracy,’ not to spread democracy to the ends of the earth” (Thompson 2013, 65).

Cold War Politics, Hegemony, and Democracy, 1945-2001

The interwar years between the First and Second World War saw the collapse of the League of Nations, the onset of the Great Depression, and a military buildup in Europe. During World War II and then the Cold War, American presidents retained the rhetoric of democracy, but tangible democracy promotion was often subsumed within—or disregarded for—other strategic interests.

The rhetoric of democracy during WWII was mostly reactionary. Hitler’s autocratic Germany was easily framed as opposite America’s democracy. But the war was hardly a battle of democracies versus autocracies: The Soviet Union, a key member of the Allies, was not democratic. This strategic utility of unsavory autocratic regimes came to define one side of America’s bifurcated foreign policy during the Cold War. On the one hand, the US saw

⁸ “Making the World ‘Safe for Democracy’: Woodrow Wilson Asks for War.” *History Matters*. <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/4943/>.

democracy and development as an intertwined antidote to communism.⁹ The US put significant resources into reconstructing Japan, West Germany, and postwar Europe more broadly. President Harry Truman declared American financial support for Greece to make it a “self-supporting and self-respecting democracy.”¹⁰ President John Kennedy created the Alliance for Progress in Latin America and the US Agency for International Development while President Jimmy Carter highlighted the morality of global democracy and human rights in his rhetoric. On the other hand, the United States actively undermined what it saw as dangerous forms of democracy and cozied to useful nondemocratic leaders. The US manipulated Italy’s 1948 elections to ensure a moderate victory, facilitated the overthrow of leftist leaders in Guatemala (1954) and Iran (1953), enthusiastically normalized relations with authoritarian China, and maintained strategic alliances with dictators such as the Philippines’ Ferdinand Marcos.

This seemingly contradictory foreign policy continued into the Reagan administration. President Reagan was foremost an anti-communist warrior, but he believed strongly in America’s mission to advance democracy. “Let us rededicate ourselves to America’s mission of freedom,” Reagan said at a White House ceremony. “And let us resolve that we will stand, as did those before us, with all who love freedom and yearn for democracy, wherever they might be.”¹¹ Under Reagan’s leadership, the Congress created the National Endowment for Democracy in 1983 to be a “private, nonprofit foundation dedicated to the growth and strengthening of democratic institutions around the world.”¹² However, Reagan displayed same inconsistencies of presidents before him. In Angola, South Africa, Chile, El Salvador and elsewhere, the Reagan

⁹ The 1950s and 1960s saw the ascendance in policy and academic circles of Modernization Theory, which argued that economic development led to democracy in a linear process.

¹⁰ “Truman Doctrine.” *Avalon Project*. http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/trudoc.asp

¹¹ “Remarks at the White House Ceremony Opening the ‘Roads to Liberty’ Exhibit, March 11, 1987,” *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=33962>

¹² National Endowment for Democracy, “Who We Are.” <http://www.ned.org/>

administration worked against the will of foreign publics in the name of anti-communism.

Despite the democratic deficiencies and domestic abuses of these allies, Reagan said, “none of them is as guilty of human rights violations as are Cuba and the Soviet Union” (Nau 2013, 151).

The end of the Cold War marked an important juncture point in American democracy promotion. This “unipolar moment” provided the United States unparalleled power and influence around the globe. President George H.W. Bush, a traditionally cautious realist, shifted tack, making democracy promotion “an indisputably important element of [his] foreign policy” (Carothers 1995, 14). This was particularly true in Europe, which experienced significant US-supported democratic advancements in the 1990s. George H.W. Bush’s successor, President Bill Clinton, argued strongly for the normative and strategic value of democracy. In his 1994 State of the Union address, Clinton said, “Ultimately, the best strategy to ensure our security and to build a durable peace is to support the advance of democracy elsewhere. Democracies don’t attack each other.”¹³ That same year, a White House national security report argued, “We believe that our goals of enhancing our security, bolstering our economic prosperity, and promoting democracy are mutually supportive” (The White House 1994, i). This rhetorical commitment to democracy was pursued in Haiti, where the US intervened in 1994 to restore its democratically elected government. However, Clinton also displayed realist hedging. Trade, oil access, and other security concerns led his administration to maintain friendly relations with various nondemocratic regimes (Carothers 2007).

Democracy and Terror, 2001-Present

The post-9/11 period of US foreign policy has been arguably the most divisive era of American democracy promotion. The Bush administration combined the classically liberal

¹³ “The 1994 State of the Union Address,” *The Washington Post*, January 25, 1994. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/special/states/docs/sou94.htm>

pursuits of democracy and liberty with the typically conservative tactics of unilateralism, use of force, and skepticism toward international organizations. This controversial policy blend was imbued with strongly idealistic rhetoric. In his second inaugural address, President George W. Bush said, “The survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands. The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world.”¹⁴

The Bush administration’s policies partly backed up this rhetoric. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are the two most direct and contentious examples of Bush’s democracy promotion legacy. Despite the varying justifications for these wars, which often strayed from idealism—as well as the continuing political deterioration of both countries—the elected governments in Iraq and Afghanistan represented democratic progress. Elsewhere in the Middle East, the administration pressured Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak for more openness, rewarded reforms in Bahrain and Morocco with economic benefits, established the Middle East Partnership Initiative to support regional liberalization, and pushed the Syrians to withdraw from Lebanon (Carothers 2007). Moreover, the administration used a panoply of sanctions and democratic aid to push for democratic reform in dictatorial regimes like Burma and Zimbabwe.

However, the Bush administration’s *realpolitik* toward other nations belied its rhetoric. During Bush’s eight years, China made few moves toward democracy and Putin slowly consolidated power in Russia. The administration chose to engage these countries without precondition. Bush also maintained close alliances with Saudi Arabia’s theocratic regime and Pakistan’s military dictatorship to retain their assistance in the war on terror. After Hamas emerged victorious in elections in the Palestinian territories, the US led an international effort to

¹⁴ “President Bush’s Second Inaugural Address,” *NPR*, January 20, 2005.
<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4460172>

isolate the democratically elected government. These policies were defended with a strictly realist logic that stood in stark contrast to the idealistic language of Bush's "freedom agenda."

