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American Democracy Promotion and the Missionaries of Empire

Jeremy Menchik

ABSTRACT

While the field of religion and international relations has grown and deepened over the past forty years, this article suggests that scholars have neglected the ways in which religious practices and structural relations shape seemingly secular policies such as democracy promotion. Security scholars have long lamented the adverse effects of democracy promotion, while comprehensive empirical reviews of democracy promotion affirm that it did not increase the likelihood of democratization. If democracy promotion did not spread democracy, what did it do? What was democracy promotion? Drawing on original interviews, research in multiple archives, and a new dataset of grants by the National Endowment for Democracy, the article demonstrates that American democracy promoters were to contemporary American liberal imperialism to those of Christian missionaries were to European imperialism. Democracy promotion was the ideological component of American liberal imperialism, with democracy promoters playing an analogous role to missionaries seeking to structure the social order. Key practices include universalizing a particular tradition, being sustained by mission rather than outcome, and evangelizing to sustain belief in the home church. In its claims of universality, its use of ideology as a double mask for hegemony, and its deployment of secularized theology, democracy promotion provided the motivation and legitimation for American liberal imperialism. Understanding democracy promotion as the missionary component of American liberal imperialism helps to explain aspects of the policy that were otherwise inexplicable. More theoretically, understanding democracy promotion as the missionary component of American liberal imperialism opens new avenues for scholarship on religion, empire, and international affairs.

Introduction

For more than forty-five years, security scholars have been debated America's policy of democracy promotion. Formally launched in the early 1980s under President Ronald Reagan, advocates contend that spreading liberal democracy can extend American hegemony, counter terrorism,

decrease the likelihood of foreign wars, and foster institutional cooperation in ways that are advantageous to national interests.¹ For those reasons, some scholars have advocated cautious policies of institutional engineering.² Advocates of democracy promotion are not naïve about the power politics involved, but see the promotion of US interests and values as good security policy.

On the other side of the debate are a variety of cynics and opponents. Some cynics, many of them realists, see democracy promotion as a veneer for strategic projects to undermine the regimes of authoritarian competitors, particularly the Soviet Union, Russia, and China.³ Similarly, a large school of opponents see democracy promotion as an identity underpinning an expansive and unrealistic vision for a liberal international order.⁴ Other critics are simply empiricists who have noted, repeatedly, that the policy does not work.⁵ That failure is why a recent review of the literature ends

¹See John M. Owen, "Transnational Liberalism and U.S. Primacy," *International Security* 26, no. 3 (2001): 117–52. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3092092>; Max Abrahms, "Why Democracies Make Superior Counterterrorists," *Security Studies* 16, no. 2 (2007): 223–53. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636410701399424>; Larry Diamond, "All Democracy is Global: Why America Can't Shrink from the Fight for Freedom," *Foreign Affairs* (Sep 2022): 188–97. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/all-democracy-global-america-cant-shrink-fight-freedom-larry-diamond>; Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlforth, "Don't Come Home, America: The Case against Retrenchment," *International Security* 37, no. 3 (2012): 7–51. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41804173>.

²See Miriam Fendius Elman, "Unpacking Democracy: Presidentialism, Parliamentarism, and Theories of Democratic Peace," *Security Studies* 9, no. 4 (2000): 91–126. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636410008429414>; Steven E. Finkel, Aníbal Pérez-Liñán, and Mitchell A. Seligson, "The Effects of U.S. Foreign Assistance on Democracy Building, 1990–2003," *World Politics* 59, no. 3 (2007): 404–38. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40060164>; James M. Scott and Carie A. Steele, "Sponsoring Democracy: The United States and Democracy Aid to the Developing World, 1988–2001," *International Studies Quarterly* 55, no. 1 (2011): 47–69. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23019513>; Joseph Wright, "How Foreign Aid Can Foster Democratization in Authoritarian Regimes," *American Journal of Political Science* 53, no. 3 (2009): 552–71. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25548137>; Simone Dietrich and Joseph Wright, "Foreign Aid Allocation Tactics and Democratic Change in Africa," *The Journal of Politics* 77, no. 1 (2015): 216–34. <https://doi.org/10.1086/678976>; Allison Carnegie and Nikolay Marinov, "Foreign Aid, Human Rights, and Democracy Promotion: Evidence from a Natural Experiment," *American Journal of Political Science* 61, no. 3 (2017): 671–83. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26379517>.

³See Lindsey A. O'Rourke, "The Strategic Logic of Covert Regime Change: US-Backed Regime Change Campaigns during the Cold War," *Security Studies* 29, no. 1 (2020): 92–127. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2020.1693620>; Alexander Cooley, "Ordering Eurasia: The Rise and Decline of Liberal Internationalism in the Post-Communist Space," *Security Studies* 28, no. 3 (2019): 588–613, DOI: 10.1080/09636412.2019.1604988

⁴See Robert J. Art, "A Defensible Defense: America's Grand Strategy after the Cold War," *International Security* 15, no. 4 (1991): 5–53. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539010>; John J. Mearsheimer, "Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order," *International Security* 43, no. 4 (2019): 7–50. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26777872>; Colin H. Kahl, "Constructing a Separate Peace: Constructivism, Collective Liberal Identity, and Democratic Peace," *Security Studies* 8, no. 2–3 (December 1998): 94–144. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636419808429376>; Ronald R. Krebs and Jennifer K. Lobasz, "Fixing the Meaning of 9/11: Hegemony, Coercion, and the Road to War in Iraq," *Security Studies* 16, no. 3 (24 August 2007): 409–51. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636410701547881>; Kupchan, Charles A. "The Normative Foundations of Hegemony and The Coming Challenge to Pax Americana," *Security Studies* 23, no. 2 (April 2014): 219–57. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2014.874205>;

⁵See Daniel Byman, "An Autopsy of the Iraq Debacle: Policy Failure or Bridge Too Far?" *Security Studies* 17, no. 4 (December 2008): 599–643. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636410802507974>; Alexander B. Downes and Jonathan Monten, "Forced to Be Free? Why Foreign-Imposed Regime Change Rarely Leads to Democratization," *International Security* 37, no. 4 (2013): 90–131; Stephen Knack, "Does Foreign Aid Promote Democracy?" *International Studies Quarterly* 48, no. 1 (2004): 251–66. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3693571>; Dov H. Levin, "A Vote for Freedom: The Effects of Partisan Electoral Interventions on Regime Type," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 63, no. 4 (April 2019): 839–68; Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and

with the acerbic line that “For now, we can conclude not that democracy promotion is dead but that there is little evidence that it was ever ‘alive.’”⁶

And yet this debate has occurred within a single, secular church. Contemporary scholars of democracy promotion see the policy as threefold: strategic and devoid of religious dimensions, institutional expansion by an overreaching hegemon, or technocratic improvement of institutional best practices. Missing is any serious examination of the place of religion in US democracy promotion. While the literature on religion and security has grown and deepened in the past forty years, scholars of both religion and security studies have neglected the ways that religious practices and structural relationships shape seemingly secular policies like democracy promotion.⁷

This neglect matters for policy. The 2022–2026 congressional budget allocations to the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), the nation’s most prominent and influential democracy promotion organization were the highest in history at \$315 million.⁸ Additionally, the 2025 NED funding was dwarfed by a colossal \$3.4 billion per year allocated to the government’s broader democracy programs.⁹ Despite its apparent ineffectiveness, democracy promotion was central to US foreign policy for the past twenty-five years. Even as evidence mounted that democracy promotion did not spread democracy, the presidential administrations of George W. Bush, Barack Obama, the first Donald Trump administration, and Joseph Biden poured resources into it. Understanding democracy promotion is thus a theoretical and policy imperative for scholars of religion and security.

George W. Downs, “Intervention and Democracy,” *International Organization* 60, no. 3 (Summer 2006): 627–49; James Meernik, “United States Military Intervention and the Promotion of Democracy,” *Journal of Peace Research* 33, no. 4 (1996): 391–402. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/424565>; James M. Scott and Carrie A. Steele, “Assisting democrats or resisting dictators? The nature and impact of democracy support by the United States National Endowment for Democracy, 1990–99,” *Democratization* 12, no. 4 (2005): 452; Simeon Djankov, Jose G. Montalvo, and Marta Reynal-Querol, “The Curse of Aid,” *Journal of Economic Growth* 13, no. 3 (2008); M. Dileonzo, “Bypass Aid and Unrest in Autocracies,” *International Studies Quarterly* 62, no. 1 (2018): 208–219.

⁶Ellen Lust and David Waldner, “Democracy Promotion in an Age of Democratic Backsliding,” *Democracy and Autocracy* 18, no.1 (2020): 20. https://connect.apsanet.org/s35/wp-content/uploads/sites/26/2020/03/Democracy-and-Autocracy_Vol-181_Is-Democracy-Promotion-Dead_FEB-2020.pdf.

⁷Key publications on religion and security include Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (University of California Press, 2000); Ron Hassner, “To Halve and to Hold’: Conflicts over Sacred Space and the Problem of Indivisibility,” *Security Studies* 12, no. 4 (2003): 1–33. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636410390447617>; Monica Duffy Toft, “Issue Indivisibility and Time Horizons as Rationalist Explanations for War,” *Security Studies* 15, no. 1 (2006): 34–69; Jenna Jordan, “When Heads Roll: Assessing the Effectiveness of Leadership Decapitation,” *Security Studies* 18, no. 4 (2009): 719–55; Ron Hassner, *War on Sacred Grounds* (Cornell University Press, 2009); Ron Hassner, “Sacred Time and Conflict Initiation,” *Security Studies* 20, no. 4 (2011): 491–520. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2011.625775>.

⁸Congressional Research Service (CRS), *Department of State, Foreign Operations, Related Programs: FY 2023 Budget and Appropriations*, 23 January 2023, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R47070>; Office of Management and Budget, Executive Office of the President. “Budget FY 2025 - Appendix, Budget of the United States Government, Fiscal Year 2025”. Government. Office of Management and Budget, Executive Office of the President, March 11, 2024. <https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/BUDGET-2025-APP768>.

⁹Office of Management and Budget, “Budget of the U.S. Government,” 2024. https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/budget_fy2024.pdf.

That policy has changed under the second Trump administration. In the first hundred days of his presidency, Trump presided over the dismantling of USAID, the largest distributor of democracy aid, and Secretary of State Marco Rubio proposed eliminating the Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Human Rights, and Democracy, and substantially reorienting the work of the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor.¹⁰ NED had to sue the federal government to get access to its congressionally allocated funding for 2025.¹¹ The Trump administration's initial budget proposal for 2026 allocated \$0 to the NED. However, Congress ultimately retained NED funding at the same level as the Biden administration.¹² Regardless of future allocations, 2025 appears to mark a critical juncture: American policies of democracy promotion are likely to disappear, shrink, or change to complement President Trump's foreign policy. While normatively discomforting, it may be easier for scholars to understand "what was democracy promotion?" in the rearview mirror.

If democracy promotion did not spread democracy abroad, what did it do? What was democracy promotion? To answer these questions, I assembled archival, interview, and quantitative data on the NED from before its founding until the early 2020s. This includes a new dataset of all NED grants from 1984 to 2021 compiled from a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request, archival research in the Library of Congress, Reagan Presidential Library, and the Hoover Institute, Congressional Research Service (CRS) and Government Accountability Office (GAO) reports, NED annual reports, and the NED website.¹³ This is the largest existing dataset

¹⁰Marco Rubio, "A New State Department to Meet the Challenges of a New Era," 22 April 2025, <https://statedept.substack.com/p/a-new-state-department-to-meet-the>. This article uses the case of the NED to theorize religion and international relations but for reasons of space does not examine the wider landscape of democracy promotion including USAID or European programs.

¹¹NED, "NED Welcomes State Department's Initial Steps Towards Restoring Funding," 10 March 2025, <https://www.ned.org/ned-welcomes-state-departments-initial-steps-towards-restoring-funding/>.

