

**World Forum on the Future of Democracy
As Delivered by Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates, Williamsburg, VA, Monday, September 17, 2007**

Thank you, Senator Warner.

Senator Warner is a special friend. He has introduced me to the United States Senate for confirmation four times. The first time was more than 20 years ago. And that dates us both. He is a great Virginian, a great American, and we will certainly all miss him when he brings his remarkable career in public service to a close next year.

I want to thank Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, one of the most distinguished jurists and public servants in America, for inviting me today. It was Justice O'Connor who administered my oath of office as Director of Central Intelligence in 1991. And last year we served together on the Baker-Hamilton Commission. Little did I know that my sojourn to Iraq a little over a year ago with the group would be only the first of many such visits for me.

Justice O'Connor and I share something else in common – a love of the College of William and Mary, where she is currently the chancellor. And of course, it was a special pleasure to see her four months ago when I had the honor of giving the commencement address at my alma mater. Attending college in here Williamsburg shaped my love of history and my belief that public service is a vital component of a working democracy – and of a meaningful life.

This setting is fitting for my topic today: a “realist’s” view of promoting democracy abroad.

I had quite a reputation as a pessimist when I was in the intelligence business. A journalist once described me as the Eeyore of national security – able to find the darkest cloud in any silver lining. I used to joke that when an intelligence officer smelled the flowers, he'd look around for the coffin. Today, as one looks around the world – wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, an ambitious and fanatical theocracy in Iran, a nuclear North Korea, terrorism, and more – there would seem to be ample grounds to be gloomy.

But there is a different perspective if we step back and look at the world through a wider lens – a perspective that shows a dramatic growth in human freedom and democracy in just the time since this fall's college freshmen were born. Since 1989, hundreds of millions of people – from Eastern and Central Europe and the former Soviet Union, to South Africa, Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere – have been liberated: they have left the darkness of despotism and walked into the bright sunshine of freedom.

Many have seized the opportunity, and freedom has prospered and strengthened; others liberated from the yoke of tyrannical ideologies or dictators continue to struggle to fully realize the dream. At no time in history, though, has freedom come to so many in so short a time. And in every case, the United States, overtly or covertly, in large ways or small, played a role in their liberation.

Still, we Americans continue to wrestle with the appropriate role this country should play in advancing freedom and democracy in the world. It was a source of friction through the entire Cold War. In truth, it has been a persistent question for this country throughout our history: How should we incorporate America's democratic ideals and aspirations into our relations with the rest of the world? And in particular, when to, and whether to try to change the way other nations govern themselves? Should America's mission be to make the world “safe for democracy,” as Woodrow Wilson said, or, in the words of John Quincy Adams, should America be “the well-wisher of freedom and independence of all” but the “champion and vindicator only of our own”?

During my time today, I'd like to put this question and its associated debates in some historical context – a context I hope might help inform the difficult policy choices our nation faces today.

Let me first speak to geography – this place we are in.

It is a strange quirk of history that a backwoods outpost in an unexplored corner of America would hold in it the seeds of a global movement toward liberty and self-governance – toward the democratic institutions that underpin the free nations of the world and give hope to countless people in many others.

So much of what defines America first took root here in Virginia along the banks of the James River. When you think about it, the initial impetus for these institutions owed as much to the struggle for survival as to anything else. The challenges were myriad: along with disease, hunger, and war, the settlers faced no small number of divisions and discord. Four hundred years removed from those early days, it is all too easy to forget about these stormy beginnings.

The revolution that brought about this nation was similarly chaotic. As my distinguished William and Mary classmate, the historian Joe Ellis, wrote in his book, *Founding Brothers*, “No one present at the start knew how it would turn out in the end. What in retrospect has the look of a foreordained unfolding of God’s will was in reality an improvisational affair in which sheer chance, pure luck – both good and bad – and specific decisions made in the crucible of specific military and political crises determined the outcome.” Ellis further wrote “the real drama of the American Revolution ... was its inherent messiness. This ... exciting but terrifying sense that all the major players had at the time – namely, that they were making it up as they went along, improvising on the edge of catastrophe.” We would do well to be mindful of the turbulence of our own early history as we contemplate the challenges facing contemporary fledgling democracies struggling to find their footing.

When I retired from government in 1993, it seemed that the success and spread of democracy was inexorable, a foregone conclusion – that with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the evolution of political systems had reached, in the words of one scholar at the time, the “end of history.” But the relative calm in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War served only to mask new threats to the security of democratic nations: ethnic conflicts, new genocides, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction – especially by rogue states and, above all, a new, more formidable, and more malignant form of terrorism embraced by Islamic extremists.

These new threats, and in particular, the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the wider challenge of dealing with radical jihadist movements since September 11th, once again have people talking about the competing impulses in U.S. foreign policy: realism versus idealism, freedom versus security, values versus interests.