President Barack Obama took office in 2009 in a domestic and international milieu of deep cynicism toward US democracy assistance. Critics around the world viewed democracy promotion as synonymous with US intervention while many Americans had soured on foreign policy activism. Consequently, Obama worked to extricate American forces from Iraq and Afghanistan and only cautiously and selectively pulled support from Middle East dictators during the Arab Spring. Although many technical democracy programs continued, there was a clear downgrade in their centrality to broader foreign policy goals (Carothers 2015; Mitchell 2016). Since 2009, US funding for democracy, human rights, and governance has declined nearly \$400 million (Diamond 2016).¹⁵ Obama's limited international idealism earned him an unusual title for a Democrat: a realist (Kaplan 2014; Pillar 2016). However, Obama has at times articulated Wilsonianism even while back-peddling from Bush's legacy. In his 2009 address in Cairo, Egypt, Obama said, "So no matter where it takes hold, government of the people and by the people sets a single standard for all who would hold power."¹⁶ Furthermore, the 2011 Libyan intervention progressed from limited humanitarian goals into *de facto* regime change under Obama's watch. The Obama administration has clearly not abandoned the American tradition of democracy promotion, but it has concertedly lowered the prominence and expectations surrounding these efforts.

The United States has been and remains a global leader in democracy promotion, but it has pursued this goal inconsistently across its history despite lofty presidential rhetoric.

¹⁵ Diamond notes that even excluding the decline in programmatic spending in Iraq and Afghanistan, the funding for similar programs in other countries stayed flat.

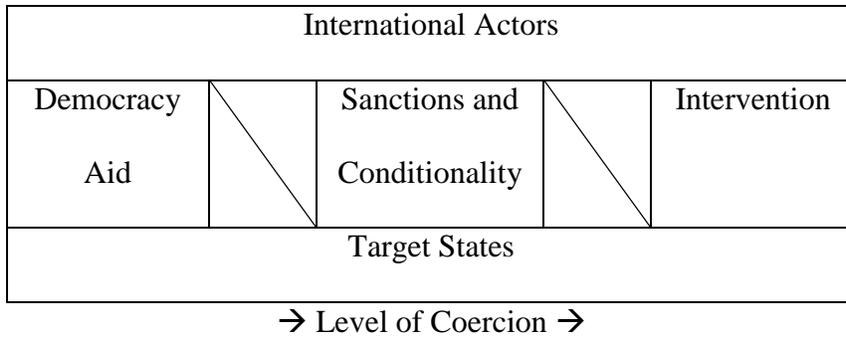
¹⁶ "Remarks by the President at Cairo University, 06/04/09" *The White House Office of the Press Secretary*. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-cairo-university-6-04-09>

Democracy has been only one component of American strategic interests. At times, other economic and security concerns, such as combatting communism or terrorism, have outweighed global democracy. Yet even presidents that have downplayed America's role in spreading democracy or supported obviously undemocratic regimes have not entirely forsaken the language of liberty.

III. Approaches to Democracy Promotion: A Theoretical Framework

As America's history of democracy promotion shows, there are numerous ways to advance democracy abroad. However, three core approaches have typified US policy: intervention, sanctions and conditionality, and democracy aid (Figure 1). These discrete but often interconnected approaches differ in their specific tactics as well as their respective level of coercion: the amount of agency provided to the local population and government in the decision to democratize. Yet despite these important differences, these approaches all share a fundamental and potentially problematic assumption: that democratization can be induced exogenously. Advocates assume foreign communities want and need democracy, and that international actors—particularly the United States—can provide critical assistance. Many US policymakers believe strongly in this sentiment of democratic universalism, but approaches to democracy promotion have in fact demonstrated varying levels of success.

Figure 1: Approaches to Democracy Promotion



Military intervention is the most coercive approach to democracy promotion. Conventionally, it requires the military defeat of the target state’s army, pacification of some portion of the local population, removal of the existing regime, and some degree of state-building depending on the extant capacity of local governing institutions. The coercive nature of intervention is obvious: a compliant and reforming government would not need to be overthrown. However, this does not necessarily indicate the target state’s population must also be coerced into democracy. It is plausible that the local population desires democracy but is unable to remove the oppressive government.¹⁷ Analyzing intervention as a form of democracy promotion is complicated by the often multifarious and at times duplicitous reasons for war. For example, Bush administration officials provided several rationales for the Iraq War in addition to democracy promotion, including Saddam Hussein’s alleged connection to al Qaeda and possession of WMD. Furthermore, critics charge the war was driven by hidden oil interests, imperialism, or other nefarious reasons. Untangling the various justifications for an intervention is unnecessary for this component of the theoretical framework. As long as democratic

¹⁷ Dick Cheney took this position regarding Iraqis desire for American intervention in 2003, predicting they would greet American forces as “liberators.” See “Transcript for Sept. 10, Dick Cheney” *Meet the Press*, September 14, 2003. http://www.nbcnews.com/id/3080244/ns/meet_the_press/t/transcript-sept/#.V69t0Y5_w5I

institutions are installed or encouraged by the intervening power, the intervention can be considered a form of democracy promotion.

The second approach to democracy promotion is sanctions and conditionality. Sanctions impose an economic cost on the target state in order to compel a particular outcome. For example, in the late 1980s the United States passed a law banning US investment, military sales, and bank loans to South Africa. The restrictions were designed to coerce the end of the apartheid regime. Conditionality can take two forms. First, specific democratic conditions must be met prior to an agreement; or, second, an agreement is met with an understanding that particular benefits will be withdrawn if democratic progress is not made. Conditionality can be positive (a country receives rewards for improved performance) or negative (a country is penalized for poor performance). Common democracy-related conditions include holding new elections, modifying a constitution, admitting an observer mission, or recognizing election results (von Soest and Wahman 2015, 963). Sanctions and conditionality constitute a moderately coercive, incentives-based approach to democracy promotion. Unlike during an intervention, the target state can choose to suffer the sometimes significant costs of not democratizing.