¹²Congress.gov. "H.R.7148 – 119th Congress (2025-2026): Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2026," 3 February 2026. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/house-bill/7148>.

¹³The NED refuses to allow scholars to access its archives at the Library of Congress. As a result, scholars have drawn from sources involved with the creation of the NED from the Reagan Presidential Library, the Hoover Institute (John Richardson Jr.'s papers and Allen Weinstein's papers), and various collections in the Library of Congress (George Agree papers, Democratic Study Group Records, Daniel Patrick Moynihan papers). Reports from the GAO are also some of the highest quality public sources on the history of democracy promotion: GAO, "Events Leading to the Establishment of the National Endowment for Democracy," 6 July 1984, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/nsiad-84-121.pdf>; GAO, "Promoting Democracy: The National Endowment for Democracy's Management of Grants Overseas," 24 September 1986, <https://www.gao.gov/products/nsiad-86-185>; GAO, "Promoting Democracy: National Endowment for Democracy Efforts to Improve Grant Management," 28 January 1992, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/nsiad-92-89.pdf>; GAO, "Democracy Assistance: U.S. Agencies Take Steps to Coordinate International Programs but Lack Information on Some U.S.-Funded Activities," 28 September 2009, <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-09-993>; GAO, "Democracy Assistance: State Should Improve Accountability Over Funding; USAID Should Assess Whether New Processes Have Improved Award Documentation," 14 December 2017, <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-18-136>; GAO, "Democracy Assistance: State Should Improve Information Sharing with Embassies," 28 January 2020, <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-20-173>. Also useful are reports from the CRS, e.g., CRS, "Democracy Promotion: An Objective of U.S. Foreign Assistance." June 3, 2026. <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R44858>.

of NED grantmaking and likely more complete than the NED's own digitized records.¹⁴ The data is complemented by archival research at the Library of Congress, the Reagan Presidential Library, and the Hoover Institute.¹⁵ I conducted interviews with contemporary leaders, including the Deputy to the President for Policy and Strategy Barbara Haig, Senior Director of the Africa Program Dave Peterson, Director of the World Movement for Democracy Ryota Jonen, Vice President for Programs Brian Joseph, as well as other current and former program officers.¹⁶ In doing so, this article follows the move to “historicize” democracy promotion as a project shaped by its time and practices.¹⁷ Instead of asking the normative question: “does democracy promotion work?” these scholars now ask: What are the origins of democracy promotion and how has it changed?

Together, the new dataset, archival material, and interviews suggest that democracy promotion was not a single project but a multilayered amalgam of three interlinked projects. The first two are well-documented: democracy promotion was a strategic project to undermine American competitors, and a liberal institutional project propelled by ideology and organizational adaptation. Putting those projects together, however, the history and practices of democracy suggest a third, unified logic. In its claims of universality, its use of ideology as a double mask for empire, and in its deployment of secularized theology, democracy promotion provided the motivation and legitimation for American empire. Democracy promoters were to American liberal imperialism as Christian missionaries were to European imperialism.¹⁸ Democracy promotion was the ideological component of

¹⁴Previous research draws from discrete periods: 1990–1997 (Scott and Steele, “Assisting democrats or resisting dictators?”) or 1985–2009 (Sarah Song Bush, *The Taming of Democracy Assistance: Why Democracy Promotion Does Not Confront Dictators* (Cambridge University Press, 2015). NED's FOIA response missed thousands of grants from 1984–2004, suggesting gaps in the NED's records. Hand coding was necessary due to discrepancies between the annual reports and the FOIA response. That said, the annual reports also missed grants in the FOIA response which suggests that the annual reports contain gaps, too. Especially in the early years, the GAO and CRS criticized the NED's grant management.

¹⁵Archival material on the NED is available from the above sources for the late 1970s and the early 1980s, but the NED's refusal to allow scholars to access its archives require me to rely on secondary sources for the 1990s and 2000s alongside the quantitative data and interviews.

¹⁶I collected the interviews through snowball sampling, the only method possible given the NED's opacity. All of the interview subjects quoted by name in this article are “public officials and powerful actors” according to the American Political Science Association's “Principles and Guidance for Human Subjects Research.” I asked each of these officials for permission to record their interviews and gave their oral consent which the author recorded in the interview transcript. In seeking this consent, I explained the purpose of the research, that the transcript would be secure and not made public, and that I would attribute quotations from the transcript. I also undertook interviews with junior and former program officers that I have chosen to keep confidential to minimize the harm that might result from this research.

¹⁷See Robert Pee, “Democracy Promotion is History,” *Passport: The Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations Review* 51, no. 1 (2020): 33–37. <https://www.shaft.org/assets/docs/Passport/2020/April-2020/passport-04-2020.pdf>. William Michael Schmidli, *Freedom on the Offensive: Human Rights, Democracy Promotion, and US Interventionism in the Late Cold War* (Cornell University Press, 2022).

¹⁸I follow scholars' definition of liberal imperialism as simultaneous liberal and hierarchical: liberal in support for democracy and equality, and hierarchical in supporting US interventions in sovereign states and systematic American exceptions to the international legal order. See Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France* (Princeton University Press, 2005); Adom Getachew.

American liberal imperialism, with democracy promoters playing an analogous role to missionaries seeking to structure the social order.¹⁹

At first glance, comparing democracy promoters to Christian missionaries may seem absurd. Political liberalism claims neutrality on matters of faith and lacks a transcendent figure or rituals such as church attendance. In the public imagination, Christian missionaries are linked to colonialism, while they envision NGOs engaged in democracy promotion as enlightened, tolerant, and private. Democracy promoters do not spread religion, do not self-define as missionaries, and are not “missionaries” in a literal or descriptive sense.

Nonetheless, a second glance is needed. Democracy promotion is analogous to Christian missionary work under empire because the two projects have similar origins, practices, and structural relationships. Democracy promotion and modern Christian missionary work share structural roots in state expansion, competition, mass literacy, and the universalization of particularistic ideas. Both projects have similarly dependent yet frustrated relations to state power. Like Christian missionaries, democracy promoters work not just with the state but with society, colonizing consciousness abroad and sustaining imperialism in the metropole. Both projects are distinctly modern; there are more Christian missionaries today than ever before.²⁰

Both projects engage in routinized practices of propagation: universalizing traditions paired with indigenization for local contexts, sustained by mission rather than outcome, and evangelizing to support the home church. Both projects have fields of self-study to motivate and improve propagation. Both projects marry transcendent belief to everyday activism. Both projects assume a teleology in which a transcendent force toward a final state drives political developments. When I asked one National Democratic Institute (NDI) Program Associate what motivated their work, they explained: “I believe that it makes a difference for global democracy. The

“Three Approaches to the Study of Race and International Relations,” *Security Studies* 32 no. 4–5 (2003): 871–78. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2023.2246896>. This approach dovetails with historical research on American missionaries and empire by Ian Tyrrell, William Hutchinson, Emily Conroy-Krutz, and John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff (see theory section below) and stands in contrast to more conceptual approaches to empire (e.g. Daniel H. Nexon and Thomas Wright, “What’s at Stake in the American Empire Debate,” *American Political Science Review* 101, no. 2 (2007): 253–71. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055407070220>).

¹⁹My article builds upon Jonathan Monten’s seminal work on democracy promotion as an ideological project that has aggressively expanded under conditions of unipolarity. I delve into the historical and theoretical underpinnings of this project by explicating the practices, structural relationships, and secular theology that has shaped forty years of democracy promotion (Jonathan Monten, “The Roots of the Bush Doctrine: Power, Nationalism, and Democracy Promotion in U.S. Strategy,” *International Security* 29, no. 4 (2005): 112–56. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4137499>).

²⁰World Christian Database, Center for the Study of Global Christianity, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. <https://www.worldchristiandatabase.org>.

evidence kind of sucks, but I believe it anyways.”²¹ Both believe that they should advocate their tradition. The most formidable enunciation of this view comes from the NDI staffer’s antecedent; in the words of US President Woodrow Wilson, “When he does not actively advocate truth, he advocates error. Those who are not for truth are against it. There is here no neutrality.”²² To Wilson, Christian missionaries provided the moral authority that exemplified and extended American power abroad, much like the NED sees democracy promotion as exemplifying and extending American power today.²³

Like Christian missionaries under European imperialism, American democracy promotion reflects national identities and interests, even as it masks that particularity in the language of universalism. That universalism is double, cloaking national interests and strategy while inviting militarism in the name of a sincere solidarity. Democracy promoters, like missionaries, often envision a different kind of empire than state administrators and military forces, yet they ultimately facilitate rather than disrupt imperial expansion. By the early 2000s, “universal democracy” was just as realistic to the NED as “the evangelization of the world in this generation” was to participants at the World Missionary Conference of 1910, blurring the line between the military and the political and facilitating the enlistment of democracy advocates into the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.²⁴ In sum, democracy promotion was the missionary component of American liberal imperialism.

This article develops this argument in stages. The next section applies early twentieth-century international relations (IR) theory to examine the links between ideological propagation and empire. The first empirical section presents evidence that democracy promotion was a strategic project, then discusses the limitations of this view. The second empirical section presents evidence that democracy promotion was a liberal internationalist project, before also noting the limitations of that view. Both arguments have merit but together set the stage for my overarching claim that democracy promoters provide the ideological component of American liberal imperialism, emulating the practices of their pious predecessors and seeking

²¹Author interview with NDI program officer, Boston, 26 September 2023.

²²Woodrow Wilson, “A Christian Statesman,” *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 1, p. 188. Printed in the *Wilmington North Carolina Presbyterian*, 6 September 1876.

²³Cara Lee Burnidge, *A Peaceful Conquest: Woodrow Wilson, Religion, and the New World Order* (University of Chicago Press, 2016); Jeremy Menchik, “Woodrow Wilson and the Spirit of Liberal Internationalism,” *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 22, no. 2 (2021): 231–53. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2021.1904910>.

²⁴On universal democracy see Larry Diamond, “Can the Whole World Become Democratic? Democracy, Development, and International Policies,” 1 June 2003, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7bv4b2w1>. On universal evangelization see William Hutchinson, *Errand to the World: American Protestant Thought and Foreign Missions* (University of Chicago Press, 1987).

to structure the social order. The conclusion explores policy implications and suggests new avenues for studying religion and international affairs.

Theory of Ideology, Empire, and Missionaries

Understanding the relationship between ideology, empire, and religion requires stepping back from the NED. To do so, I turn to an IR theorist present during the US imperial turn in the late 19th and early twentieth centuries, when the nation transitioned from a regional to a global power. Standing outside the liberal tradition, Carl Schmitt perceived the US vision for itself more clearly than we do today, recognizing the power of ideas in both domestic and international politics.²⁵ Schmitt teaches us that its claims of universality, its use of ideology as a double mask for hegemony, and in its deployment of secularized theology, democracy promotion provides the motivation and legitimation for American empire.

Democracy promoters use the claim of universality to mask US national interests. Schmitt teaches us that such claims serve ideological warfare: “At the expense of its opponent, [the state] tries to identify itself with humanity in the same way as one can misuse peace, justice, progress, and civilization to claim these as one’s own and to deny the same to the enemy.”²⁶ Reagan’s National Security Council directive creating the NED followed this precise strategy of universalization and indigenization, instructing that “the overarching strategy should be to stress the fundamental strengths of the political system characteristic of the US and the advanced societies of the West, while at the same time emphasizing those features of Western democracy which can most readily serve as models for democratic or constitutional regimes in the Third World.”²⁷

Beyond strategy, Schmitt teaches us that the mask is double. The wearer comes to assume the world shares universal qualities which naturally engender convergent interests.²⁸ This distinction between the effect of the mask on the audience and the wearer provides a useful contrast between the realists who have supported democracy promotion as a strategic project, for example, Henry Kissinger, and the NED activists embedded in the global democracy movement. The activists staffing the NED are less conscious of universalization as a strategy, and more cognizant of it as their daily practice.

