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## **Killing in the Name of Democracy**

**by James Bovard**

President George W. Bush perpetually invokes the goal of spreading democracy to sanctify his foreign policy. Unfortunately, he is only the latest in a string of presidents who cloaked aggression in idealistic rhetoric. Killing in the name of democracy has a long and sordid history.

The U.S. government's first experience with forcibly spreading democracy came in the wake of the Spanish-American War. When the U.S. government declared war on Spain in 1898, it pledged it would not annex foreign territory. But after a swift victory, the United States annexed all of the Philippines. As Tony Smith, author of *America's Mission*, noted,

Ultimately, the democratization of the Philippines came to be the principal reason the Americans were there; now the United States had a moral purpose to its imperialism and could rest more easily.

William McKinley proclaimed that in the Philippines the U.S. occupation would "assure the residents in every possible way [of the] full measure of individual rights and liberties which is the heritage of a free people, substituting the mild sway of justice and right for arbitrary rule." He also promised to "Christianize" the Filipinos, as if he did not consider the large number of Filipino Catholics to be Christians. McKinley was devoted to forcibly spreading American values abroad at the same time that he championed high tariffs to stop Americans from buying foreign products.

The "mild sway of justice" worked out very well for Filipino undertakers. The United States Christianized and civilized the Filipinos by authorizing American troops to kill any Filipino male 10 years old and older and by burning down and massacring entire villages. (Filipino resistance fighters also committed atrocities against American soldiers.) Hundreds of thousands of Filipinos died as the United States struggled to crush resistance to its rule in a conflict that dragged on for a decade and cost the lives of 4,000 American troops.

Despite the brutal U.S. suppression of the Filipino independence movement, President Bush, in a 2003 speech in Manila, claimed credit for the United States's having brought democracy to the Philippines:

America is proud of its part in the great story of the Filipino people. Together our soldiers liberated the Philippines from colonial rule.

Perhaps Bush believes that subservience to the U.S. government is the highest freedom that any foreign people can attain. His comments illustrated the continual "1984"-style rewriting of American history.

### **Latin American interventions**

Woodrow Wilson raised tub-thumping for democracy to new levels. As soon as he took office, he began saber-rattling against the Mexican government, outraged that the Mexican president, Victoriano Huerta, had come to power by military force (during the Mexican civil war that broke out in 1910). Wilson announced in May 1914,

They say the Mexicans are not fitted for self-government; and to this I reply that, when properly directed, there is no people not fitted for self-government.

This is almost verbatim what Bush has said about Iraqis and other Arabs. And as long as a president praises self-government, many Americans seem oblivious when he oppresses foreigners.

Wilson summarized his Mexican policy: "I am going to teach the South American republics to elect good men!" U.S. Ambassador to Great Britain Walter Hines Page explained the U.S. government's attitude toward Latin America:

The United States will be here 200 years and it can continue to shoot men for that little space until they learn to vote and rule themselves.

In order to cut off the Mexican government's tariff revenue, Wilson sent U.S. forces to seize the city of Veracruz, one of the most important Mexican ports. U.S. soldiers killed hundreds of Mexicans (while suffering 19 dead) and briefly rallied the Mexican opposition around the Mexican leader.

In 1916, U.S. Marines seized Santo Domingo, the capital of the Dominican Republic. After the United States could not find any Dominican politicians who would accept orders from Washington, it installed its own military government to run the country for eight years. The previous year, the U.S. military had seized control of Haiti and dictated terms to that nation's

president. When local residents rebelled against U.S. rule in 1918, thousands of Haitians were killed. Tony Smith observes,

What makes Wilson's [Latin American] policy even more annoying is that its primary motive seems to have been to reinforce the self-righteous vanity of the president.

## **World War I and II**

After Wilson took the nation into World War I "to make the world safe for democracy," he acted as if fanning intolerance was the key to spreading democracy. He increasingly demonized all those who did not support the war and his crusade to shape the postwar world. He denounced Irish-Americans, German-Americans, and others, declaring, "Any man who carries a hyphen about him carries a dagger which he is ready to plunge into the vitals of the Republic." Wilson urged Americans to see military might as a supreme force for goodness, appealing in May 1918 for "force, force to the utmost, force without stint or limit, the righteous and triumphant force which shall make Right the law of the world." As Harvard professor Irving Babbitt commented,

Wilson, in the pursuit of his scheme for world service, was led to make light of the constitutional checks on his authority and to reach out almost automatically for unlimited power.

Again, the parallels with Bush are almost uncanny. And many of the same intellectuals who currently praise Wilson for his abuses in the name of idealism also heap accolades on Bush's head.