The third approach to democracy promotion is democracy aid, which aims to foster democratization in nondemocratic regimes (movement toward credible elections) and improve the functioning of democratic institutions and key stakeholders (for example, civil society and political parties) in countries that are already nominally democratic. Various US and international actors do this work. The US Agency for International Development sponsors myriad democracy and governance programs promoting rule of law, elections, human rights, civil society, free media, anti-corruption, and other issues. The United Nations Development Program and other international organizations conduct similar programming. In the United States

and several European nations, democracy assistance NGOs provide political party and civil society trainings, electoral process support, and other forms of assistance. The US-based National Endowment for Democracy and the institutes it funds, particularly the International Republican Institute (IRI) and the National Democratic Institute (NDI), are among the most prominent global democracy assistance NGOs.¹⁸ In 2016, the NED received \$170 million from Congress, which was up from \$18 million during its first year of operating in 1984 (Bouchet and Bibbins Sedaca 2014, 16). Despite some criticisms,¹⁹ democracy aid is the least coercive approach to democracy promotion. Aid programs generally operate with the consent of the host government, participants attend voluntarily, and aid providers have little control over when or if the skills they impart are used.

IV. Has Democracy Promotion Worked?

Despite the significant investment made by the United States and other international actors in democracy promotion, there have been few definitive studies evaluating its effectiveness. The existing evidence suggests that while no approach shows a consistent ability to foster full democratization, sanctions and democracy aid are linked to small but measurable democratic strengthening abroad.

Intervention

¹⁸ The two other core recipients of NED funding – the Solidarity Center and the Center for International Private Enterprise—play an important though less direct role in supporting democracy. Their focus on labor rights and free markets respectively is different from NDI and IRI, which directly support elected officials and political parties.

¹⁹ For a brief discussion of left-wing critiques of democracy promotion, see (Mitchell 2016, 12)

Around the world and even among the American public, the term “democracy promotion” is now closely associated with military intervention. The controversial wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were justified in part by successful military interventions and democracy building efforts in the past. As Bush administration officials noted, West Germany and Japan were politically, economically, and socially reconstructed under American military occupation. In February 2003, President Bush said in defense of the impending Iraq invasion, “There was a time when many said that the cultures of Japan and Germany were incapable of sustaining democratic values. Well, they were wrong.”²⁰

Since the Iraq and Afghanistan wars began, several studies have attempted to test the proposition that democracy can be successfully implanted through military force. Some studies show a small but highly conditional success rate for forced democratization. Alexander Downes and Jonathan Monten’s examination of foreign-imposed regime change finds that interveners can have a small positive effect on a target state’s democracy, but only if they actively promote democracy (e.g., by encouraging institution building and overseeing elections) and if domestic conditions favorable to democracy already exist, such as economic development, ethnic homogeneity, and a history with democracy (Downes and Monten 2013). They note the important paradox that the regimes easiest to overthrow are also the hardest to democratize: it is poor economic, social, and political conditions that make a government both easy to topple and difficult to rebuild.

A World Bank study of democratic interventionism came to a similar conclusion (Gleditsch, Christiansen, and Hegre 2007). The report finds that intervention can produce a short-term improvement in democracy (over the first year), but overtime there is little effect.

²⁰ “President George W. Bush Speaks at AEI’s Annual Dinner,” February 28, 2003, *American Enterprise Institute*. <https://www.aei.org/publication/president-george-w-bush-speaks-at-aeis-annual-dinner/>

Moreover, the improvement is minor: target countries often become semi-democracies rather than full democracies. Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Anthony Downs research on interventionism is more pessimistic (Bueno de Mesquita and Downs 2006). Using data from 1946-2001, they find that democratic interventionism leads to little or no improvement in democracy and in fact often erodes the target country's democratic development. They conclude that "American engagement abroad has not led to more freedom or more democracy in the countries where we've become involved" (Bueno de Mesquita and Downs 2004).

Sanctions and Conditionality

The academic literature is mixed regarding the effectiveness of sanctions to coerce democratic reform. Hufbauer and his collaborators much-cited report finds that sanctions correlate with democratic outcomes only about one-third of the time (Hufbauer, Schott, and Elliott 2009). The reasons conjectured for this low success rate are varied. Some argue that authoritarian regimes destabilized by economic sanctions increase their repression to stay in power (Peksen and Drury 2010; Wood 2008). In contrast, Von Soest and Wahman's research finds that sanctions *writ large* are not associated with higher levels of democracy, but sanctions designed to democratize have a "significantly positive effect on the target state's level of democracy" (von Soest and Wahman 2015, 959). However, they also note that this increase in democratic character is generally modest and rarely leads to rapid liberalization.

Studies on the success of political conditionality in creating an incentive for democratic development are similarly mixed. The European Union's accession requirements are often cited as positive evidence. Ethier argues that the EU's membership criterion, which demands democratic institutions, human rights protections, rule of law, and other facets of good

governance, has effectively raised the level of democracy in Europe (Ethier 2003). However, Dipama and Dal find that the suspension of development assistance toward a selection of African countries has mostly failed to improve democratic conditions (Dipama and Parlar Dal 2015). Studying Africa as well, Stephen Brown concludes that political conditionality often fails because donors lack the will and money to perpetually start and stop development programs based on the country's political performance. Moreover, donor states often have overriding economic or security interests to maintain good relations with the country despite poor democratic credentials (Brown 2005). Older studies of the early post-Cold War period find a similar politicization of political conditionality: nondemocratic allies tended to get less pressure for democratization than hostile nondemocratic regimes (Crawford 2001; Crawford 1997; Hook 1998).

Democracy Aid

Recent evaluations of democracy aid provide contradictory conclusions, but several show a small but clear positive impact on democracy levels. World Bank researcher Stephen Knack's assessment of foreign aid is a commonly cited critique (Knack 2004). Using Freedom House data from 1975-2000, Knack concludes that there is no evidence that democracy aid promotes democracy. Contrariwise, several newer studies show beneficial effects of aid. Scott and Steele's data show that carefully tailored assistance can positively affect democratization, more so than economic assistance (Scott and Steele 2011). Finkel *et al*, using a unique data set of USAID budget appropriations for democracy programming, argue that USAID democracy assistance has a "significant, albeit modest, impact on democratic outcomes" (Finkel et al. 2007, 435).