²⁵On Schmitt and religion see Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (University of Chicago Press, 1996 [1932]); Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1985 [1922]); for secondary sources see Jens Meierhenrich and Oliver Simons, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Carl Schmitt* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

²⁶Schmitt, *Concept of the Political*, 54.

²⁷12 December 1983, NSC Memo “NSSD 2-83 on US International Information Policy and Accompanying NSDD. Raymond Walter Files, Reagan Presidential Library (hereafter RPL).

²⁸Tracy B. Strong, “Foreword,” in *The Concept of the Political*, xxii.

The double mask's primary function is domestic. Historically, Christianity legitimized European empires, including Spain, and later Dutch, British, and early American rule.²⁹ Contemporary American Christian mission work has likewise long been understood as serving the home church.³⁰ This domestic function suggests that scholars should analyze the empire and missions less by their impact in the colony than in the metropole. That democracy promotion rhetoric focuses as much on “who we are” as on foreign affairs is no accident—its ideological work matters most at home. In sum, missionaries are the ideological engine for empire, with their vision for the world preceding and shaping hegemony.

This function is not new. Scholars long saw American missionaries as vital to home churches. They were unapologetically imperial in their worldview, even before the United States colonized the Philippines.³¹ In contrast to everyday Americans, missionaries were globally connected and saw opportunities in imperialism. They helped shape America's imperial culture, as “the missionary map followed the imperial map.”³² Historian Emily Conroy-Krutz notes, “That way of thinking brought this group of Americans to view the world with the eyes of imperialists, looking for places where they might exert their influence and power.”³³

Schmitt is also useful in mapping the evolution of this function. Schmitt teaches us that all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts, both in their historical development and in their structure.³⁴ The normative consciousness of a period is reflected in the ideological tools for legitimating empire: “Monarchy thus becomes as self-evident in the consciousness of that period as democracy does in a later epoch.”³⁵ Structurally, democracy promotion now provides that secularized theological apparatus for American empire. Religious imperialism is outmoded in our age of disenchantment.

In sum, Schmitt teaches us that democracy promotion involves the universalization of a particular tradition, the development and deployment of a double mask to structure the domestic and international order, and evangelicism to sustain the home church. Like other missionary endeavors, the NED works closely with imperial power, downgrades the promotion

²⁹While all European empires invested in missions, in comparative historical perspective the maritime empires of Britain, the United States, and the Netherlands invested later and fewer resources in missions than did the Spanish and Portuguese empires. For comparative analysis, see Thomas Barfield, *Shadow Empires: An Alternative Imperial History* (Princeton University Press, 2023), Ch. 2, and Alejandro Colás, *Empire* (Polity Books, 2007).

³⁰Emil Brunner, *The Word and the World* (American Theological Library Association, 1965), 108.

³¹Hutchinson, *Errand to the World*, 59.

³²Emily Conroy-Krutz, *Christian Imperialism: Converting the World in the Early American Republic* (Cornell University Press, 2015), 6.

³³Conroy-Krutz, *Christian Imperialism*, 19.

³⁴Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 36.

³⁵Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 46.

of universal values when the American state's particular interests are at stake, and provides cover, camouflage, and motivation for imperialism.

The next section shows how this argument builds on the two dominant explanations in the literature: that democracy promotion is strategic and that it is the institutional component of a global social movement. The evidence suggests that both claims have some validity as well as limitations. My contribution is in bringing religion into the debate to show the over-arching logic of democracy promotion in empire, as well as the origins of the practices and structural relationships that make it possible.

Existing Explanations for Democracy Promotion: Strategy and Solidarity

Democracy Promotion is a Strategic Project

Especially to security scholars, US democracy promotion is a strategic project to undermine authoritarian competitors, particularly the Soviet Union, Russia, and China.³⁶ From its founding, the NED's funding has prioritized competitor states and within their spheres of influence. [Figure 1](#) shows the top target states for funding from 1984 to 2021 with Russia or China consistently the highest priority states. It is worth noting that after forty years, the top recipients of democracy aid remain authoritarian regimes.

The emphasis on competitors is even clearer at the intraregional level. [Figures 2 and 3](#) show that Russia and China have dominated NED funding for most of its history, with only Ukraine receiving comparable support as a regional "keystone" state.³⁷ This dominance excludes hundreds of millions spent on "global" grants that obscure target countries. NED descriptions suggest these grants primarily counter Russia and China's influence, \$46.6 million in 2020 alone, but opacity prevents precise country-level tracking. Overall, the figures confirm that democracy promotion prioritizes US strategic competitors.

That strategic logic extends to democracy prevention, arguably more central to US foreign policy than democracy promotion.³⁸ The NED has largely avoided promoting democracy where authoritarianism serves US interests. Since 1984, it has allocated only \$1.2 million to civil society in Saudi Arabia, compared to Afghanistan (\$52 million) and Morocco (\$25

³⁶On this line of argument see Mearsheimer, "Bound to Fail;" O'Rourke, "Strategic Logic;" Schmidli, *Freedom*.

³⁷Author interview with Rohozinska, 4 June 2019, Washington, DC. "So, [Ukraine] is the keystone state, right? So, I mean it's the biggest former Soviet Republic outside of Kazakhstan. Um, it's certainly, I mean, the basic calculation is this, and whether it's right or wrong, it doesn't matter. I would probably say it's half right. But, it's important for Ukraine to succeed in making a democratic transition fully for both the symbolic and the practical value that it has for Russia."

³⁸Jason Brownlee, *Democracy Prevention: The Politics of the U.S.-Egyptian Alliance* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

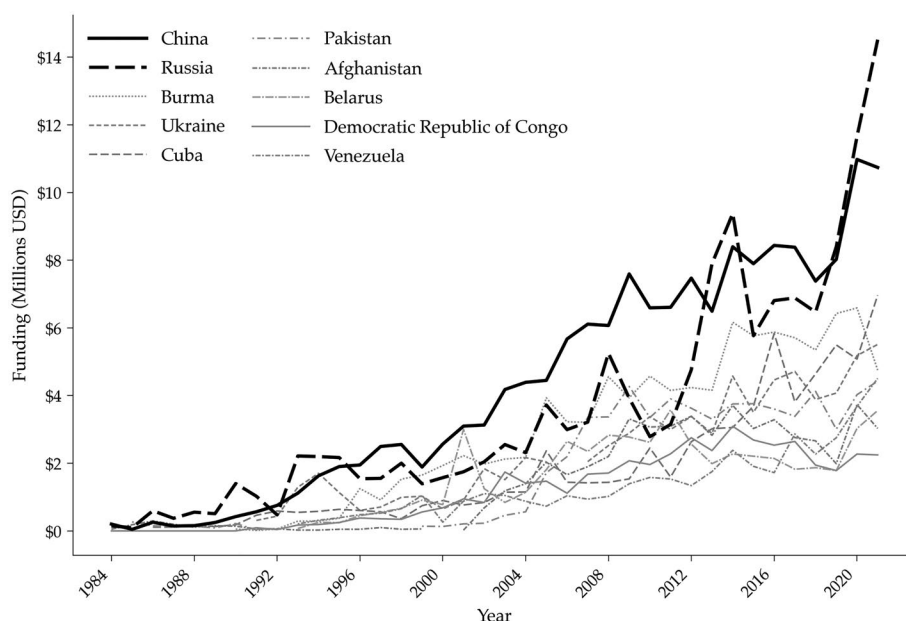


Figure 1. The National Endowment for Democracy (NED)’s top targets: Russia and China (1984–2021). Note: The data excludes Iraq from year-by-year trends since the three years it appeared in the top 10, 2004–2006, were a departure from the other 37 years.

million). In contrast, China (\$133 million) and Russia (\$131 million) have received massive funding, with single grants frequently exceeding Saudi Arabia’s 40-year total. The NED has bypassed other right-wing authoritarian states with strong US ties: Singapore (\$30,000), Oman (\$69,506), Kuwait (\$1.7 million), and Bahrain (\$897,390). Meanwhile, left-wing authoritarian regimes have received comparatively vast amounts of money, especially Cuba (\$67 million), Venezuela (\$41 million), and Nicaragua (\$36 million). As realists argue, democracy promotion primarily targets US competitors.

That said, there are limitations to this line of analysis. While realists tie democracy promotion to the post-Cold War liberal order,³⁹ the project has Cold War origins. Additionally, we should take seriously the agency of the “democracy makers,” as Guilhot calls them.⁴⁰ Figures like Larry Diamond and Carl Gershman demonstrate genuine commitment to transnational solidarity through their writings and activism. While the weaponization of ideas is key to understanding the NED, belief in those ideas is central to democracy promotion. Thus, we need a second answer to the question, “What is democracy promotion?”

³⁹Mearsheimer, “Bound to Fail,” 21.

⁴⁰Nicolas Guilhot, *The Democracy Makers: Human Rights and the Politics of Global Order* (Columbia University Press, 2005).

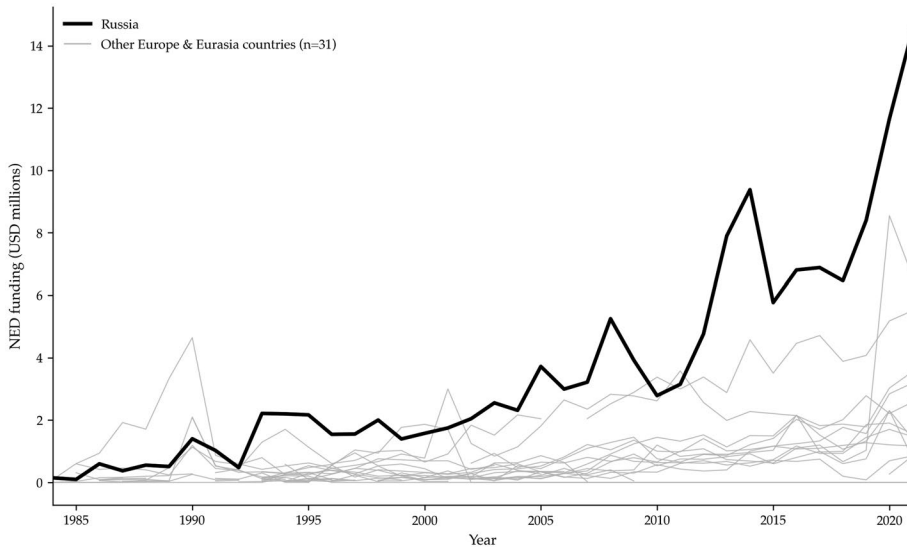


Figure 2. Russia receives the most NED funding in Europe (1984–2021).

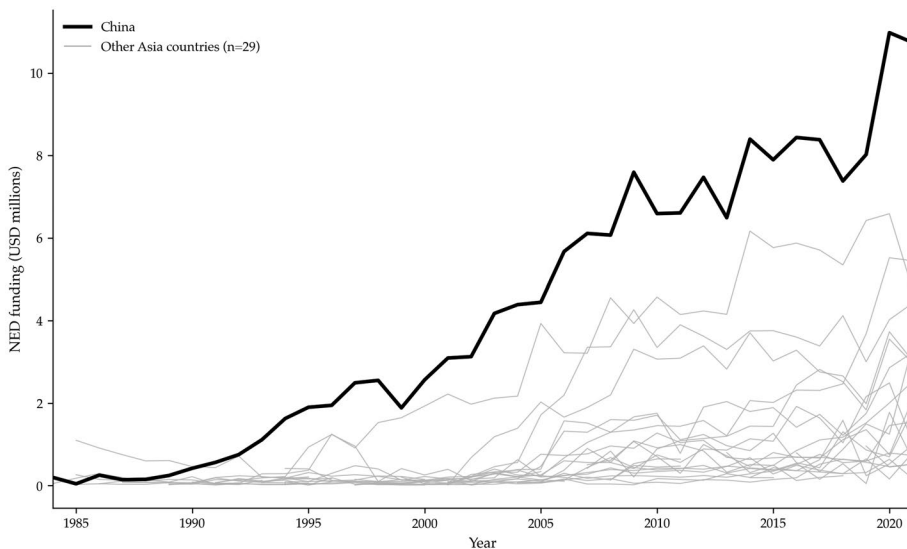


Figure 3. China receives the most funding in Asia (1984–2021).

