

**Remarks by Kenneth Wollack on the  
Occasion of the 10th Anniversary of  
Georgetown University's Masters Program in  
Democracy and Governance  
January 26, 2018**

I want to thank Dan Brumberg for his kind invitation for me to speak tonight to a very special group of students who are marking a milestone in your Democracy and Governance program. NDI is proud to be associated with this important academic initiative. Our vice president, Shari Bryan, serves on your advisory committee, NDI senior staff members have taught program courses here and we have agreed to house a program intern each year at the Institute.

Liza Prendergast, a 2012 graduate of the program, and the Inaugural chair of the program's Alumni Association reminded me in an email the other night that her fellow graduates have "infiltrated", my word not hers, the State Department, the Congress, NGOs, including NDI, and foreign governments. In fact, the very existence of this pioneering program and the inspiration, knowledge and energy it has imparted is really the subject of my talk -- a contrarian's view of the state of democracy. I confess to be an incurable optimist who for 32 years has worked in the optimism business. Given negative trends over the past decade, a period of time that coincidentally has spanned the existence of this program, I, like my chairman Madeleine Albright, remain optimistic but, I concede, we are optimists who now worry a lot. Last September, I announced my retirement, which will take place later this year. It is, therefore, an appropriate time for me to begin thinking and reflecting. I will share some of these thoughts with you and perhaps I, who is lacking a postgraduate degree, will enroll in your program.

Last week, Freedom House released its latest Freedom of the World report, entitled ominously "Democracy in Crisis." It, like other studies put out by the Economist and the Bertelsmann Foundation, chronicles more than a decade of decline in political rights, civil liberties and global freedom. It points to a retreat by the U.S. of its traditional role as a champion of democracy, the expansion of China's and Russia's anti democratic influence, a rise in right wing populism in traditional democracies and continued repression in nondemocratic places. In fact, today's autocrats no longer operate in isolation, they communicate with, and learn from each other -- across borders and regions. For the 12th consecutive year, countries that suffered democratic setbacks outnumbered those that registered gains. Not an optimistic outlook but one certainly based on empirical evidence. I will add a few more negative trends.

We now know that initial views about the impact of technological change were incomplete. There were those who had presented a cyber-utopian view of the impact of social media on democracy, whereby increased internet access would inevitably lead to more open societies. This has now given way to a more realistic, if not darker view. As Wael Ghonim, the democratic activist whose Facebook posts helped ignite the Egyptian revolution now warns: "Social media was once seen as a liberating means to speak truth to power. Now the issue is how to speak truth to social media. " Authoritarian regimes are using a broader and more aggressive set of tools to advance their interests, including various forms of electoral espionage, the hacking of politicians and political parties, and the dissemination of misinformation and fake

news -- all designed to skew electoral outcomes, discredit democratic systems and undermine democratic discourse. Repressive regimes are using what we call "distributed denial of democracy" attacks to pollute new media channels with disinformation, making new media less useful as a mechanism for legitimate discourse. These misinformation campaigns use troll farms and botnets to amplify certain stories on new media.

And while citizens around the world have begun to harness the benefits of information and communication technology to amplify their voices, their political institutions have often been slower to respond. As one tech leader explained, "Citizens are using 21st century tools to communicate, while governments are using 20th century tools to listen, and 19th century processes to respond. As technology innovation amplifies the voices of desegregated citizen interests, fledgling democratic institutions -- governments, parliaments, and political parties -- must harness innovation to strengthen deliberative discourse, broker compromise, and respond in a timely and effective manner.

New, fragile democracies are struggling to meet rising expectations of their citizens, particularly with regard to efforts that would combat corruption and improve standards of living. Democratic transitions have been stymied or reversed by violence and terrorism by non-state actors, or by the inability of democratic movements to move from "protest to politics" and to challenge the resiliency of the so-called "deep state" -- the elites and institutions that benefited from years of corruption and impunity afforded by entrenched autocracy. And even established democracies have been beset by political polarization and growing citizen discontent with the performance of democratic institutions and elected leaders. And when the discontent reaches crisis of confidence, people will either go to the streets or vote for a Hugo Chavez, who once famously said, "I'm am not the cause. I'm the result."

Now, this fire hose of bad news could understandably lead some of you conclude that I'm getting out of this work at the right time and you, perhaps, should pursue a master's degree in another area of study or a career that produces better dividends. Others still could be tempted to escape or at least fantasize about escaping as many of my generation did in the 1960s. The angst, hand ringing and depression, particularly in this city, is palpable and affects how we communicate with friends, family members and colleagues. It is, however, divorced from the reality of a democratic struggle that continues to take place even in the most unlikely places on earth.