Likewise, Kersting and Kilby find that international donors have a clear but small positive influence on democracy (Kersting and Kilby 2014).²¹

What does the evidence suggest?

Overall, American and international efforts to promote democracy have achieved success, but the record is mixed. While existing studies do not provide a definitive assessment of democracy promotion, some insights can be drawn from the data. When divided by approach, the success rate appears to increase as coercion declines. The evidence suggests intervention is the least effective democracy promotion tactic. Sanctions and conditionality have shown a positive impact but are often undermined by politics and practicality. Though not conclusive, democracy aid appears to have the most consistently positive effect on democracy outcomes of the three approaches. Several studies affirm its small but beneficial impact. One factor complicating a discrete impact analysis of these approaches is their occasional usage in tandem. For example, the war in Iraq combined intervention with democracy aid, and US policy toward Zimbabwe couples sanctions with democracy aid. In these cases, one needs to assess the impact of each approach alone as well as the potential for interaction effects (positive and negative). Nevertheless, given the distinct theory of change for each approach, it is still possible to trace their individual influence.

A second complicating factor for evaluating democracy promotion is the role of time. While intervention has a clear timeline for impact, sanctions and democracy aid have an inherently longer time horizon. The pain of sanctions increases across months and years, and

²¹ There are a variety of explanations as to why the impact of democracy aid is limited, but one new study argues that democracy NGOs are tamed by the need to placate the non-democratic governments that allow them to operate (Bush 2015).

democracy aid works slowly to build skills and change norms. It can therefore be hasty to declare pro-democracy sanctions or aid as failed when more time could yield success. Yet the “slow burn” impact of these approaches can also be used to defend and prolong failed policies. US policy toward Burma presents a useful case study of these complicating factors: two democracy promotion approaches—sanctions and democracy aid—were utilized together across several administrations, creating a subtle dynamic that ultimately contributed to Burma’s democratic transition.

V. Burma’s Political Transition and The Impact of US Democracy Promotion

Burma’s parliamentary election in November 2015—its first credible election in over 50 years—constituted a remarkable step forward in Burma’s democratic development.²² Though still far from fully democratic (As of 2016, Freedom House still rates Burma as “not free”), Burma’s liberalization and democratization process has been faster and more substantive than most expected. This sudden transition came amid long-standing US sanctions and democracy aid designed to induce democratic opening. What impact, if any, did these policies have? In short, I argue that US sanctions and democracy aid—along with similar efforts from other countries and regional organizations— contributed to the regime’s decision to liberalize in 2011. Furthermore, US democracy aid continued to have a positive effect on Burma’s democratization process through the provision of critical training to political parties, CSOs, and others leading into the 2015 election. While it remains difficult to measure the exact impact of these policies, the evidence suggests they contributed to the dual processes of liberalization and democratization in Burma.

²² Because the US government uses the name Burma instead of Myanmar, I will do the same.

Burma's Repressive Military Rule

Burma's long history of military rule began only fourteen years after its independence in 1948.²³ Freed from British colonialism, the newly formed Union of Burma unified the central regions of Burma with the ethnic "frontier" areas, which had been administered separately by the British. Burma held several multiparty elections through the 1950s and into the 1960s, but in March 1962, General Ne Win took control of Burma in a military coup that would begin over 50 years of direct or indirect military rule. The military regime implemented extreme central planning and nationalization policies and cultivated a repressive and exclusionary nationalism. During its tenure, ethnic separatist movements raged throughout Burma's periphery while pro-democracy movements were brutally suppressed. In 1989, the regime formally changed the country's name to the Union of Myanmar.

The end of the Cold War did little to precipitate change in the socialist state. In 1990, elections were held for the first time in thirty years, but the results, which overwhelmingly favored opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi's pro-democracy party the National League for Democracy, were ignored. In 2010, fraudulent elections dubiously affirmed the power of the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party. However, in 2011, the military junta dissolved itself and turned over control to civilian leaders elected in 2010. Since then, the government has engaged in a series of liberalizing and democratizing reforms that culminated in the 2015 general elections that brought the National League for Democracy to power. Though Burma's constitution still contains patently undemocratic features, the extent and rapidity of the military regime's liberalization surprised many.

²³ See (Charney 2009) for a primer on Burma's modern history.

U.S. Democracy Promotion Policy Toward Burma²⁴

As an authoritarian regime, US democracy promotion toward Burma was designed to pressure the junta to honor free-and-fair elections.²⁵ Two core approaches to democracy promotion were used to achieve this end: sanctions and democracy aid. Burma-specific laws sanctioning the country for democratic deficiencies began after the military government's suppression of the 1988 pro-democracy movement. Across several administrations, the US has drawn on federal law and executive orders to punish the Burmese regime. The restrictions have included withholding contributions to selected international organizations with programs in Burma, the right to sanction Burma until human rights and democracy conditions improve, banning Burmese imports, freezing assets of certain Burmese officials, blocking Burma-directed loans from international financial institutions, banning visas for certain Burma officials, and prohibiting the import of products using Burmese jade (Martin 2012).²⁶

After a long review process, the Obama administration decided to shift US-Burma policy in 2009.²⁷ The State Department announced the US would maintain sanctions, but begin direct dialogue with the government regarding democracy and human rights.²⁸ In 2011, Hillary Clinton traveled to Burma, the first US Secretary of State to do so since 1955. Following the end of formal military rule in 2011, the Thein Sein government released hundreds of political prisoners as well as held and respected by-elections in 2012. In response to these steps, the US waived

²⁴ This section is not an authoritative or exhaustive account of US democracy promotion policy in Burma (sanctions and democracy aid, in particular), but rather provides an overview of important dimensions of that policy.