Democracy Promotion is the Institutional Component of a Global Social Movement

Some people might see us as simply one tool in the arsenal of foreign policy tools to impact and effect political change, including ideology. And if ideology, you mean ideas? Yes, we are absolutely in the business of ideas. Democracy is not just a technical exercise of having people pull a ballot lever. We are part of, if you want to call it that, an ideological struggle, though it's not the language I would use. But I would

absolutely say that we believe that ideas matter. Ideas transcend political borders, ideas animate politics, [and] if you're not engaged in that political discourse, you're missing part of the equation.

—Brian Joseph, NED Vice President for Programs⁴¹

Democracy promotion is the institutional component of a global social movement to advance freedom and counter authoritarianism.⁴² Movement leaders' backgrounds in activism, the Peace Corps, and Fulbright reflect this solidarity. Guilhot describes these "double agents" as bringing democracy and human rights language into foreign policy. These former Trotskyists, socialists, and neoconservatives joined classical liberals and conservatives in a social and ideological struggle against the Soviet Union.⁴³ In the NED's early years, scholars like Sidney Hook and Seymour Martin Lipset collaborated with policymakers like Jeanne Kirkpatrick and Lane Kirkland. NED staff have likewise moved between academia, the State Department, and NGOs to continue this fight.⁴⁴

The foundation for this synthesis came from William A. Douglas's 1972 book, *Developing Democracy*, written while he was a fellow at the American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD).⁴⁵ Douglas later became the NED's key consultant. AIFLD was among its first and largest early grant recipients.⁴⁶ He saw "democratic development" as both a strategic and moral imperative to counter liberalism's ideological rivals, specifically the Socialist International, International Union of Socialist Youth, the International Union of Christian Democratic Youth, the World Union of Christian Democrats, and various populist groups. The United States needed its own ideological movement.⁴⁷ He wrote, "As long as the Communist powers have a foreign policy weapon which the West cannot match, there will be cases of impending political defeat for the West, which may result in misguided last-ditch military interventions."⁴⁸ The NED became that weapon.

Douglas's vision aligned with another rising social and ideological movement. Neoconservatives like Daniel Bell, Irving and William Kristol, Melvin Lasky, Norman Podhoretz, Elliot Abrams, Morton Abramowitz, and Paul Wolfowitz have worked for the NED, served on its board, or promoted

⁴¹Interview with the author, 22 May 2022.

⁴²On this line of argument see: Guilhot, *Democracy Makers*; Brooks et al., "Don't Come Home;" Owen, "Transnational Liberalism."

⁴³Guilhot, *Democracy Makers*, 32–33.

⁴⁴Erin Snider, *Marketing Democracy: The Political Economy of Democracy Assistance in the Middle East* (Cambridge University Press, 2022), Ch 3.

⁴⁵William A. Douglas, *Developing Democracy* (Heldref Publications, 1972).

⁴⁶Democracy Program, "The Commitment to Democracy: A Bipartisan Approach" (Washington, DC: Democracy Program, 1983), available at <http://www.ned.org/docs/democracyProgram.pdf>; National Endowment for Democracy, "NED Annual Report 1984," 1984, FOIA Request.

⁴⁷Douglas, *Developing Democracy*, chap 14.

⁴⁸Douglas, *Developing Democracy*, 137.

its mission.⁴⁹ Their early influence peaked under Reagan, when figures like Daniel Patrick Moynihan and Jeane Kirkpatrick allied with “Reagan Democrats” such as Elliot Abrams and Richard Perle. This latter group, committed to Jewish nationalism after 1967 and opposed to the UN following its 1975 resolution equating Zionism with racism, embraced an anti-Communist foreign policy that clashed with the 1960s New Left but dovetailed with strategic democracy promotion.

The first two presidents of the NED, Weinstein and Gershman, help to illustrate the centrality of this social and ideological movement to democracy promotion. Weinstein was a professor at Smith, Georgetown, and Boston University, editor of *The Washington Quarterly*, and drafter of the preliminary proposals for the Democracy Project. In 1980 Weinstein helped organize a demonstration in support of Soviet dissident Andrei Sakharov.⁵⁰ Under Reagan, he chaired a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) delegation advocating free media access in developing countries.⁵¹ In 1992, he joined a journalist delegation to Nicaragua, emphasizing the power of free media in fighting communism.⁵² Weinstein’s focus on opposing left-wing authoritarianism, his ties to Reagan, and his use of liberal media ideals in US foreign policy reflect the ideological foundation of democracy promotion.

Gershman was president of the NED until 2022, and, like Weinstein, his commitments provide insight into the NED’s origins. He was active in key leftist and Jewish organizations, including the Youth Committee for Peace and Democracy in the Middle East (a Zionist student group), and the Young People’s Socialist League, later Social Democrats, USA. His 1975 pamphlet, *The Foreign Policy of American Labor* argued that free trade unions were essential to democracy and a defense against tyranny.⁵³ Gershman also defended labor’s anti-communism as opposition to Soviet efforts to co-opt unions. Before the NED, he was senior counselor to the US ambassador to the UN under Kirkpatrick.

The NED’s scope today fulfills Reagan’s vision for a “march of freedom and democracy” on a global scale, even as the evidence grows that democracy promotion does not lead to democratization. That endurance suggests that strategic interests, more than a social movement, underpin democracy promotion. In comparative and historical perspective, the NED shares a structural relationship and set of practices common to empires.

⁴⁹The literature on neoconservatives is abundant. See, for example, Murray Friedman, *The Neoconservative Revolution: Jewish Intellectuals and the Shaping of Public Policy* (Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁵⁰Associated Press, Washington, 6 November 1980.

⁵¹Associated Press, Mexico City, 1 August 1982.

⁵²David Shribman, *The New York Times*, 12 September 1983, 4.

⁵³Carl Gershman, *The Foreign Policy of American Labor* (1975), 2.

Democracy Promotion is the Missionary Component of American Liberal Imperialism

This section adopts a periodization strategy to demonstrate that democracy promotion is the missionary component of American liberal imperialism. Key practices include the NED's universalizing of a particular tradition, being driven by mission rather than outcome (with implications for apologetics, historical teleology, and cooperation with imperial power), and evangelizing to sustain the home church. The periods are grouped based on shifts in US foreign policy: 1982–1990, 1991–2001, and 2002–present.

Period I: Universalizing a Particular Tradition

In its promotional material, the NED traces its origins to the Wilsonian tradition. That genealogy makes a certain sense given President Woodrow Wilson's support for global democracy, led by Christian missionaries, a democratic alliance, and economic openness. Like the NED, his liberal internationalism was selective, favoring a union of Protestant democracies shaped by his Southern Protestant values, anti-Catholicism, and limited awareness of other traditions.⁵⁴ That said, the NED's connection to Wilson is also an awkward fit. Wilsonianism emphasized interstate cooperation, while the NED works on the social level. The NED claims to be secular, universal, and bipartisan, while Wilson's mode of transcendence was unapologetically Democratic and Protestant.

A more apt, albeit particular, predecessor for the NED was the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF), a transnational group of anti-Communist intellectuals supported by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to counter Soviet-backed organizations.⁵⁵ Prior to the NED, US agencies pursued similar goals through similar methods. The NED and CCF shared personnel—including Daniel Bell, Irving Kristol, Sidney Hook, and Melvin Lasky—as well as structure and mission. Both relied on indirect US government support for anti-communist intellectuals, social democrats, and liberals. In fact, those same intellectuals founded the periodicals that Reagan supported as part of his public diplomacy efforts, including the *New Leader*, *Encounter*, and *Survey*.⁵⁶ As with other missionary ventures, such periodicals are the terrain upon which universalization takes place.

⁵⁴Burnidge, *Peaceful Conquest*; Menchik, "Woodrow Wilson."

⁵⁵Guilhot, *Democracy Makers*; Peter Coleman, *The Liberal Conspiracy: the Congress for Cultural Freedom and the Struggle for the Mind of Postwar Europe* (The Free Press, 1989); Mary Sperling McAuliffe, *Crisis on the Left: Cold War Politics and American Liberalism* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1978); Frances Stoner Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper?: The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (Granata Books, 1999); Hugh Wilford, *The Mighty Wurlitzer: How the CIA Played America* (Harvard University Press, 2008).

⁵⁶Guilhot, *Democracy Makers*, Ch. 1–2; Raymond, "Outline for a Vigorous Information Program," 1982, RPL.

In 1966, the CCF was exposed as a CIA “false front” operation, leading to the closure of smaller periodicals and an end to CIA funding.⁵⁷ Yet the structural pressure for ideological war endured. In April 1967, Representative Dante Fascell proposed an Institute of International Affairs to promote democracy more publicly than the CIA. The bill failed, but Dante Fascell and Donald Fraser revived it in 1978 in the form of a Quango.⁵⁸ Around the same time, consultant George Agree proposed the creation of the American Political Foundation, modeled on Germany’s *Stiftungen*.⁵⁹ Created in 1980, the American Political Foundation (APF) launched “The Democracy Project” in 1982, directly leading to the NED’s creation. Officials saw in the CCF a model, noting: “We used to do some of this giving covertly. But when we stopped being able to keep our secrets in these matters, people became unwilling to accept our money. The foundation idea is a way of getting around the problem.”⁶⁰ APF director Allen Weinstein explicitly acknowledged efforts to recreate CIA programs “TO FOSTER SUCH VALUES AND IN EFFECT PUT US BACK INTO THE BUSINESS THAT HAD BEEN LOST IN THE 1960S, BUT IN A WAY, OF COURSE, NOT INVOLVING THE AGENCY.”⁶¹ The APF’s board thus included academics and policymakers skilled in anti-Communist diplomacy, promoting universalized values to serve strategic interests.

Scholars consider Reagan’s 1982 address at Westminster the official birth of the NED.⁶² Reagan’s speech is worth describing in depth because it highlights core features of the NED that are central to my claim that democracy promotion is the missionary component of American liberal imperialism: universalization, apologetics, polemics, and teleology of history.

Prior to the speech, Chancellor of the House of Commons Quintin Hogg provided an introductory polemic: “So let tyrants tremble throughout the world. Representative government is stronger than dictatorship. Not in spite of, but—because of their differences and debates free peoples are more efficient and more prosperous than the enslaved. Right will prevail

⁵⁷The CCF was subsequently renamed the International Association for Cultural Freedom (IACF).

⁵⁸Brock report to Reagan, 1983, RPL; CRS, “The National Endowment for Democracy/Project Democracy,” Issue Brief IB83107. Updated 01/31/84. Hoover Institute archives, Weinstein Paper Box 51, File 4.

⁵⁹New York Times, 17 February 1983.

⁶⁰Suzanne Garment, 11 June 1982. “Getting Started on Mr. Reagan’s Democracy Drive,” *The Wall Street Journal*.

⁶¹Allen Weinstein, “My Meeting with Deputy National Security Advisor Bud McFarlane,” 6 November 1982. Hoover Institute archives, Weinstein Paper Box 30, File 5.