This is not a new debate. Not long after winning our own independence, the U.S. was faced with how to respond to the French Revolution – an issue that consumed the politics of the country during the 1790s. The issue was whether to support the revolutionary government and its war against an alliance of European monarchies led by Great Britain. To many, like Thomas Jefferson, the French Revolution, with its stated ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity, seemed a natural successor to our own. Jefferson wrote that “this ball of liberty, I believe most piously, is now so well in motion that it will roll round the globe.”

John Adams and the Federalists, however, were just as adamantly opposed. They were appalled by the revolution’s excesses and feared the spread of violent French radicalism to our shores. In fact, they accused the Jeffersonians of being “pimps of France,” who “represented cutthroats who walk in rags.” The Federalists mocked Jefferson for his rhetorical defense of freedom and equality across the Atlantic while he continued to own slaves. Adams and Alexander Hamilton were, in turn, accused of being crypto-monarchists.

It was left to President George Washington to resolve the matter. He had said that: “My best wishes are irresistibly excited whensoever, in any country, I see an oppressed nation unfurl the banners of freedom.” But the European wars and, in particular, our estrangement from the British, had begun to disrupt the lives of ordinary Americans by impeding trade and causing riots and refugees. Washington, understanding the fragility of America’s position at the time, adopted a neutrality policy toward France and would go on to make a peace treaty with Great Britain – sparking massive protests and accusations of selling out the spirit of 1776.

Consider the great historic irony: The United States had recently broken free of the British monarchy only with the help of an absolutist French king. Yet when France itself turned in the direction of popular rule and was confronted by Europe's monarchies, the United States took a pass and made amends with our old British foe. In short, from our earliest days, America's leaders have struggled with "realistic" versus "idealistic" approaches to the international challenges facing us. The most successful leaders, starting with Washington, have steadfastly encouraged the spread of liberty, democracy, and human rights. At the same time, however, they have fashioned policies blending different approaches with different emphases in different places and different times.

Over the last century, we have allied with tyrants to defeat other tyrants. We have sustained diplomatic relations with governments even as we supported those attempting their overthrow.

We have at times made human rights the centerpiece of our national strategy even as we did business with some of the worst violators of human rights. We have worked with authoritarian governments to advance our own security interests even while urging them to reform.

We have used our military to eliminate governments seen as a threat to our national security, to undo aggression, to end ethnic slaughter, and to prevent chaos. In recent times, we have done this in Grenada, Panama, Kuwait, the Balkans, Haiti, Afghanistan, and Iraq. In the process, we have brought the possibility of democracy and freedom to tens of millions more who had been oppressed or were suffering.

To win and protect our own freedom, the United States has made common cause with countries that were far from free – from Louis XVI, to one of history's true monsters, Joseph Stalin. Without the one there is no American independence. Without the other, no end to the Third Reich. It is neither hypocrisy nor cynicism to believe fervently in freedom while adopting different approaches to advancing freedom at different times along the way – including temporarily making common cause with despots to defeat greater or more urgent threats to our freedom or interests.

The consuming goal of most of my professional life was containing the threat of the Soviet Union and seeing a Europe made whole and free. For most of the Cold War, the ideal surely seemed distant, even unreachable. One prominent columnist wrote in Time magazine in 1982 that "It would be wishful thinking to predict that international Communism someday will either self-destruct or so exhaust itself."

During that struggle, as for most of our history, inspiring presidential rhetoric about freedom, along with many firm stands for human rights and self-determination, had to coexist with often grubby compromises and marriages of convenience that were necessary to stave off the Evil Empire.

But the Western democracies – joined as the Atlantic Alliance – came together to get the big things right. The democracies' shared belief in political and economic freedom and religious tolerance was the glue that held us fast despite the many quarrels along the way.

President Bush said in his second inaugural address, "[I]t is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world."

When we discuss openly our desire for democratic values to take hold across the globe, we are describing a world that may be many years or decades off. Though achievement of the ideal may be limited by time, space, resources, or human nature, we must not allow ourselves to discard or disparage the ideal itself. It is vital that we speak out about what we believe and let the world know where we stand. It is vital that we give hope and aid to those who seek freedom.

I still remember working on the advance team for President Ford when he attended the Helsinki conference in 1975. Many critics were opposed to America's participation, since they believed that the accords did little but ratify the Soviet Union's takings in Eastern and Central Europe. The treaty's provisions on human rights were disparaged as little more than window dressing. However, the conference and treaty represent another of history's ironies. The Soviets demanded the conference for decades, finally got it, and it helped destroy them from the inside. We "realists" opposed holding the conference for decades, and attended grudgingly. We were wrong. For the meeting played a key role in our winning the Cold War.