²⁵ This policy evolved from demanding the regime honor the May 1990 elections, which the NLD won, to "pragmatic engagement" without precondition under the Obama administration.

²⁶ Key among US laws was The Burmese Freedom and Democracy Act of 2003 and The Tom Lantos Block Burmese JADE (Junta's Anti-Democratic Efforts) Act of 2008.

²⁷ The shift of US objectives from regime change to engagement was done with the consent of Burma's political opposition, including Aung San Suu Kyi, who has personally had a significant role in shaping US foreign policy toward Burma (Steinberg 2010).

²⁸ "U.S. Policy Toward Burma," Special Briefing, September 28, 2009, <http://www.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rm/2009/09/129698.htm>

restrictions on visas, financial services, US investments, and international financial institutions. In May 2012, President Obama nominated Derek Mitchell to be the first US ambassador to Burma since 1990. In the wake of the 2015 election and the peaceful transfer of power to the opposition, the US has lifted some additional sanctions but kept others in place. The future of continued sanctions relief in light of the military's unwillingness to relinquish more power remains debated.²⁹

In addition to sanctions, US policy toward Burma also employed democracy aid. Although the USAID mission, a traditional implementer of democracy assistance, closed in 1989 in response to the regime's domestic repression,³⁰ the National Endowment for Democracy provided assistance and training to pro-democracy groups throughout the 1990s and 2000s. In 1997, Louisa Coan, then the NED's program officer for Asia, told the House Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific:

NED has been able through its direct grants program to support the dissidents, to support the democracy movement of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, particularly through assistance to the groups along the borders in Thailand and in India, including twice daily radio programming, the Democratic Voice of Burma, [...] newsletters, underground newspaper, underground labor organizing, particular programs to foster inter-ethnic cooperation and unity among the opposition forces... We have been able to support over 25 pro-democracy groups among the Burmese pro-democracy movement... over the last 7 years, having spent over a total of \$3.25 million over that period.³¹

²⁹ Mathew Smith and Tom Andrews, "This Is Not the Time to Ease Up on Burma," *Foreign Policy*, May 19, 2016.

³⁰ USAID focused on humanitarian assistance in this period.

³¹ Louisa Coan, Testimony for the House Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific, September 17, 1997, http://commdocs.house.gov/committees/intlrel/hfa47501.000/hfa47501_0.HTM

Since reopening its Burma office in 2012, USAID has increased its democracy aid as part of an assistance package that totaled over \$202 million by 2014.³² USAID has funded various initiatives, including capacity building for civil society groups, training programs for parliamentarians and journalists, technical assistance to police, and rehabilitation for released political prisoners.³³ The NED has also continued its robust democracy aid programming through grants to IRI and NDI as well as other domestic pro-democracy CSOs.³⁴ For example, in 2014 NDI received \$465,000 to strengthen the understanding of electoral standards among local CSOs and IRI received \$450,000 to help political parties develop strategic communication plans and policy platforms.³⁵ These programs constituted only a small portion of the NED's multi-million-dollar grant-making activities in Burma.

The final tool of democracy promotion—military intervention—was never employed in Burma. However, Senate testimony from 2009 raises the possibility covert action was used to aid insurgent groups. At a subcommittee hearing, Senator Jim Webb asked Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell if he had any knowledge of US economic aid being used to fund groups conducting “covert operations” in Burma. Campbell replied that the US had provided “substantial support” to displaced groups along the Thai border for decades. But he continued: “And on the subsequent question that you asked, I think probably another forum would be better to address that particular issue.”³⁶ While Campbell's request for a private session could be construed innocuously, it could also suggest the presence of covert US efforts to

³² “U.S. Assistance to Burma,” Fact Sheet, August 9, 2014.

³³ “U.S. Assistance to Burma,” Fact Sheet, August 9, 2014. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2014/230463.htm>

³⁴ As a matter of disclosure, this author led three NED-funded democracy workshops for Burmese political parties and civil society groups in Thailand and Burma in 2014.

³⁵ The National Endowment for Democracy, “Burma 2014.” <http://www.ned.org/region/asia/burma-2014/>

³⁶ “U.S. Policy Toward Burma: Its Impact and Effectiveness,” Hearing Before the Subcommittee on East Asian and Pacific Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Relations, US Senate, 111th Congress, September 30, 2009. <http://www.hsdl.org/?abstract&did=24705&advanced=advanced>

undermine the regime.³⁷ However, because such activities are unconfirmed, the possible impact of covert action (as a form of military intervention) against the Burmese regime will not be evaluated here.

The Impact of Democracy Promotion Policy in Burma

Assessing the direct impact of US democracy promotion on Burma's democratic transition is difficult. Political transformations inevitably have domestic and international drivers that interact in complex ways. When evaluating the reasons for Burma's transition, one cannot ignore the unique role of leadership, specifically opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi and former Burmese President Thein Sein, local political culture and history, and transnational factors like the cascading revolutions of the Arab Spring, which unfolded just as the Burma's military regime decided to liberalize. Moreover, the US was not alone in pushing for democracy in Burma. Other nations and regional organizations imposed sanctions and provided democracy aid. Therefore, this section aims to assess the effectiveness of US democracy promotion policy while making no claims about its causal weight compared to other factors. I argue that although US sanctions and democracy aid did not help precipitate democratization in the short-term, their application over time played an important role in Burma's liberalization and burgeoning democratization process.