⁶²The speech’s author, Mark Palmer, has a background that runs parallel to the other anti-Communist leftists; Palmer was a Freedom Rider as an undergrad at Yale, went on to be a speechwriter for Kissinger, and then served as an advocate for democratization as foreign policy in the State Department for 26 years. He was ambassador to Hungary in 1986 under Reagan and after 9/11 published a book making the case for a liberal interventionism (Mark Palmer, *Breaking the Real Axis of Evil: How to Oust the World’s Last Dictators by 2025* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2003).

over might, law over anarchy and oppression.”⁶³ Reagan continued the theme: “From here I will go on to Bonn and then Berlin, where there stands a grim symbol of power untamed. The Berlin Wall, that dreadful gray gash across the city, is in its third decade. It is the fitting signature of the regime that built it.”⁶⁴ Like other apologetic texts, Reagan addressed objections: “This is not cultural imperialism: it is providing the means for genuine self-determination and protection for diversity.”⁶⁵

Another missionary theme was a teleology of history leading to the endpoint of liberal democracy: “Poland’s struggle to be Poland, and to secure the basic rights we often take for granted demonstrates why we dare not take those rights for granted. Gladstone, defending the Reform Bill of 1866, declared: ‘You cannot fight against the future. Time is on our side.’” Reagan also stated, “What I am describing now is a plan and a hope for the long term—the march of freedom and democracy which will leave Marxism-Leninism on the ash heap of history as it has left other tyrannies which stifle the freedom and muzzle the self-expression of the people.”⁶⁶

Reagan’s vision for democracy promotion was more particular than universal, emphasizing privatization: “There was a threat posed to human freedom by the enormous power of the modern state. History teaches the dangers of government that overreaches political control taking precedence over free economic growth.”⁶⁷ He linked his critique of the USSR to social democracy, prioritizing economic over social rights. Central to the speech was the universalizing of Reagan’s specific view: “We must be staunch in our conviction that freedom is not the sole prerogative of a lucky few but the inalienable and universal right of all human beings.”

Reagan’s speech dovetailed with his broader anti-Communist policy. National Security Decision Directive 77 (NSDD-77), signed on January 14, 1983, authorized these programs, with its political committee laying the groundwork for the NED:

[The International Political Committee] will be responsible for planning, coordinating and implementing international political activities ... designed to counter totalitarian ideologies and aggressive political action moves undertaken by the Soviet Union or Soviet surrogates.⁶⁸

⁶³Diary, 1982-03-01–1982-07-16, GBR/0014/HLSM 1/1/19. Churchill Archives Centre. https://archivesearch.lib.cam.ac.uk/repositories/9/archival_objects/441639.

⁶⁴ June 1982, Reagan address at Westminster. Collection RR-WHCA: Records of the White House Communications Agency (WHCA) (Reagan Administration), 1/20/1981–1/20/1989 Item: President Ronald Reagan’s Address to British Parliament, Royal Gallery of the Palace of Westminster, London, United Kingdom, 6/8/1982. <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/7087571>.

⁶⁵Reagan address at Westminster, 1982.

⁶⁶Reagan address at Westminster, 1982.

⁶⁷Reagan address at Westminster, 1982.

⁶⁸NSDD-77, 14 January 1983. emphasis mine.

Early media coverage of “Project Democracy” made explicit the links between the CIA and NED that are now buried. A UPI article on the “crusade for democracy” quoted a senior administration official: “We are looking at things which the CIA used to do covertly.”⁶⁹ That coverage raised eyebrows in the NSC, with one cable warning: “This kind of press play could give second thoughts to the Ecuadorian notables who have agreed to participate in Washington conference and prejudice success of proposed hemispheric institute for democracy.”⁷⁰ Over time, the rhetoric of crusading and CIA links was replaced with the secularized and universalized language of civil society and freedom.

The NSC also made clear that democracy promotion should be modeled on the intertwined missionary techniques of universalization and indigenization; first showing the US political system as a timeless and universally accessible ideal, then indigenizing it in conversation with the local institutions. “In the political area, the overarching strategy should be to stress the fundamental strengths of the political system characteristic of the US and the advanced societies of the West, while at the same time emphasizing those features of Western democracy which can most readily serve as models for democratic or constitutional regimes in the Third World.”⁷¹ To facilitate adoption, the NCS downplayed certain aspects of the ideal:

Emphasis should also be placed on the importance of local politics and of intermediate political and social associations of all kinds as a practical expression of the freedom enjoyed in Western democracies, in place of the celebration of Western “individualism”—a notion which is thoroughly alien to the political culture of much of the Third World. To the extent possible, the idea of democracy should be assimilated to traditional participatory practices of less developed societies such as tribal or village councils and the like.⁷²

Unlike the NED staff, the NSC maintained a critical distance from the missionary endeavor and saw its utility without getting ensnared in its horizons. The staff of the NED was less conscious of universalization as a strategy than a daily practice.

Weinstein and staff in the United States Information Agency (USIA) sought funding for the Democracy Project from the private sector, with major gifts to endow initiatives. USIA ideas included:

Post Soviet World Project: A series of conferences and a book set for publication in early 1984 discussing the demise of the Soviet Empire. \$150,000

⁶⁹UPI 1982, in Walter Raymond Files, RAC Box 7, RPL.

⁷⁰NSC Cable, “UPI Story on Democracy Initiative,” RAC Box 7, RPL, 9 September 1982.

⁷¹NSC Memo, “NSSD 2-83 on US International Information Policy and Accompanying NSDD,” 12 December 1983, RAC Box 7, RPL.

⁷²NSC Memo, “NSSD 2-83,” 1983.

Academic Programs in Democracy: Private endowments either to universities in developing countries or to US universities for visiting chairs in donors [sic] name. \$1,000,000

Institute for Democracy in Central America: Regional organ composed of US and Latin American intellectuals, modeled after American counterparts. \$1,500,000

International Election Commission: An international, bi-partisan monitoring agency responsible for worldwide and standard election review. \$1,500,000

Private Institution Leadership Training: Designed for military as well as civilian leaders and attached to private Institutes and Universities.” \$750,000

Free Market Institutes: Regional efforts modeled after AEI and adapted to the specific needs of the indigenous economies. \$1,000,000⁷³

Such initiatives should be familiar to contemporary scholars and were intended to universalize democracy from a Western institution to a global ideology. For example, the School for Advanced International Studies (SAIS) program was to “expand some of their focus from American studies to more universal studies on democracy.”⁷⁴ The SAIS planned to export this universal ideal by “putting more focus on how to expand democracy” and providing training on “how to make the transition from non-democratic to democratic institutions.”⁷⁵

These efforts at universalization and indigenization were coupled with strategic targeting focused on the Soviet sphere of influence, “placing more emphasis on programs related to the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.”⁷⁶ Personnel were also key; left-wing anti-Communists and Russian dissidents were prioritized: “It was emphasized that this should be open to Russian and other ethnic groups from the USSR and to Eastern Europeans and that a welcome mat should be out for motivated blue collar representatives (e.g., Polish Solidarity) as well as members of the intelligentsia.”⁷⁷ Another focus was on training future democrats, the “Successor Generation,” through programs such as Fulbright. Such programs then integrated alumni into a “Full Cycle” leadership model patterned after the Georgetown Leadership Seminar.⁷⁸

Labor unions were a key asset for indigenization. As noted, Gershman’s roots were within the labor movement.⁷⁹ Lane Kirkland, the Chair of the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations

⁷³W. Scott Thompson memo to Robert Kiernan, “Private Sector Funding of Project Democracy,” RAC Box 7, RPL, 28 December 1982.

⁷⁴Steiner Memo to Interagency Working Group on Public Diplomacy, 7 December 1982, RAC Box 7, RPL.

⁷⁵Steiner Memo, 1982.

⁷⁶Steiner Memo, 1982.

⁷⁷Steiner Memo, 1982.

⁷⁸Steiner Memo, 1982.

⁷⁹Gershman, *Foreign Policy*.

(AFL-CIO), was center stage at NED's launch with the AFL-CIO's Director of International Affairs, Irving Brown, in the second row.⁸⁰ The NSC likewise placed labor at the center of its vision for public diplomacy against the USSR: "Emphasis should be placed on the dignity of labor, and the respect accorded labor and labor unions in democratic as distinct from Communist societies."⁸¹ The Reagan administration sought to counter Soviet influence by promoting free trade unions to weaken anti-American elements and combat Communist infiltration.⁸² This approach was envisioned as being piloted in the Caribbean and South America before global implementation using US embassy labor attachés.

The ideological work of transforming democracy from a set of institutions to a universal ideology is most visible in the NED discussions of the enemies of freedom. Recall that Reagan's pitch at Westminster centered on polemics against communism. Moynihan's yearly "Dear Colleague letters" lamented Soviet efforts to "radicalize" and "destabilize" foreign countries⁸³ and posited the NED as the remedy. As Keith Schuette, head of the National Republican Institute for International Affairs noted: "We're engaged in almost missionary work. ... We've seen what the Socialists do for each other. We've seen what the Communists do for each other. And now we've come along, and we have a broadly democratic movement, a force for democracy."⁸⁴

I want to end this section with the NED's 1984 *Founding Statement of Principles and Objectives*, which highlights the missionary practices behind the project and its inherent tensions. The opening statement, "The National Endowment for Democracy is a US initiative to strengthen democratic institutions through private, non-governmental efforts," is misleading since nearly all NED funding comes from the US government.⁸⁵ While not a federal agency, it is inaccurate to call a publicly funded organization "private." This emphasis continues in a puzzling section:

The expansion of private, voluntary initiatives to promote democracy internationally cannot be accomplished through governmental action alone. Indeed, the creation and structure of the Endowment reflect the view that the U.S. private sector is both a

⁸⁰15 December 1983, White House Memo to Brenda, RAC Box 7, RPL.

⁸¹12 December 1983, NSC Memo "NSDD 2-83 on US International Information Policy and Accompanying NSDD, RAC Box 7, RPL.

⁸²Memo for Walter Raymond by Robert W. Searby, "Implementation of the President's Speech to the British Parliament on Promoting Democracy," n.d. August 1982, RAC Box 7, RPL.

⁸³Daniel Patrick Moynihan, 26 June 1984, Folder 1588, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress.

⁸⁴David K. Shieler, "Missionaries for Democracy: U.S. Aid for Global Pluralism," *The New York Times*, 1 June 1986, 1.

⁸⁵NED, "Founding Statement of Principles and Objectives," 1984, cited Oct. 20, 2022 at <https://www.ned.org/about/statement-of-principles-and-objectives/>. Private sector support for the NED continues to be miniscule compared to the federal government (NED, "Financial Report," Sep. 30, 2020. Accessed June 3, 2026 at <https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/NED-FY-2020-Financial-Audit.pdf>). Perhaps for this reason, over time the NED has shifted its description of itself from a "private" organization to a "non-profit."

more appropriate and a more effective vehicle than government for working with private groups abroad to advance the democratic cause.⁸⁶

One way to resolve this contradiction is to redefine the NED as “private” despite public funding. A more convincing explanation is that this statement is ideological rather than empirical: the NED’s founders imagined the private sector to be democracy’s engine. The gap between the NED’s self-image and reality reveals a universalizing campaign that embeds its vision in a false history. The mask is double, and the wearer comes to believe its own ideology.

Another unintended theme, to be developed in Period II, is the NED’s missionary zeal: “While the Endowment will concentrate the major part of its resources on situations that offer a realistic prospect for achieving progress toward democracy, it will not neglect those who keep alive the flame of freedom in closed societies.”⁸⁷ The “flame of liberty” originates in Enlightenment literature, where the “light of progress” guides the way out of ignorance. True to its secularized theology, the founding statement ends with a religious appeal: “We hope that the Endowment’s work will not only help them achieve the blessings of democracy, but will strengthen the bond between them and the people of the United States, a bond based on our common commitment to democracy as a way of life.” Such language is missionary not just in its transcendent tone but in a more subtle aspect: it is mission driven rather than outcome driven.

Period II: Mission Driven

The NED faced existential challenges in Period II, which should be surprising given the triumph of democratization during the third wave. Legislation and amendments to terminate the NED were introduced in 1991, 1993, 1994, 1995, and 1998.⁸⁸ GAO and CRS reports in 1985, 1986, 1994, 1996, 1997, and 1999 criticized the NED for its failure to comply with statutes and its unwillingness to evaluate the effectiveness of its

⁸⁶NED, “Founding Statement of Principles and Objectives,” 1984.