The deaths of more than 100,000 Americans in World War I did nothing to bring Wilson's lofty visions to Earth. The 1919 Paris peace talks became a slaughter pen of Wilson's pretensions. One of his top aides, Henry White, later commented, "We had such high hopes of this adventure; we believed God called us and now we are doing hell's dirtiest work." Thomas Fleming, the author of *The Illusion of Victory*, noted, "The British and French exploited the war to forcibly expand their empires and place millions more people under their thumbs." Fleming concluded that one lesson of World War I is that "idealism is not synonymous with sainthood or virtue. It only sounds that way." But it did not take long for idealism to recover its capacity to induce political delusions.

During the 1920s and 1930s, U.S. military interventions in Latin America were routinely portrayed as "missions to establish democracy." The U.S. military sometimes served as a collection agency for American corporations or banks that had made unwise investments or loans in politically unstable foreign lands. Marine Corps Maj. Gen. Smedley Butler bitterly lamented of his 33 years of active service,

I spent most of my time being a high class muscle-man for Big Business, for Wall Street and for the Bankers. In short, I was a racketeer, a gangster for capitalism.... I helped in the raping of half a dozen Central American republics for the benefit of Wall Street.

Franklin Roosevelt painted World War II as a crusade for democracy — hailing Joseph Stalin as a partner in liberation. Roosevelt praised Stalin as “truly representative of the heart and soul of Russia” — as if the lack of bona fide elections in Russia was a mere technicality, since Stalin was the nation’s favorite. Roosevelt praised Soviet Russia as one of the “freedom-loving Nations” and stressed that Stalin was “thoroughly conversant with the provisions of our Constitution.” Harold Ickes, one of Roosevelt’s top aides, proclaimed that communism was “the antithesis of Nazism” because it was based on “belief in the control of the government, including the economic system, by the people themselves.” The fact that the Soviet regime had been the most oppressive government in the world in the 1930s was irrelevant, as far as Roosevelt was concerned. If Stalin’s regime was “close enough” to democracy, it is difficult to understand why Roosevelt is venerated as an idealist.

### **Cold War interventions**

Dwight Eisenhower was no slacker in invoking democracy. In 1957, he declared,

We as a nation ... have a job to do, a mission as the champion of human freedom. To conduct ourselves in all our international relations that we never compromise the fundamental principle that all peoples have a right to an independent government of their own full, free choice.

He was perfectly in tune with the Republican Party platform of 1952, which proclaimed,

We shall again make liberty into a beacon light of hope that will penetrate the dark places.... The policies we espouse will revive the contagious, liberating influences which are inherent in freedom.

But Eisenhower’s idealism did not deter the CIA, dreading communist takeovers, from toppling at least two democratically elected regimes. In 1953, the CIA engineered a coup that put the shah in charge of Iran. In 1954, it aided a military coup in Guatemala that crushed that nation’s first constitutionally based government.

The elected Guatemalan government and the United Fruit Company could not agree on the value of 400,000 acres that the Guatemalan government wanted to expropriate to distribute to small farmers. The Guatemalan government offered \$1.2 million as compensation based on the “taxed value of the land; Washington insisted on behalf of United Fruit that the value was \$15.9 million, that the company be reimbursed immediately and in full, and that [President Jacobo]

Arbenz's insistence on taking the land was clear proof of his communist proclivities," as *America's Mission* noted.

Yet, at the same time, the federal government in the United States was confiscating huge swaths of private land throughout American inner cities for urban renewal and highway projects, often paying owners pittance for their homes. There was no foreign government to intervene to protect poor Americans from federal redevelopment schemes. The fact that the U.S. government got miffed over a 1954 Guatemalan government buyout offer helped produce decades of repressive rule and the killing of hundreds of thousands of Guatemalan civilians.

Since the Eisenhower era, U.S. government bogus efforts to spread democracy have sprouted like mushrooms. Especially with the creation of the National Endowment for Democracy in 1983, all limits were lifted on how many democratic cons that the U.S. government could bankroll abroad. The U.S. government is currently spending more than a billion dollars a year for democracy efforts abroad. But Thomas Carothers, the director of the Carnegie Endowment's Democracy and Rule of Law Project, warns that Bush policies are creating a "democracy backlash" around the globe.

The greatest gift the United States could give the world is an example that serves as a shining city on a hill. As University of Pennsylvania professor Walter McDougall observed, "The best way to promote our institutions and values abroad is to strengthen them at home." But there is scant glory for politicians in restraining their urge to "save humanity." The ignorance of the average American has provided no check on "run amok" politicians and bureaucrats.

*James Bovard is the author of [Attention Deficit Democracy](#) [2006] as well as [The Bush Betrayal](#) [2004], [Lost Rights](#) [1994] and [Terrorism and Tyranny: Trampling Freedom, Justice and Peace to Rid the World of Evil](#) (Palgrave-Macmillan, September 2003) and serves as a policy advisor for The Future of Freedom Foundation.*

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