The influence of sanctions on the Burmese military government's decision to liberalize is widely debated. The sanctions in fact did little harm to corrupt members of the ruling regime. The economic restrictions exempted lucrative energy deals with Chevron and other international oil companies. Moreover, military elites could stash millions in offshore bank accounts in non-

³⁷ As one prominent American academic and Burma expert told me in an interview.

sanctioning countries like Singapore.³⁸ In 2011 – the year prior to US and EU sanctions relief—Burma achieved 5.5% economic growth, but very little trickled down to the masses.³⁹ Many Burma scholars and local activists are skeptical of the sanctions’ impact. The University of London’s Lee Jones writes, “Although many people doubtlessly suffered under sanctions and military misrule, the regime successfully directed the economy eastwards, distributing booming natural resource export revenues to itself and its supporters” (Jones 2014, 781). Similarly, a Burmese democracy activist told me, “international sanctions didn’t play any important roles in the government’s decision to liberalize the country. International sanctions made Burmese ordinary citizens to become poorer and made military officials and those who close with them (cronies) to become richer.”⁴⁰

Despite this evidence, it does appear the sanctions had an indirectly positive effect in pushing the regime to liberalize. While the junta and its allies were personally able to evade the sanctions’ costs, ordinary citizens remained in desperate conditions. Burma was one of the poorest countries in Asia due to the combined effect of sanctions and poor economic policies.⁴¹ Historian Michael Charney, writing in 2009, said, “International sanctions and other efforts to isolate the regime have hurt the general population, pushing most further into poverty” (Charney 2009, 196). The country’s destitution, dilapidated infrastructure, antiquated military hardware,

³⁸ Pauline Chiou, “Analysis: Why sanctions aren’t working in Burma,” *CNN*, July 5, 2009.

<http://edition.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/asiapcf/07/02/burma.sanctions/>

³⁹ Jonah Fisher, “Did economic sanctions play a role in Burma’s reform?” *BBC*, April 23, 2012.

<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-17781745>

⁴⁰ Research Interview Questionnaire, Burmese Democracy Activist, June 14, 2016.

⁴¹ Disaggregating the differential impact of sanctions versus poor economic policies is difficult. The regime tendentiously blamed Burma’s economic problems on Western sanctions while ignoring the impact of its own policies. Undoubtedly, the regime’s poor governance contributed significantly, if not primarily, to Burma’s overall poverty. Nevertheless, sanctions exacerbated Burma’s economic woes.

and international isolation stung regime officials. A senior Burmese government official told researcher Kyaw Yin Hlaing:

Sanctions and protests had made us look like a rogue state. Sanctions did not paralyze us. We could continue to rule the country for a long time even if Western countries did not lift sanctions... However, the sanctions hurt people. Even though many thought that we did not care about the people, we wanted to do what we could for the development of the country. Without the additional sanctions...the roadmap [to reform] would not have been implemented this quickly. (Hlaing 2012, 204)

It was clear to many regime officials that their time in power was limited if broad-based poverty, disenfranchisement, and rampant corruption persisted, particularly in the wake of the Arab Spring protests. An MP from Yangon told me, “the military government declared that they did not take heed to the western sanctions, but in reality, they knew they had been marginalized in the international community...[The] sanctions worked to some extent.”⁴² Another MP from Yangon said, “The Military Regime decided to change because of many reasons and international sanctions are one of those reasons.”⁴³ Likewise, former Indian ambassador to Burma Rajiv Bhatia writes, “Sanctions against Burma did hurt the military leadership in political, if not in economic, terms. They eventually compelled them to include Suu Kyi in their calculations, treating her as a passport for opening up to the West” (Bhatia 2013, 112).

⁴² Research Interview Questionnaire, Member of Parliament, July 8, 2016

⁴³ Research Interview Questionnaire, Member of Parliament, July 20, 2016.

Beyond exacerbating poverty and, by extension, provoking unrest, the sanctions also forced Burma into economic and political dependence on China, which concerned and embarrassed regime officials (Lintner 2013; Singh 2013). Over the last decade, China has consistently invested billions of dollars in Burma's economy and been its largest source of military equipment and training, even while diplomatically treating Burma as its "little brother."⁴⁴ In 2007, *The Economist* reported, "Myanmar offers two of the prizes China values most in its foreign friends: hydrocarbon resources and a friendly army, willing to give it access to facilities on its coast on the Bay of Bengal."⁴⁵ But military officials and ordinary citizens began to resent Chinese influence in the country. The sanctions made "China's strategic penetration into Burma effortless," writes researcher K. Yhome. "Many Burmese thought Chinese immigrants had come at their expense...For the military leadership, a way out of their dependence on China had to be found" (Yhome 2013, 114). The leader of a human rights group in Burma told me, "Burma people dislike China and China investment and they think China is their enemy and China has been supporting military regime."⁴⁶ Although Chinese support allowed the junta to avoid the worst effects of the sanctions, the government's economic and political reliance on China angered the regime and populace alike.

Democracy aid, which fostered persistent and destabilizing democratic protest, had a similarly indirect effect on the government's decision to liberalize. While democracy aid likely did not precipitate the junta's decision, it created an atmosphere of continuous dissent that emboldened further opposition and sustained international attention. Writing in 2010, researcher

⁴⁴ Priscilla A. Clapp, "China's Relations with Burma," *Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission on China's Relations with Southeast Asia*, May 13, 2015.

<http://www.usip.org/publications/2015/05/13/china-s-relations-burma>

⁴⁵ "Revolution in Myanmar: The saffron revolution," *The Economist*, September 27, 2007.

<http://www.economist.com/node/9867036>

⁴⁶ Research Interview Questionnaire, CSO leader, June 16, 2016.

Linnea Beatty argued, “After nearly 20 years of democracy assistance there is no evidence of evolution towards democracy [in Burma], although...gains have been made within the political movement and civil society” (Beatty 2010, 620). These gains were seen during the 2007 pro-democracy movement called the Saffron Revolution. While tied to an economic crisis, the movement’s organizational capacity was strengthened before, during, and after by democracy aid programs that promoted interethnic cooperation, bolstered the ability to communicate and evade the regime’s internet controls, and taught nonviolent protest techniques among the opposition (Beatty 2010). While liberalization would not come for another four years, the government’s 2007 crackdown increased international and domestic pressure for reform, which was enhanced by the persistence of pro-democracy activists benefiting from US and international assistance.