Why? Because the human-rights provisions of the treaty made a moral statement whose significance was not lost on the dissidents behind the Iron Curtain. Helsinki became a spur to action, a rallying cry to fight tyranny from within and plant democracy in its place.

Vaclav Havel later said that the accords were a "shield, a chance to resist coercion and make it more difficult for the forces of coercion to retaliate." Lech Walesa called it a turning point "on the road to change in Gdansk."

President Carter's promotion of the spirit of Helsinki – his elevation of human rights – for the first time in the Cold War denied the Soviet Union the respect and the legitimacy it craved. Ronald Reagan's muscular words – labeling the U.S.S.R the "Evil Empire" and demanding that Mr. Gorbachev tear down that wall – combined with his muscular defense policies hastened the implosion of the Soviet system.

Did these policies reflect hard-edged realism or lofty idealism? Both, actually. Were they implemented to defend our interests or to spread our democratic values? Again, both.

An underlying theme of American history is that we are compelled to defend our security and our interests in ways that, in the long run, lead to the spread of democratic values and institutions.

Since September 11th, these questions, contradictions, and dilemmas have taken on new urgency and presented new challenges for decision-makers, especially in an information age where every flaw and inconsistency – in words or deeds – is highlighted, magnified, and disseminated around the globe.

And, as with the Cold War, every action we take sends a signal about the depth of our strength and resolve. For our friends and allies, as well as for our enemies and potential adversaries, our commitment to democratic values must be matched by actions.

Consider Afghanistan. The democracies of the West and our partners are united in the desire to see stability and decent governance take hold in a land that was not only Al Qaeda's base of operations, but also home to one of the most oppressive governments in the world. And yet, though there is little doubt about the justness, necessity, and legitimacy of the Afghanistan mission, even though we agree that democracy is key to enduring stability there, many Allies are reluctant to provide the necessary resources and put their men and women in the line of fire.

Afghanistan is, in a very real sense, a litmus test of whether an alliance of advanced democracies can still make sacrifices and meet commitments to advance democracy. It would be a mark of shame on all of us if an alliance built on the foundation of democratic values were to falter at the very moment that it tries to lay that foundation for democracy elsewhere – especially in a mission that is crucial to our own security.

Likewise, for America to leave Iraq and the Middle East in chaos would betray and demoralize our allies there and in the region, while emboldening our most dangerous adversaries. To abandon an Iraq where just two years ago 12 million people quite literally risked their lives to vote for a constitutional democracy would be an offense to our interests as well as our values, a setback for the cause of freedom as well as the goal of stability.

Americans have never been a patient people. Today, we look at Russia, China, Afghanistan, Iraq, and others – and wonder at their excruciatingly slow progress toward democratic institutions and the rule of law.

The eminent French historian Helene Carrere d'Encausse wrote in 1992: "Reforms, when they go against the political traditions of the centuries, cannot be imposed in a hurry merely by enshrining them in the law. It takes time, and generally they are accompanied by violence." She added: "Reforms that challenge centuries of social relations based on . . . the exclusion of the majority of society from the political process, are too profound to be readily accepted by those who have to pay the price of reform, even if they are seen to be indispensable. Reforms need time to develop . . . It is this time that reformers have often lacked."

For more than 60 years, from Germany and Japan to South Korea, the Balkans, Haiti, Afghanistan, and Iraq, we and our allies have provided reformers – those who seek a free and democratic society – with time for their efforts to take hold. We must be realists and recognize that the institutions that underpin an enduring free society can only take root over time.

It is our country's tragedy, and our glory, that the tender shoots of freedom around the world for so many decades have been so often nourished with American blood. The spread of liberty both manifests our ideals and protects our interests – in making the world "safe for democracy," we are also the "champion and vindicator" of our own. In reality, Wilson and Adams must coexist.

Throughout more than two centuries, the United States has made its share of mistakes. From time to time, we have strayed from our ideals and have been arrogant in dealing with others. Yet, what has brought us together with our democratic allies is a shared belief that the future of democracy and its spread is worth our enduring labors and sacrifices – reflecting both our interests and our ideals.

I would like to close by returning to this corner of Virginia. In September 1796, shortly before George Washington left office, he addressed in his farewell statement an American people who had passed through the dangerous fires of war and revolution to form a union that was far from "perfect," but was a historic accomplishment nonetheless. He told them: "You have, in a common cause, fought and triumphed together; the independence and liberty you possess are the work of joint councils and joint efforts, of common dangers, sufferings, and successes."

In this historic place, among old friends and new, let us take time to reflect on the common causes in which we have fought and triumphed together – to protect our own liberty, and to extend its blessings to others. As we prepare for the challenges ahead, let us never forget that together we will face common dangers, sufferings, and successes – but with confidence that, together, we will continue to protect that tender shoot of liberty first planted in this place so long ago.

Thank you.