⁸⁷NED, “Founding Statement of Principles and Objectives,” 1984.

⁸⁸Congress.gov, “H.R.117 – 102nd Congress (1991-1992): To terminate all United States assistance to the National Endowment for Democracy, and for Other Purposes,” 31 January 1991. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/102nd-congress/house-bill/117>; Congress.gov, “H.R.602 – 103rd Congress (1993-1994): To Terminate All United States Assistance to the National Endowment for Democracy, and for Other Purposes,” 11 February 1993. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/103rd-congress/house-bill/602>; Congress.gov, “H.Amdt.692 to H.R.4603 – 103rd Congress (1993-1994),” <https://www.congress.gov/amendment/103rd-congress/house-amendment/692>; Congress.gov, “S.Amdt.2845 to H.R.2076 – 104th Congress (1995-1996),” <https://www.congress.gov/amendment/104th-congress/senate-amendment/2845>; Congress.gov, “S.2186 – 105th Congress (1997-1998): A Bill to Terminate All United States Assistance to the National Endowment for Democracy, and for Other Purposes,” 17 June 1998. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/105th-congress/senate-bill/2186>.

programs in a sustained or meaningful manner.⁸⁹ The end of the Cold War raised hard questions about the utility of the NED's mandate; recall that Reagan's 1982 Westminster speech centered on anti-Communism, as did the NSC declaration creating the NED.

How did the NED survive the 1990s? By deploying the same strategies as other missionary organizations: continuing to universalize a particular tradition with adaptation to the new configuration of power, sustained by the mission rather than the outcome, and evangelizing to sustain the home church. This section elaborates those strategies, especially the way the mission drives democracy promotion.

In contrast to other government programs like education, which has relatively clear metrics for success, the NED insists that it cannot meaningfully evaluate its outcomes. It came as a surprise when, 90 minutes into my interview with Barbara Haig, she said that she could not evaluate the success of the NED's programs. When pressed, she pointed, hesitantly, to the NED's evaluations office. But she also concluded, "I don't know that they could tell you the larger picture of success."⁹⁰ Instead, she suggested I speak with NED program staff like Joanna Rohozinska, who has been working on democracy promotion in Ukraine and Eastern Europe. Yet Rohozinska, too, was hesitant to identify examples of success. She explained that democratization is a long process: "I think a lot of it is about moving the needle in various slow increments toward it. A lot of these things are like 20, 30-year processes as far as I'm concerned."⁹¹ She went on to provide examples of decentralized policy making in Ukraine, but given such a *longue durée*, she, too, was skeptical whether the NED's evaluations office could identify success.

This skepticism is systemic. A 1991 GAO report found the NED lacked the capacity to evaluate its programs: "The Endowment does not know whether its programs are effective and efficient, because it lacks the capacity to independently evaluate and report on the effectiveness of its programs."⁹² In 2006, the NED called assessing its impact "an overwhelming, if not impossible, task" due to differing definitions of democracy

⁸⁹GAO, "Questions Concerning Whether National Endowment for Democracy Complied with National Endowment for Democracy Act," 22 March 1985, <https://www.gao.gov/products/b-214585-0>; GAO, "Promoting Democracy: The National Endowment"; Ellen C. Collier and Paul Graney, "National Endowment for Democracy," CRS Report for Congress, 21 December 1994; Susan B. Epstein, "National Endowment for Democracy: Policy and Funding Issues," CRS Report for Congress, 2 August 1996, 96-222 F; Susan B. Epstein, "National Endowment for Democracy: Policy and Funding Issues," CRS Report for Congress, 20 August 1997, 96-222Fa; Susan B. Epstein, "National Endowment for Democracy: Policy and Funding Issues," CRS Report for Congress, 16 August 1999, 96-222 F.

⁹⁰Author interview with Haig, 4 June 2019, Washington, DC.

⁹¹Author interview with Rohozinska, 4 June 2019, Washington DC.

⁹²GAO, "Promoting Democracy: National Endowment for Democracy's Management of Grants Needs Improvement," <https://www.gao.gov/assets/nsiad-91-162.pdf>, 24.

promotion, quantification limits, and longtime horizons.⁹³ A 2007 CRS summarizes: “Even qualitative measures can be misleading, according to the NED report, if they do not take into account a wide variety of criteria on a case-by-case basis. Among other factors, even qualitative assessments must take into account whether a case is high-risk, whether sponsored groups operate under limiting or deteriorating conditions, and whether projects are sponsored as ‘long-term investments’ in countries where democratization is not expected to occur for many years.”⁹⁴ The CRS report goes on to note that after more than twenty years, “There is little agreement among experts and practitioners on the circumstances in which democracy promotion success may be achieved; the appropriate emphasis, sequencing, and mix of programs to achieve it; and the time frame necessary for an enduring democracy to take hold.”⁹⁵ Even NED’s success stories—such as the Philippines, Poland, Bosnia, and Hungary—have since become hybrid or authoritarian regimes.

How should scholars make sense of the NED’s insistence that success cannot be evaluated? Democracy promoters see their work as inherently valuable, regardless of what the outcome metrics indicate. The NED justifies its existence by virtue of its support for democratic values and solidarity with democratic activists: “As an institution founded on the principle that democracy is a universal value, NED believes that it has a special responsibility to act on this principle and to show solidarity with all those who are defending democratic values and human freedom.”⁹⁶ In other words, the NED is mission driven rather than outcome driven.

To the NED, the efficacy of democracy promotion cannot be evaluated because acting on the principle of democratic solidarity is the end. Even global democratization would not change the NED’s mandate; it would cement the importance of that work since, as the world’s foremost democracy promoter Larry Diamond writes, “Democracy can deteriorate at any point in its development; its quality and stability can never be taken for granted.”⁹⁷ In fact, the closest Rohozinska came to defining success was as a feeling rather than a metric: “It’s kind of the hands-on feeling of satisfaction and the immediate benefit of somehow being engaged in something right.”⁹⁸ Commitment to the mission is success.

⁹³NED, “Evaluating Democracy Promotion Programs: A Report to Congress from the National Endowment for Democracy” submitted to the House and Senate Appropriations Committees in response to a reporting requirement contained in the conference report (Conf. Rept. 109-272) accompanying H.R. 2862, the Science, State, Justice, Commerce Appropriations Act for FY2006, March 2006, p. 51; cited in CRS 2007, “Democracy Promotion: Cornerstone of U.S. Foreign Policy?” https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/RL/PDF/RL34296/RL34296.6.pdf.

⁹⁴CRS 2007, “Democracy Promotion: Cornerstone of U.S. Foreign Policy?”, citing NED 2006.

⁹⁵CRS 2007, “Democracy Promotion: Cornerstone of U.S. Foreign Policy?”, 12.

⁹⁶NED, “2012 Strategy Document”, 2012. <https://www.ned.org/docs/strategy/2012StrategyDocument.pdf>, 8.

⁹⁷Larry Diamond, *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 273.

⁹⁸Author interview with Rohozinska, 4 June 2019, Washington, DC. Emphasis mine.

As a result, throughout its history the NED has changed its *raison d'être*. After the Cold War, deprived of its mandate to fight communism, the NED pivoted to democratizing the globe and engaged in historical revisionism to justify its mission anew: “As a reading of [the 1984 strategy document] shows, the Endowment’s mission was from the very outset conceived not as anti-communist but as pro-democratic.”⁹⁹ That is a falsehood that helped the NED pivot to China, with funding doubling to over \$400,000 following the 1989 Tiananmen Square demonstrations and growing to \$3.8 million by 1996.¹⁰⁰ In the 1980s, funding for China programs had never surpassed \$250,000.

A related shift refined the NED’s global and teleological vision. NED portrayed democracy as progressing in stages, with the NED focusing on “the ‘cutting edge’ of democratic advance, where historically it has been most effective.” NED proposed shifting its funding to “the world’s remaining closed societies, especially China, Cuba and Vietnam; and authoritarian systems, especially in Africa, the Middle East and elsewhere in the Islamic World, including Indonesia.”¹⁰¹ The NED assumed that democratization was inevitable, with the timing uncertain. While most funding still went to Central and Eastern Europe, more was allocated to Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East, including projects in Cambodia, China, Egypt, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Lebanon, Nigeria, Somalia, South Africa, Syria, Thailand, and Turkey (see [Figure 4](#)).

In every period, the NED has adapted to the crisis of the time. In 1992, the NED justified its mission as one of global democratization rather than combating the Soviet Union. In 1997, the NED justified its mission as countering ethnic conflict.¹⁰² After 9/11, countering terrorism provided the strongest justification for the NED until the mid-2010s, when countering rising authoritarianism and kleptocracy became predominate. Moments of crisis are when the NED is most compelling in its vision for the United States in the world, drawing on Reagan’s durable call for freedom to combat the peril of the moment.

In Period II, the targets changed, but not the mission. In 1992, the NED strategy elevated concerns about cultural forces: “In many of the areas that have so far resisted the advance of freedom, powerful cultural factors pose significant obstacles to democratic progress.”¹⁰³ Likewise, regions of the world were newly infused with culture: “Non-democratic

⁹⁹NED, “Strategy Document,” January 1992, 3.

¹⁰⁰The “Goddess of Democracy” statue from Tiananmen Square became NED’s award for democracy activists.

¹⁰¹NED, “Strategy Document,” January 1992, 14.

¹⁰²NED, “Promoting Democracy in a Time of Austerity: NED’s Strategy for 1997 and Beyond,” 1997. https://www.ned.org/docs/strategy/1997_Strategy_Document.pdf, 5.

¹⁰³NED, “Strategy Document,” January 1992, 2.

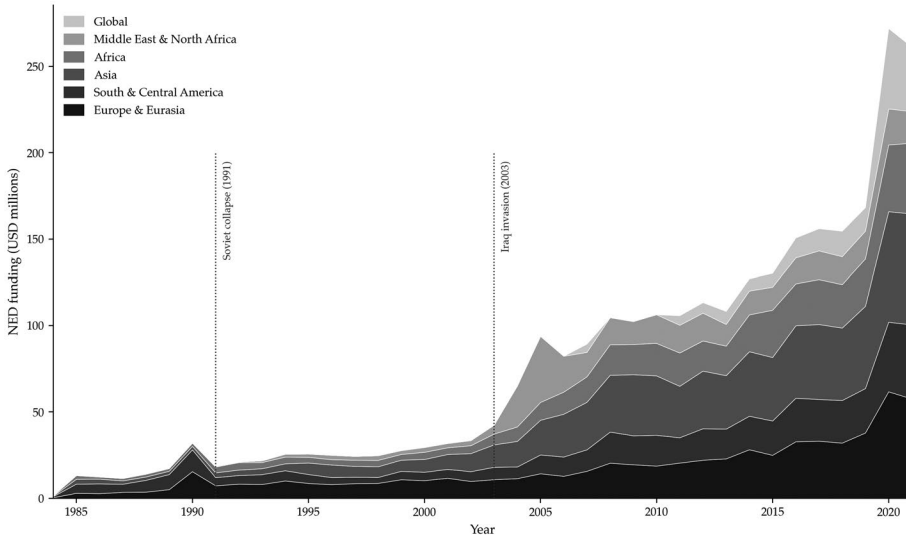


Figure 4. Democracy promotion follows US foreign policy priorities (1984–2021).

regimes are concentrated in Africa, the Islamic World and East Asia.”¹⁰⁴ The introduction of culture as a problem was a departure from Period I when civic culture was an asset for advancing democracy.¹⁰⁵ NED thus borrowed directly from the Christian missionary tradition, in which missionaries see culture as something either to be deployed or combat to advance propagation.¹⁰⁶ By reviving and reconceptualizing the place of culture in democracy promotion, the NED harkened back to classic strategies of empire and adapted them to the new environment.