When USAID and the NED began government-approved work inside Burma after the regime’s initial opening in 2011, the positive impact of their democracy programming grew. Many Burmese politicians, activists, and academics note the important role these programs had in resuscitating Burma’s democratic political culture. One graduate of an American-run political leadership program said many political leaders “had spent their lives in prisons for a long time and they didn’t get any access to the systematic ideas and practice about democracy and other relevant ideology of politics.”⁴⁷ Another CSO leader said,

Last 5 years, most of political activities depended on aid, small grant and grant from US embassy and other INGO to increase and promote. The social activities based on political platform to build the citizen’s capacity and empower youths to participate in political affairs.... The people have known the political information through Civic Education

⁴⁷ Research Interview Questionnaire, CSO leader, June 16, 2016.

trainings, workshops and seminar which were conducted in rural areas and cities...The democracy aid was one of the forces to change the regime and to become liberalization process in Myanmar.⁴⁸

Burmese politicians have also acknowledged the importance of democracy aid. A Yangon MP told me democracy assistance programs were “very important” to Burma’s “big long journey to Democratic Society.” Another MP said of internationally funded trainings:

Politicians had a chance to learn theoretical practices. In the past...there was no chance for attending trainings and workshops. We had to work clandestinely. That is why I appreciate NGOs’ work in the political field...I would like to say that democracy aid is very good for us. I would like them to continue.⁴⁹

Similarly, Maung Maung Yin, a professor of peace studies at the Burma Institute of Theology, noted the importance of democracy aid in spreading democratic values:

I think in some places in Myanmar such democracy aid played important roles for the public to understand the values of democracy, the importance of voting and the citizen’s responsibility to vote. General public, not only in the rural and remote areas, but even in the cities and towns such knowledge is a scarcity since people have no such experience and education necessarily for nearly 60 years.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Research Interview Questionnaire, CSO leader, June 15, 2016

⁴⁹ Research Interview Questionnaire, Member of Parliament, July 7, 2016.

⁵⁰ Research Interview Questionnaire, Maung Maung Yin, July 11, 2016.

If evaluated by their expressed intention, economic sanctions and democracy aid did not achieve their goal of democratization in the short-term. Burma's military rulers largely escaped the sanctions' direct punishment and their large cost to the Burmese economy failed to significantly destabilize the regime. Furthermore, opposition groups receiving democracy aid failed to successfully attain regime change. However, such a narrow evaluation criterion minimizes the importance of sanctions and democracy aid over the long-term and in combination with other domestic and international factors, particularly at key juncture points. Long-term poverty, underdevelopment, and political stagnation created by regime policies and sanctions emboldened pro-democracy movements and embarrassed the regime internationally. Moreover, the sanctions forced a demoralizing dependence on China that many military officials wanted to end. The sanctions' impact was also likely bolstered by the Arab Spring, which created a new global context in which decrepit military regimes appeared unable to control restive populations.

Similarly, while democracy aid helped pro-democracy movements pressure the government for reform in the 1990s and 2000s, it also played an important role after 2011 by advancing democratic norms and knowledge among politicians and activists in the run up to the 2015 election. Burma exemplifies important positive interaction effects between democracy promotion approaches: sanctions exacerbated the economic crisis created by regime policies, which in turn enflamed political unrest that was aided by democracy assistance. After the opening in 2011, democracy programming helped parties, CSOs, and others mobilize for the election while the remaining sanctions have continued to pressure the regime for more reforms. Together these policies have spurred and strengthened Burma's ongoing liberalization and democratization process.

Answering this argument's counterfactual is difficult: Would the government have liberalized without decades of sanctions and foreign-assisted political activism? Would elections have been as successful without American and international democracy aid? Without domestic political factors, like Aung San Suu Kyi's leadership, would international pressure have mattered? There is also a significant question regarding the quality of Burma's transition. Burma's military remains in control of key political institutions and the constitution retains undemocratic provisions. Burma's democratic transition is therefore far from complete, and not yet obviously democratic.⁵¹ Nevertheless, available evidence suggests US democracy promotion policy, both sanctions and democracy aid—together with other international actors working toward the same goal—played a contributing role in Burma's nascent and inchoate political transformation.

VI. The Present and Future of American Democracy Promotion

After nearly sixteen years of perceived militarization and neglect across two administrations respectively, the policy of democracy promotion is often maligned. Even traditional supporters of democracy promotion have been chastened by the last decade, agreeing with realist-oriented critics that America's democracy agenda should be significantly constrained moving forward. Democracy scholar Larry Diamond recently wrote, "It should thus come as no surprise that none of the current presidential candidates has made democracy promotion a cornerstone of his or her campaign" (Diamond 2016, 152). However, the impact of US policy in

⁵¹ There are increasing criticisms not only of the military's continued hold on power, but also of Aung San Suu Kyi's leadership style. As the *New York Times* reported after the NLD's 2015 victory: "what some see as [Aung San Suu Kyi's] domineering, imperious style has raised questions about her fealty to the rule of law and about the way she plans to exercise power." (Seth Mydans, "Aung San Suu Kyi, Long a Symbol of Dignified Defiance, Sounds a Provocative Note," *The New York Times*, November 17, 2015.)

Burma shows the continued importance and effectiveness of specific approaches to democracy promotion.

Prominent liberal and conservative scholars and policymakers have attempted to diagnose the ills of current US democracy promotion. Carnegie Endowment scholar Thomas Carothers has written extensively on the impact of Bush administration policy on the standing of democracy promotion at home and abroad. (Carothers 2006; Carothers 2007; Carothers 2008; Carothers 2015). He claims Bush's democracy-by-force approach, Manichean rhetoric, abuses of power at home, and contradictory support for dictators combined to profoundly delegitimize both democracy as a concept and America's ability to promote it. As a consequence, Carothers argues that future democracy promotion needs to be distinguished from regime change, disconnected from counterterrorism, and contextualized within a world order different from the 1990s, when American liberalism was politically and ideologically hegemonic.

