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Dictators and Hedgehogs

America could use a proper strategy for promoting reform in the Arab world.

The philosopher Isaiah Berlin categorized political leaders as either foxes or hedgehogs. The fox, he explained, knows many things, while the hedgehog knows one big thing. Pres. George W. Bush was decidedly a hedgehog on the subject of Middle Eastern dictatorships. His repeated message — the essence of what he called his “freedom agenda” — was that the dictators can never have more than a tenuous hold on power. He said people naturally chafe under political oppression, and frustrated desires for a political voice were driving young Muslims into the ranks of the Islamist extremists.

Bush’s insight is being vindicated now on the streets of Cairo. Meanwhile, the American foreign-policy establishment’s wily foxes, who perceived the regimes of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and the Gulf as embodiments of stability, are not looking too astute.

Insight is one thing, however, and execution of policy is another. The Bush administration did not always advance the president’s freedom agenda consistently or well. Egypt is a case in point. The State Department’s work there to promote liberalism and to cultivate pro-democratic forces did not match Bush’s clarion pro-democracy pronouncements.

The Obama administration then came along and so scorned Bush that, in repudiating his freedom agenda, it threw the baby out with the bathwater. The Obama team chose not to try to repair or improve Bush’s policies. Rather, in its national-security approaches to Iran, Russia, China, Venezuela, and the Arab states, it downplayed human-rights and democracy concerns or discarded them altogether. Obama’s goal was to increase U.S. influence in the world by sounding more humble, even apologetic. When addressing the world’s Muslims in his 2009 Cairo speech, President Obama dealt cursorily with democracy, while elaborating on how America and the West have mistreated Muslims through colonialism, ignorance, and disrespect. Obama cut funds for State Department democracy programs. And when Iranian demonstrators bravely defied imprisonment, torture, and death to protest their government’s electoral fraud in June 2009, Obama’s frigid detachment shocked even many of his own political supporters.

Vice President Joe Biden and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton initially reacted to the upheaval in

Egypt by voicing confidence in Mubarak's stability. President Obama has now scrambled to get on the right side of history in Egypt, but he clearly is discomfited by his administration's lack of good contacts, information, and options, problems he helped create when he repudiated democracy promotion. He cannot be pleased that the United States is functioning mainly as spectator rather than player in the grand events under way in Egypt and the Arab world.

In the U.S. government, thoughtful promotion of democracy abroad continually runs up against challenges from the foreign-policy "realists," who see democracy as irrelevant and despotism as stable. That view predominates at the State Department and CIA, which helps explain why the pro-democracy policies of Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush often met with resistance from the institutions asked to implement them.

Another challenge is the need to balance conflicting U.S. values. Promoting political freedom may be accepted as an important goal of U.S. policy, but it does not always trump all other U.S. goals. To defeat Hitler, after all, Franklin Roosevelt allied with Stalin. Human-rights specialists often present all-or-nothing arguments from the standpoint of moral purity, but officials with broad responsibilities are forced by circumstances to make tradeoffs among important interests.

The third and greatest challenge is grappling with the difficulties inherent in promoting liberty in other countries. The task is far more complex than supporting the overthrow of authoritarians and advocating quick elections. Commenting contemporaneously on the French revolution of 1789, the British parliamentarian Edmund Burke admonished his countrymen in words that apply as well to Egypt today as they did to France of the old regime. Burke would withhold congratulations on France's new liberty until he was "informed how it had been combined with government; with public force; with the discipline and obedience of armies; with the collection of an effective and well-distributed revenue; with morality and religion; with the solidity of property; with peace and order; with civil and social manners." All these things are good, he said, "and, without them, liberty is not a benefit whilst it lasts, and is not likely to continue long."

Burke wrote that giving a people freedom is easy in that it "only requires to let go the rein," but "to form a free government; that is, to temper together these opposite elements of liberty and restraints in one consistent work, requires much thought, deep reflection, a sagacious, powerful, and combining mind."

If the Muslim Brotherhood gains the upper hand in Egypt, the revolution may do more harm than good for human rights in Egypt and may increase regional instability and the danger of war. For now, the Obama administration is preoccupied with crisis management. But America could use a proper strategy for patient and persistent promotion of political reform in the Arab world. It would combine Bush's best hedgehog insight with Burke's sophisticated caution.

— *Mr. Feith, a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute, served as undersecretary of defense from 2001 to 2005. He is the author of War and Decision: Inside the Pentagon at the Dawn of the War on Terrorism (Harper 2008).*