The centrality of mission rather than outcome was made most clear in my interview with Haig. She contrasted the work of the NED with that of other organizations: “And I think another thing is because we’re a single mission organization. We’re not in development assistance, or humanitarian assistance, and this and that, and the other thing.”¹⁰⁷ She went on to critique NGOs in Iraq for being too outcome-oriented:

So [say] you’re a civil society group. And what we want to do now is public service announcements. So would you be one of the implementers of doing public service announcements? Sure.” Okay, six months later: Now, we want to do a big push on vaccinations or some other thing. And now we want people who can learn how to be trainers and human rights, and now who, and you go to the same groups. So they’re not mission oriented. They’re service delivery oriented.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴NED, “Strategy Document,” January 1992, 9 emphasis mine.

¹⁰⁵NED, “Founding Statement of Principles and Objectives,” 1984.

¹⁰⁶Hutchinson, *Errand to the World*; John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, Vol. 1 (University of Chicago Press, 1991).

¹⁰⁷Interview 18 May 2022, emphasis mine.

¹⁰⁸Interview 18 May 2022.

Haig contrasted technical proficiency with the transcendent work of democracy promotion. The NED's mission transcends any specific task, administration, regional event, or metric for success: it moves the entire organization, which in turn expects to see its mission mirrored in grant recipients.

The missiology literature refers to Haig's vision as "church-planting."¹⁰⁹ In the 1990s, the NED imagined establishing regional democracy promotion centers in Warsaw, Manila, and Portugal, which would spawn their own centers: "Through the grants program NED can help build indigenous institutions that have the will and ability to become regional centers for the promotion of democratic values. Such centers could eventually evolve into formal NED-like institutions that provide grant support and training both within and beyond their own regions."¹¹⁰ Replication of the NED in other contexts became a new metric for success: "The success of NED's operating philosophy is best illustrated by the use of NED as a model for the creation of similar institutions in other countries."¹¹¹ Propagating the ideology of democracy became success for the NED, rather than democratization.

Since the NED's mission can never be achieved and the success of its programs cannot be assessed, the NED's own continuity became another key metric: "Nonetheless, there is no higher priority for NED in the coming period than to make the case for the continuing relevance of our work in the post-Cold War era."¹¹² Notice the domestic focus of the 1997 NED strategy document: "If the United States, the world's first and leading democracy, cannot sustain a program like the Endowment, the effect on our friends will be devastating. We cannot let this happen, and the odds are that it won't if we believe strongly enough in our mission and can defend it cogently. This is a difficult challenge, but one from which we can draw energy and inspiration."¹¹³ The NED thus justified democracy promotion as sustaining faith in democracy at home: "At a time of intense partisanship in American political life, it is sometimes necessary to be reminded by someone still fighting for democracy of what unites us as a people and what we stand for as a country."¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁹Keith Eitel, "'To Be or Not to Be?': The Indigenous Church Question," in *Missiology: An Introduction to the Foundations, History, and Strategies of World Missions*, ed. John Mark Terry, Ebbie C. Smith, and Justice Anderson (Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998).

¹¹⁰NED, 1997, 3.

¹¹¹A Report to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the House Foreign Affairs Committee of the US Congress, "Democracy Promotion Programs Funded by the US Government – 'Brown Report,'" PC-AAA-756, 7.

¹¹²NED, 1997, 5.

¹¹³*Ibid.*, 6.

¹¹⁴*Ibid.*, 5.

Interviews with the NED staff commonly reflected the commitment to that mission. They referred to members of Congress and the State Department as “supporters.”¹¹⁵ Take, for example, this extended quote from Haig:

But you know, Nancy Pelosi loves us to death. I mean, Leahy loves us. Graham loves us, McConnell loves us, and lots and lots of lesser-known people in the Congress. And I think one of the reasons is that some of the conservatives, if they are kind of faith-based people and believe in this sort of human dignity issue that extends to everybody, not just Americans. They see us as an organization that believes in values. So, Paul Weyrich, if you know who he is, he was one of the founders of the Heritage Foundation. ... He loved us because he thought we believed in values.

In contrast to other government programs, scholars correctly see the NED as having an ideological, or in the case of Pelosi and Weyrich, emotional relationship to policymakers. Perhaps for that reason, scholarship on the NED tends to be polarized, much like research on Christian evangelicals and Islamists.

Period II ended with the NED’s budget similar to where it began the decade: around \$30 million. The NED adapted to the calls for austerity by both proclaiming its ability to “do more with less” and expanding its mission and mandate: “Because freedom is an innate human aspiration, the gradual universalization of democracy within a world of diverse cultures remains a critical and feasible objective of the United States.”¹¹⁶ It was not until the 9/11 attacks that the NED grew far beyond what Reagan could have imagined. And, yet, being driven by mission rather than outcome meant that the NED and its supporters continued to preach the gospel of democracy, especially in the home church.

Period III: Evangelizing to Sustain the Home Church

For the ultimate determinant in the struggle now going on for the world will not be bombs and rockets, but a test of wills and ideas, a trial of spiritual resolve: the values we hold, the beliefs we cherish, the ideals to which we are dedicated. ... So let us ask ourselves: What kind of people do we think we are? And let us answer: free people, worthy of freedom, and determined not only to remain so but to help others gain their freedom as well. ... Let us now begin a major effort to secure the best—a crusade for freedom that will engage the faith and fortitude of the next generation.
—President Ronald Reagan at Westminster¹¹⁷

Mission work does not arise from any arrogance in the Christian Church; mission is its cause and its life. The Church exists by mission, just as a fire exists by burning.

¹¹⁵Interview with Ryota Jonen, June 3, 2022.

¹¹⁶NED, 1997, 6.

¹¹⁷Reagan 1982.

Where there is no mission, there is no Church; and where there is neither Church nor mission, there is no faith. It is a secondary question whether by that we mean Foreign Missions, or simply the preaching of the Gospel in the home Church.

–Reformed Theologian Emil Brunner¹¹⁸

Part III explains how democracy promotion has most influenced the home church, motivating and justifying belief in American liberal imperialism. This logic peaked after 9/11. The attacks were not a reason to rethink interventions like the NED's support for the Afghan mujahideen but justification for more: "Meeting the challenge of democratization in the Muslim world thus does not warrant a retreat from the Endowment's global approach, which is rooted in the worldwide interests and moral concerns of the United States. On the contrary, it constitutes a powerful new argument for maintaining and strengthening this approach."¹¹⁹ As shown in Figure 5, NED's total assets rose from \$35.4 million in 2000 to \$128 million in 2020, while Congressional allocations grew to \$315 million per year from 2020 to 2025. After September 11, 2001, any global instability was framed as a threat requiring intervention: "In a globalized world, the cancer of breakdown in any country can metastasize to other parts of the global body politic and thus constitutes a danger to international peace and security."¹²⁰

The idea that missionary work sustains belief has a long history and set of practices. One practice is bringing field workers and converts back home. For American Baptists, Adoniram Judson's furloughs were vital for sustaining mission work. Similarly, the NED has brought democracy activists to the United States. In the 1980s these included NED grantee Sabahuddin Kushkaki, an Afghan "freedom fighter" who met with President Reagan and said of the NED's support, "They have been giving us help without any strings attached."¹²¹ Other visitors included Korean opposition leaders,¹²² Nicaraguan opposition politician and journalist Violeta Barrios de Chamorro,¹²³ anti-Communist figures from Eastern Europe,¹²⁴ and the Kosovar journalist Veton Surroi.¹²⁵ These visits helped mobilize congressional support, with one senator stating: "The reason that NED will not go away is because it does good work. ... We have had any number of people come through the Halls of the Congress recognized as fighters for human rights, fighters for freedom, fighters for democracy who have

¹¹⁸Brunner, *The Word and the World*, 108.

¹¹⁹NED, "Strategy Document," January 2002. <https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/strategyDocument2002.pdf>, 4.

¹²⁰NED, "Strategy Document," 2002, 4.

¹²¹Shipler, "Missionaries for Democracy."

¹²²Christopher Madison, "Selling Democracy," *The National Journal*, 1986.

¹²³Robert Pear, "Chamorro Meets Bush and Vows to Reduce Army," *The New York Times*, 9 November 1989, p. 6.

¹²⁴A. M. Rosenthal, "On My Mind: The Presence of Heroes," *The New York Times*, 1991, p. 29.

¹²⁵Jane Perlez, "Voice of Hope in Kosovo Tells the U.S. of Goals," *The New York Times*, 2000, p. 8.

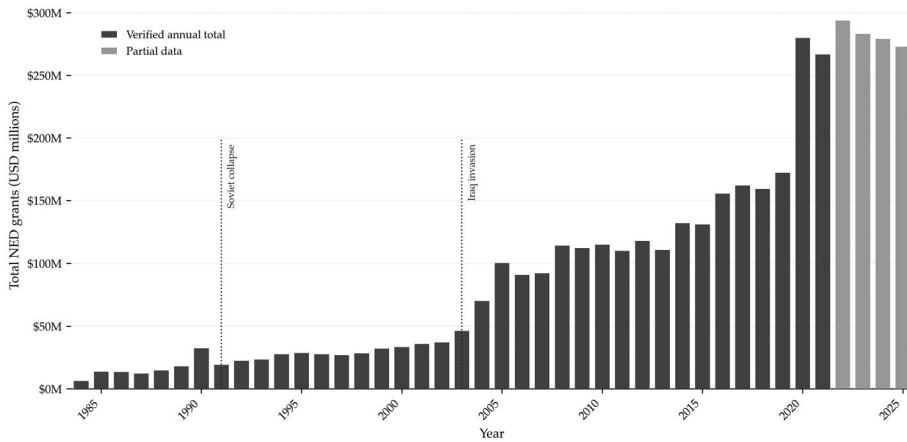


Figure 5. Total National Endowment for Democracy (NED) funding 2000–2021. Note: Grant totals for 2022–2025 are an estimate since the NED has become more opaque in its public reporting and has not released sufficient country or regional grant information to enable verification.

manifested their support for NED and the support which [it] gave them and made them possible in their own countries to lead this effort.”¹²⁶

Another missionary practice that sustains belief is self-study. Missiology is a field that blurs the line between research and practice to spread Christianity. Calvinist scholar and politician Abraham Kuyper described missiology as “The investigation of the most profitable God-ordained methods leading to the conversion of those outside Christ.”¹²⁷ The NED likewise blurs the line between research and practice to sustain belief. The International Forum for Democracy (later called the International Forum for Democratic Studies) is the NED’s home for missiology, including self-study, ideational development, and mentoring. The NED created the Forum with the same purpose as missiology: “The work of the International Forum for Democracy should be useful to democrats everywhere, but its most important benefits will accrue to the Endowment itself.”¹²⁸ The Forum became an internal think-tank or research arm providing the ideological weapons for the war of ideas after 9/11 in the competition with Russia and China. The Forum publishes the *Journal of Democracy* (JOD), a non-peer-reviewed journal with articles by activists and scholars, blurring the line between the two in the service of the mission.

¹²⁶Senator Sarbanes was discussing a 29 September 1995 event with seven former Secretaries of State supporting the NED. See Epstein, “National Endowment for Democracy: Policy and Funding Issues,” 1996, 6.

¹²⁷Justice Anderson, “An Overview of Mission,” in *Foundations, History, and Strategies of World Missions*, ed. Terry, Smith, and Anderson (1998), 7.

¹²⁸NED, “Strategy Document,” 1992, 17.