Carothers and others advocate a recalibrated and more constrained approach to democracy promotion. Carothers argues the US should reduce its public face on its democracy work and put democracy promotion back into the NED—and out of the foreign policy bureaucracy—where it will appear less political. Echoing Carothers, Francis Fukuyama and Michael McFaul argue that the US government should support democracy abroad, but avoid funding foreign NGOs directly (Fukuyama and McFaul 2007). McFaul also argues that the image of America must be refurbished before it can be again promote democracy effectively (McFaul 2009). Similarly, realist scholar Stephen Walt writes, “the United States will do a better job of promoting democracy in other countries if it first does a better job of living up to its ideals here at home.”⁵²

⁵² Stephen M. Walt, “Why Is American So Bad at Promoting Democracy in Other Countries?” *Foreign Policy*, April 15, 2016. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/04/25/why-is-america-so-bad-at-promoting-democracy-in-other->

Some critics of democracy promotion advocate focusing exclusively on improving socio-economic conditions abroad rather than building or strengthening democratic institutions.

Scholar Walter Russell Mead mocks the notion that the “Democracy Fairy” can solve intractable foreign policy problems. Instead, he suggests focusing on promoting education abroad, which is “the most enlightened, most effective, and least condescending form of foreign aid” (Mead 2015). “In the end,” writes skeptical scholar Arthur A. Goldsmith, “rule-bound democracy is largely produced from within, not spread from the outside in a standardized manner” (Goldsmith 2008, 147).

While often compelling, these criticisms and suggestions are made through the distorting prism of the Iraq War, which inevitably focuses attention on the inefficacy of democratic interventionism, particularly in the Middle East. Yet as the Burma example illustrates, the United States has successfully promoted democratization with different tactics in various regions. Burma shows that the patient application of multilateral sanctions and democracy assistance can have an important impact. However, the slow and indirect effect of sanctions and democracy aid represents an important challenge for democracy promotion. In countries where an autocratic regime controls the economy and polity, it can generally evade the pain of sanctions and repress democratic movements. Over time in Burma, the sanctions coupled with regime policies impoverished citizens and the state, which fostered reliance on China and demoralized the regime. By 2011, Burma came to resemble the post-communist countries in which the US successfully advanced democracy in the 1990s: an isolated, exhausted, and hated regime fighting off a popular opposition leader. But this came at a moral cost. Decades of sanctions and poor policies ravaged the Burmese countryside while regime officials remained well-fed and in

power. The sanctions' advocates believed democracy could be compelled with patience, but the toll of this strategy for average Burmese proved significant.⁵³

As a noncoercive approach, US democracy aid does not have similar moral drawbacks. The assistance to Burmese pro-democracy groups during the 1990s and 2000s helped build long-term democratic resistance while doing no broader harm. After the regime liberalized and accepted open democracy assistance, the impact of this programming was strongly positive. Two insights emerge from US democracy aid policy toward Burma. First, where regimes are intent on maintaining power, democracy assistance can help opposition dissidents but is unlikely to alter the balance of power in the short term. Second, once a regime decides to transition, democracy aid can serve a vital capacity-building function among previously repressed and isolated groups.

In sum, Burma demonstrates that US democracy promotion policy can succeed, but it often works slowly and in conjunction with diverse and disparate factors that can undermine or enhance these efforts. The absence of a quick impact does not necessarily indicate a failed policy, but the costs of promoting democracy, both for the US and target country, must be weighed against the strategic and normative gain from global democratic advancement. Such a cost-benefit analysis cannot be extrapolated from a single case onto the broader policy agenda, but should instead be evaluated within the context of a specific country. In principle, democracy promotion can work, but this does not mean it will work everywhere.

⁵³ So called "smart" or targeted sanctions, which are directed toward regime officials or specific sectors as opposed to the country, have the potential to lessen these moral costs. Some of the sanctions against Burma were targeted at leaders, but they also had a broadly deleterious effect on the economy.

VII. Conclusion

Since the Spanish-American War, US presidents have sought—with varying degrees of consistency and effectiveness—to advance democracy abroad. With the assistance of American policy, the number of democracies around the world continued to rise into the first decade of the 21st century. But democracy has now fallen on hard times. The overall number and quality of democracies are in decline. Freedom House’s 2016 report on global freedom concludes:

The world was battered in 2015 by overlapping crises that fueled xenophobic sentiment in democratic countries, undermined the economies of states dependent on the sale of natural resources, and led authoritarian regimes to crack down harder on dissent. These unsettling developments contributed to the 10th consecutive year of decline in global freedom. (Freedom House 2016, 1)

The report finds that since 2005 the percentage of “free” countries has fallen, the number of countries with declining levels of freedom now far outpaces those improving, and 60 percent of the world’s population now live under “partly free” or “not free” political systems. As the world has become less democratic, Americans have also stopped caring. In a 2013 Pew poll, just 18 percent of Americans said “promoting democracy in other nations” should be a top policy priority and 80% said the US should concentrate on domestic problems rather than international issues.⁵⁴

Despite this, the US should not abandon its long history of democracy promotion; instead, it should continue efforts to promote democracy using the most effective approaches.

⁵⁴ Pew Research Center, “Long-Range Foreign Policy Goals,” December 3, 2013. <http://www.people-press.org/2013/12/03/public-sees-u-s-power-declining-as-support-for-global-engagement-slips/>

Military intervention to promote democracy is costly, generally unsuccessful, and domestically and internationally controversial. Moreover, the inevitable reality that varying explanations are often used to justify intervention can create the impression that democratic rhetoric only conceals other strategic self-interests, which undermines the effort. Alternatively, sanctions and conditionality can work, but they must be multilateral, strict, and patiently applied in the face of possible humanitarian costs. In contrast, democracy aid has the lowest political, economic, and moral costs while still demonstrating impact. Unlike intervention, sanctions, and conditionality, which entail differing degrees of coercion, democracy aid cannot compel democratic transitions. Nevertheless, democracy assistance can help foster the conditions and capacity for change as well as make transitions operate more efficiently and peacefully if they occur. When discussing the future of US democracy policy, we must move beyond the Iraq War example, which is in fact unique in the history of American democracy promotion, and consider both the costs and effectiveness of the full scope of available policy options. Burma's incipient political transition shows us that—contrary to critics—the United States can and should promote democracy. As one Burmese MP told me, “In order to complete the democracy journey, we still need international support, including the United States.”⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Research Interview Questionnaire, Member of Parliament, July 7, 2016.

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