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Let's NOT Spread Democracy!
By Robert Weiner and John Larmett
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   Now that Fidel Castro has finally openly suggested that he will permanently relinquish his post following surgery for intestinal problems more than 16 months ago, the U.S. government needs to determine how to best benefit Americans and Cubans with real policies, not myths and wish lists about the "democracy" which still might not come. In a letter on Cuban television, Castro said that he would not "cling to office" or obstruct new leaders.

   At last week's (December 20) news conference and many times before, President Bush has repeatedly declared that the United States is committed to spreading democracy. As the President stated, "We have the ultimate weapon, and that is freedom." He called for "advancing the freedom agenda," which he sees "as the great alternative to repression and radicalism."

   President Bush has also said earlier, "We are working for the day of freedom in Cuba." The State Department hopes that "such a liberation from Fidel Castro's brutal communist dictatorship will inspire a new political order based on national reconciliation, the rule of law, personal choice, and equal justice and opportunity for all." Yet after almost 50 years Castro's rule, Fidel has simply (as he said he would all along) turned over the government to his younger brother, Raul, who has been indicted by the U.S. Justice Department for drug smuggling and human rights violations. Given that history, Raul could prove to be even more dangerous. Whatever our Cuba policy, it hasn't worked.

   Unlike Berlin in 1989, not all walls can easily be "torn down." Regrettably to us, people in many other countries do not want democracy. There are numerous examples.

   The rebellion against U.S. forces and our international allies in Iraq is in itself a powerful backlash against Western-imposed democracy on a society that has never known nor wanted American democratic values.

   We insisted that Palestinians hold elections this year, against their leaders'

wishes. Hamas extremists, committed to violence in their platform, won the election.

Despite the fact that we truly love our own democracy, we should know by now that free and fair elections elsewhere have often led to murderous demagogues and tyrants (witness pre-World War II Germany and Italy), not to the rule of law, the separation of powers, the protection of free speech, even property rights.

Bush was asked at the Dec. 20 news conference about Time Magazine's selection of Russia's Vladimir Putin as "Person of the Year." Bush rightly said, "I presume they put him on there because he was a consequential leader. The fundamental question is: consequential to what end?" Yes, Putin is using his power to restrict and jail political and economic opposition, blackmail Eastern Europe with oil prices, and restrict human rights - and scientific polls show the vast (80%) majority of Russians approve of his performance. Putin's support likely stems from his having reduced poverty with his new found oil power and restoring the influence of Mother Russia lost at the end of the old USSR.

Free elections brought Milosevic to power in Yugoslavia (1990) and Hugo Chavez in Venezuela (1998), both of whom we consider outrageous dictators. Leaders like Mubarak in Egypt and Musharraf in Pakistan argue that if they liberalize political dissent as the United States pressures them to do, Muslim extremists would likely come to power. While not one of the twenty-two states of the Arab League is an electoral democracy, the autocrats who rule these countries might be better than the leaders that free elections would bring.

If we can live and let live for our own benefit with our truly greatest threats, Russia and China, who have nuclear weapons that can kill us by the millions, why must we try to impose governments more-or-less like us in the Middle East or Caribbean?

If we want to spread our democracy, secret torture and invasions under false pretenses does not help. Let's not export democracy; let's export economic education and leadership in human rights. The United States has the capability to help address the challenges stemming from poverty, hunger, disease, and lack of opportunity in the developing world. We can help countries to establish a stable economy and a government that suits their needs. A return to bold cultural bonding agencies like the Peace Corps, Vista, and Alliance for Progress would be a giant step forward. We cannot jam democracy down people's throats with troops.

Robert Weiner, president of a Washington think tank, was a public affairs director in the Clinton White House and a chief of staff of the late Claude Pepper (D-FL). John Larmett, senior policy analyst at Robert Weiner Associates, was Foreign Affairs Legislative Assistant to Rep. Jim McDermott (D-WA) and Sen. Gaylord Nelson (D-WI).

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