The *JOD* editors argued that democrats needed a forum for ideas since “democracy remains comparatively weak in the realm of political ideas and organization.” The Forum has addressed a primarily domestic audience by “reaching out to more US citizens, including students, and involving them more extensively in the worldwide effort to build democracy. Such broadened participation would enhance the understanding in the United States of the Endowment’s activities and objectives.”¹²⁹ The effects have been most obvious in higher education, where *JOD* articles seed numerous syllabi. From 2003–2016, the Forum served as the “Secretariat” for the Comparative Democratization section of the American Political Science Association, shaping over a decade of research and enlisting sectors of political science in its mission: “We hope that it will help to unify what is becoming a worldwide democratic movement.”¹³⁰

A final practice by which mission sustains belief is by blurring the line between the military and the political, and humanitarianism and self-interest.¹³¹ The NED filled that role in the debates about the US invasion of Iraq after 9/11. The militarization of democracy promotion was invited by the NED under the auspices of a “natural organizing principle” in the war on terrorism: “Since democracy is a genuinely universal value based on the belief that people everywhere, regardless of their religion or culture, can achieve self-government under the rule of law, it is the natural organizing principle in the struggle to defeat terrorism and to create a stable and peaceful world. ... The universal aspiration for democracy is the banner under which this battle for the defense of our national interest can most effectively be waged, and it is also the banner under which the NED has always proudly marched.”¹³² As a result, democracy promotion served as a key pillar of George W. Bush’s rationale for the US invasion of Iraq.

In a speech at the NED, Bush merged the war and the militarization of democracy promotion: “We believe that liberty is the design of nature. We believe that liberty is the direction of history. ... It is the right and the capacity of all mankind. ... With all the tests and all the challenges of our age, this is, above all, the age of liberty. Each of you at this endowment is fully engaged in the great cause of liberty, and I thank you.”¹³³ Bush bridged the NED’s Reagan-era war of ideas against communism with its new fight against Islamofascism. Democracy promotion remained a

¹²⁹NED, “Strategy Document,” 1992.

¹³⁰Larry Jay Diamond and Marc F. Plattner, “Why the ‘Journal of Democracy,’” 1 no. 1 (1990): 4. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.1990.a225680>

¹³¹Ian Tyrrell, *Reforming the World: The Creation of America’s Moral Empire* (Princeton, 2010).

¹³²NED, “Strategy Document,” 1992, 4.

¹³³George W. Bush, “President Discussed the Future of Iraq,” 26 February 2003, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/02/print/20030226-11.html>.

flexible tool for US presidents: “And whatever lies ahead in the war against this ideology, the outcome is not in doubt: Those who despise freedom and progress have condemned themselves to isolation, decline, and collapse.”¹³⁴ The NED was fully enlisted in the US invasion of Iraq because it had been blurring the line between the military and the political, and humanitarianism and self-interest since the 1980s.

The case of Iraq demonstrates the centrality of bringing converts from the mission field to sustain belief in the home church, too. Prior to the first Gulf War, a NED grantee, the Congressional Human Rights Foundation, masked the identity of the daughter of the Kuwaiti Ambassador to the United States, and presented her to Congress as “Nayirah,” a 15-year-old Kuwaiti girl who testified that she saw 15 infants taken from incubators in Al-Adan Hospital in Kuwait by Iraqi soldiers who “left the babies on the cold floor to die.” Her testimony was pivotal to the George H. W. Bush administration’s obtaining the necessary votes for authorization, though it was later debunked.¹³⁵

The NED was also a key platform for Laith Kubba, one of the Iraqis in exile who made the case for the invasion. Kubba provides a final illustration of how the NED has provided the ideological apparatus to sustain belief in the morality of American liberal imperialism. Prior to working at the NED, Kubba was director of a civil society NGO, the International Forum for Islamic Dialogue in London, and an organizer of the Iraqi National Congress, founded in 1992 by 33 groups opposed to the regime of Saddam Hussein. He was director of the Arabic weekly *Alalam* and the English monthly *Africa Events*, and as early as 1992 called for a military invasion of Iraq.¹³⁶ Recruited to the NED by Gershman, he was involved in the State Department’s Future of Iraq project.¹³⁷ In the *JOD*, Kubba echoed a teleological vision, portraying the Middle East as plagued by tribalism and violence.¹³⁸ And yet, he promised that new technologies and civil society would drive liberal democracy forward.¹³⁹

Kubba’s writings had policy implications. Ahead of the war, Kubba outlined a road map to depose Saddam Hussein, establish democracy, and prevent civil war. His vision for the transitional administration included

¹³⁴George W. Bush, “President Discusses War on Terror at NED,” <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2005/10/20051006-3.html>.

¹³⁵John R. MacArthur, “Remember Nayirah, Witness for Kuwait?,” *The New York Times*, 6 January 1992, 17.

¹³⁶William E. Schmidt, “Warning to Baghdad: Iraq Says It Is Ready to Fight Allies over Air Zone,” *The New York Times*, 27 August 1992, 14.

¹³⁷Nora Bustany, “Witness to Violence, Bearer of Hope,” *The Washington Post*, 17 January 2003; Frontline interview with Laith Kubba, 9 October 2003. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/truth/interviews/kubba.html>.

¹³⁸Laith Kubba, “The Awakening of Civil Society,” *Journal of Democracy* 11, no. 3 (2000): 84–90; NED, 2002, 68.

¹³⁹Laith Kubba, “What Is Liberal Islam? Faith and Modernity,” *Journal of Democracy* 14, no. 2 (2003): 45–49.

a quick referendum, representative councils, and a tripartite presidency.¹⁴⁰ His vision for the constitution included minority rights, provincial financial authority, and a consociational military.¹⁴¹ In the lead-up to the war, *The Washington Post* featured a glowing profile of Kubba: “In his day job, he’s a program officer at the National Endowment for Democracy, but he spends much of his after-hours time organizing Iraqi Americans who hope to contribute to the rehabilitation of Iraq after the government changes.”¹⁴²

With the invasion, Kubba realized his dream, and he became an advisor and spokesman for Iraqi Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari (2005–2006). But after his democracy project failed, Kubba fled back to Washington, D.C., where he continued to champion democracy promotion. He blamed authoritarianism not on US policies or foreign-backed dictators but on culture: “The critical challenge in advancing democracy in Muslim countries has always been fighting authoritarianism, which is rooted in tribal traditions of loyalty, nepotism, and patriarchy.”¹⁴³ He lamented the early elections in Iraq and longingly imagined another path.¹⁴⁴ Such imaginings keep the dream of universal democracy alive.

Implications for Research and Policy

This article has demonstrated that democracy promotion is the missionary component of American liberal imperialism, reflecting similar structural relationships and practices as Christian missionaries under European and early American imperialism. This finding opens up new avenues for scholarship and policy on religion, international affairs, and democracy promotion.

First, while scholarship on religion and security has advanced, religion is too narrowly construed. To understand international affairs, we must trace religious influences in seemingly secular domains. While scholarship on humanitarianism, international order, and state formation has uncovered religious origins, religion’s influence on contemporary secular institutions remains undertheorized.¹⁴⁵ As a result, scholarship on religion and international affairs retains a secular-religious binary that masks the historical

¹⁴⁰Laith Kubba, “How to Achieve Democracy in Iraq,” *Financial Times*, 6 October 2002.

¹⁴¹Laith Kubba, “How to Stop the Disintegration of Iraq,” *Financial Times*, 8 December 2002.

¹⁴²Bustany, “Witness to Violence.”

¹⁴³Laith Kubba, “Islamist Parties and Democracy: Institutions Make the Difference,” *Journal of Democracy* 19, no. 3 (2008): 38.

¹⁴⁴Kubba, “Islamist Parties and Democracy,” 42.

¹⁴⁵Michael Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism* (Cornell University Press, 2011); Daniel D. Philpott, “The Religious Roots of Modern International Relations,” *World Politics* 52, no. 2 (2000): 206–45; Anna Grzymala-Busse, *Sacred Foundations: The Religious and Medieval Roots of the European State* (Princeton University Press, 2023).

and relational diffusion of religion.¹⁴⁶ For example, if we take seriously, as Wilson, Schmitt, Reagan, and George W. Bush did, that wars for democracy are crusades for freedom, we must theorize them as wars involving religion—just as scholars are rethinking the Cold War.¹⁴⁷ Studies of wars involving religion suggest they last longer and follow different dynamics than resource conflicts, which may help to explain the protracted wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.¹⁴⁸

Second, this finding suggests that scholars need to do more research on religion, ideology, and social movements to understand how such projects emerge, evolve, and end. This article found that the metropole, not the mission field, drives ideological projects such as democracy promotion. That suggests that only a major ideological defeat would change the policy, and indeed, Donald Trump, an authoritarian president, may be credited by historians for helping to end democracy promotion.¹⁴⁹ That said, we lack systematic comparisons of ideological ventures across religious and political traditions, and their relationships to social movements and state policies. As we move beyond the unipolar moment, studying the evolution of ideological projects in comparative and historical perspective would clarify their trajectory.

Third and related, despite forty years of research on democracy promotion, there is relatively little work following the NED into the field. The research that does exist, most notably by Sarah Sunn Bush, Jessica Teets, and Erin Snider, points to great enthusiasm for democracy aid resources and little impact on fostering democratic transitions.¹⁵⁰ Similarly, historical work on democracy promotion in Nicaragua suggests that it was welcomed by opponents of the Sandinistas like the Contras, but unfavorably by democracy activists who opposed the Reagan administration's "deeply undemocratic practices that misled the US people, violated US law, and contributed to immense human and material destruction in Nicaragua."¹⁵¹ Ironically, the change in NED's influence under President

¹⁴⁶For efforts to combat this binary see Peter S. Henne, "Reassembling the Social in the Study of Religion and International Relations," *International Studies Review* 25, no. 3 (2023): 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viad037>.

¹⁴⁷Andrew Preston, *Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith: Religion in American War and Diplomacy* (Knopf, 2012); James C. Wallace, "A Religious War? The Cold War and Religion," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 15, no. 3 (2013): 162–80. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26924388>.

¹⁴⁸See, for example, Hassner, "Sacred time and conflict initiation"; Giovanni Capoccia, Lawrence Saez and Eline de Rooil, "When State Responses Fail: Religion and Secessionism in India 1952–2002," *The Journal of Politics* 74, no. 4 (2012): 1010–22. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022381612000564>.

¹⁴⁹It is worth stating that critics of the policy should seek policy change through democratic deliberation and debate, not through authoritarian diktat.

¹⁵⁰Sarah Sunn Bush, *The Taming of Democracy Assistance: Why Democracy Promotion Does Not Confront Dictators* (Cambridge University Press, 2015); Erin Snider, *Marketing Democracy: The Political Economy of Democracy Assistance in the Middle East* (Cambridge University Press, 2022); Jessica C. Teets, *Civil Society under Authoritarianism: The China Model* (Cambridge University Press, 2014).

¹⁵¹Schmidli, *Freedom*, 6–7.

Trump may present an opportunity for scholars to finally gain access to the NED archives and follow the trail from the home to the mission field. Upon doing so, this research suggests that scholars will find polyvalent impacts abroad, similar to how Christian missionaries' impact on indigenous cultures is often partial, contested, and multi-directional.¹⁵²

Fourth and finally, this finding suggests a policy remedy for democracy promotion. A long-standing finding in religious studies is that established churches can poison faith and invite persecution in the name of righteousness. As John Locke noted, "In vain, therefore, do princes compel their subjects to come into their Church communion, under pretense of saving their souls. If they believe, they will come of their own accord, if they believe not, their coming will nothing avail them."¹⁵³ Democracy promotion may do the same. Democracy promotion may feel righteous, but in its deployment of democracy as an ideological weapon it neither succeeds in spreading democratic institutions nor fosters sincere belief. That is one reason why advanced industrialized states disestablished state churches. Likewise, American policy makers should permanently disestablish democracy promotion.

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¹⁵²For an example of democracy promotion research moving in this direction see Manal A. Jamal, *Promoting Democracy: The Force of Political Settlements in Uncertain Times* (New York University Press, 2019).

¹⁵³John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (Liberty Fund, 2010 [1939]), 49 [71].