I don't want to dismiss the negative developments because they are real but, for just a moment, I would like to view the past decade as a snapshot and offer a degree of perspective -- another picture that includes a slightly longer sweep of history. It was a time before many, if not all of you, were born. But it is not the distant past. When I joined NDI in 1986, it was four years after President Reagan's landmark democracy speech before the British parliament (and I would encourage all of you to read it) and less than three years after Congress established the National Endowment for Democracy. Freedom House scored only 52 countries as "free" as compared to 88 in 2018. The countries of Latin America were largely run by military regimes, as were the Asian countries of South Korea, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Burma. Dictators were in power in Indonesia and the Philippines; martial rule was in place in Taiwan; the communists ruled Mongolia; and the monarchy enjoyed absolute power in Nepal.

On the African continent, only four leaders since 1960 had retired voluntarily or left office after losing an election -- that figure stands at nearly 50 since then. Democracy, freedom and dignity were not even part of the lexicon of the Middle East. And Soviet communism, which extended to the borders of Western Europe, seemed deeply embedded. Only Senator Moynihan and a few others at the time were naive enough to predict its demise. Meanwhile, intergovernmental groups like the Organization of American States and the Organization of African Unity -- the predecessor to the African Union -- operated on the principle of "nonintervention" into the affairs of member states. They routinely turned a blind eye to military coups and other abuses. Today, both organizations and others like them have adopted democratic charters and have intervened to defend democratic rule .

In 1986, there was minuscule if any democracy and governance funding by USAID, the State Department, the UNDP or by the OECD donor aid agencies; and contentious debates in the U.S. Senate and House over a \$30 million appropriations for the National Endowment for Democracy were commonplace -- and the debates. went on for hours. I know, because I sat through most of them. In fact, funding for NDI and our Republican counterpart were eliminated in 1985 and were only restored a year later by a one vote margin in the Senate -- and that was because a senator from a Western state had mistakenly voted in favor of our institutes. U.S. ambassadors stationed abroad during the Cold War had little interest in raising democracy issues with friendly authoritarian leaders or even to be seen meeting with democratic forces. Democracy advocates like Ambassador Harry Barnes in Chile, Steve Bosworth in the Philippines and Mark Palmer in Hungary were a rarity and their pro-democracy efforts did little to enhance their diplomatic careers. In contrast, every ambassador today has democracy and human rights as part of his or her portfolio, even if these issues may not be item number one on the bi-lateral agenda.

I remember when NDI first entered Mexico, the then-U.S. ambassador warned us against bringing the Philippine "people power" revolution to his country. He not only misunderstood our mission but he had little interest in democratic reforms even after 70 years of one-party rule. Ironically, reform efforts had begun by elements of the ruling PRI party, led by Luis Donaldo Colosio -- and NDI was there at his invitation.

And then there was the foreign policy establishment realists, most of whom argued that we need to care more about what countries do outside their borders -- not inside them.

Aside from the German party foundations, which played such an important role in the democratic transitions of Spain and Portugal during the 1970s, there were no democracy support NGOs; in the mid-1980s, no networks of citizen election monitors, who today number 4 million, democratic governments and legislatures, or parliamentary monitoring organizations. And the traditional socioeconomic development community, including aid agencies and international financial institutions ignored, if not rejected, the linkages between economic and political reform, positing instead that economic and social development must come first and democracy must evolve over time from its creation of a middle class. Compare those views to the UNDP's landmark Human Development Report in 2002 which concluded that democratic participation is a critical end of human development. as well as a means of achieving it. Or Sweden's

development cooperation policy which now asserts that poverty is not only about inadequate socioeconomic development but also the lack of political power at the individual level.

There are many positive stories since then -- stories that should remind us about the universal demand for democracy and progress being made, sometimes in the most challenging of environments. Public opinion polls from countries in every region of the world have shown that vast majorities agree that democracy, despite its problems, is the best political system. One recent study of more than 800 protest movements around the world show that they are not driven primarily by a desire for better economic conditions, but rather by demands for democracy or a better democracy, which the protesters believe can better address economic issues. This shows that the desire for improved economic opportunities often coexists with the demand for a political voice. And in today's interdependent world, citizens will not indefinitely postpone the latter for the former. Admittedly, there have been times when many citizens seemingly abandoned democratic aspirations because of instability, insecurity, or the performance of government. This was the case in Pakistan, Venezuela, Côte d'Ivoire, Egypt, and Chile; but broad support for authoritarian rule in these places were short lived.

There are countries where active civil societies and reform-minded politicians have maintained positive democratic trajectories. Nascent African democracies of Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, Mozambique, and Sierra Leone are among the world's fastest growing economies, while many countries -- including Indonesia, Mongolia, Chile, Colombia, Georgia, South Korea and Mexico -- have continued to make strides in both consolidating their democracies and maintaining steady economic growth. There are also places where democratic setbacks have been reversed either by the demands of citizen movements, as was the case in Burkina Faso, or through the intervention of regional organizations as recently occurred in The Gambia.

And in the midst of a massive humanitarian crisis and refugee flight, another story of democratic resilience is unfolding -- remarkably in Syria. As the Syrian government has lost control of large parts of the country, and the war has expanded over the past six years, millions of citizens have been left bereft of services and governing institutions to maintain order and to meet their basic needs. But in liberated territories across northern Syria, citizen groups are identifying and prioritizing community needs, and local administrative councils, some democratically elected, are responding by providing critical services. These democratic subcultures can become a powerful model for the country's future once the conflict subsides.

More than two dozen NDI governance advisers are working each day in 34 of these locations within Syria, helping to advise local citizen groups and administrative councils, and bringing them together to solve problems and, in the process, creating democratic subcultures. Already, thousands of consultations and training sessions have been conducted. More than 700 council members and staff and nearly 8,000 civic activists, including many young people and women, have been engaged in the program. Courageously, these civic groups and councils have challenged extremist groups like Al-Nusra which have sought to establish parallel governing structures. As one regional news outlet noted: "You may think Syrians are condemned to an unpleasant choice between Bashar Al Assad and the jihadists. But the real choice being fought out by Syrians is between violent authoritarianism on the one hand and grassroots democracy on the other."

There is no doubt that democracy promotion is still seen by some opinion and policy makers as either too soft or idealistic as a response to serious security threats facing the nation; or it is seen as too bellicose -- conflated with regime change and the use of military force. In fact, the issue is not whether democracy promotion is "hard" or "soft" or whether it fits neatly into the realism or idealism paradigms. The issue, rather is whether advancing democracy is an important means of advancing America's interests and protecting our national security interests in a turbulent and often violent world. The reality is that hotspots most likely to erupt into violence are found, for the most part, in areas of the world that are non democratic -- places that have been defined by the Pentagon as the "arc of instability." And we now know from issues like terrorism, migration flows and disease that, unlike that famous tagline in advertising marketing, what happens inside places like Salvador or Syria doesn't stay there.

Now there has widespread concern in the democracy and human rights communities about the Trump Administration's seeming retreat from America's traditional role in advancing global democracy. As evidence of this retreat, the Freedom House report points to the Administration's America First foreign policy, its skepticism toward international alliances with other democracies, the absence of democracy rhetoric in the president's public speeches, and his stated admiration for some of the world's strongmen. These actions and words maybe disturbing but reports on the death of America's traditional role in promoting and supporting democracy maybe greatly exaggerated. As it did in the Obama Administration, the U.S. Congress has already stepped in to restore all proposed cuts in democracy assistance. This, despite overall reductions in foreign assistance -- a reduction by 17 percent in the House of Representatives and 11 percent by the Senate. When it comes to democracy assistance, Congress has strongly asserted its Article 1 prerogatives and the Congressional debate, across party and ideological lines is much different than it was some 30 years ago. America First has come to frame the Administration's overall foreign policy goals. That is jarring to most of us but it need not be inconsistent with our efforts to advance democracy. Our government has continued to use pro-democracy tools -- diplomatic, military, and economic -- in places as diverse as Ukraine, Cambodia, Egypt, Venezuela, Cuba, Hungary and Iran. And the recently released National Security Strategy provides a framework and rationale for maintaining the traditional U.S. commitment to supporting democracy. Moreover, the NSS, along with its companion National Defense Strategy, clearly identify the threats to U.S. interests from China and Russia which are propagating their authoritarian model. This may inevitably lead the U.S. to counter with stronger democracy policies.

So, for those of you who are contemplating your future work. My message to you is pretty simple. Despite serious challenges to the cause you have studied and care about, there remains a need and a demand for your expertise and your active engagement. If we have learned anything, it is that democratic progress is inseparable from democratic cooperation. In this interconnected and interdependent world, the lexicon of democracy is very much a part of international relations; and there is in place a global solidarity network, an international democratic architecture, made up of nongovernmental groups, governments, intergovernmental organizations, political parties and parliaments. As a result of your pioneering program here at Georgetown, academia has joined this network -- a network that is responding to local demand by institutions, organizations and individuals and by those seeking nothing more than their

fundamental political and human rights. It is our responsibility, our obligation and, yes, our interest, to respond to their hopes and aspiration.

Let me conclude by telling you a story about a dinner hosted by the Brookings Institution some 20 years ago. The gathering was to examine the linkages between economic development and democracy. A few academics dominated the early part of discussion, arguing that, in the developing world, democratic change must be a gradual process and await the development of a middle class. U.S. assistance in these places, therefore, must be sequenced, with aid concentrated first on helping to raise a country's standard of living. After 45 minutes of this talk, the then-President of the AFL-CIO, Lane Kirkland, leaned forward and, in his soft-spoken South Carolina drawl, made a simple but eloquent intervention that virtually ended the dinner conversation. "Those who stood in front of tanks in 1956 in Hungary did not risk their lives so that General Electric could open up a light bulb factory in Budapest," he said. "They were fighting for their freedom. And we support them because it's the right thing to do." I have never found a better way to describe the work of NDI. And for all of you who are enrolled in, or have graduated from this program, and are deciding whether to join this mission, let me assure you — "it's the right thing to do."