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In *America’s Mission*, Tony Smith contends that the “central ambition of American foreign policy” since the Spanish-American war has been centered on promoting democracy, or in President Woodrow Wilson’s formulation, “making the world safe for democracy.”¹ Challenging this narrative, Arman Grigoryan argues in “Selective Wilsonianism,” that this ‘Kantian narrative’ that originates in liberal theory does little to explain glaring differences in Western support for various democratic movements in the post-Soviet space. Further, he argues that the overall history of U.S. democracy promotion shows American interest in it to be largely instrumental instead of based on ideological commitments. Grigoryan argues that this Kantian narrative of the West relentlessly supporting democracy across the world is more a story that believers in liberal theory tell themselves rather than one which is based in reality.² Instead, he convincingly argues that the U.S. has shown significant variation when and how it promotes democracy across time, using democracy promotion instrumentally to achieve its national goals.

However, while Grigoryan’s story is largely accurate, it is essential to reflect on Western justifications of democratic expansion and why certain American presidents and different leaders promoted and used democracy promotion instrumentally at different times. This helps explain how democracy promotion could both be a foundational feature of American foreign policy and used for instrumental reasons, squaring the Smith and Grigoryan arguments while

¹ Tony Smith, *America’s Mission: The United States and the Worldwide Struggle for Democracy in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 3.

² Grigoryan contends that this liberal narrative originates in liberal theory, with statements of this argument occurring in: Michael W. Doyle, “Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 12:3 (Summer 1983): 205–235; Michael W. Doyle, “Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs, Part 2,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 12:4 (Autumn 1983): 322–353. Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought since the Revolution* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1955); Samuel P. Huntington, *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981); Thomas Carothers, *Aiding Democracy Abroad: The Learning Curve* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for Peace, 1999); Michael Cox, G. John Ikenberry, and Takashi Inoguchi, eds., *American Democracy Promotion: Impulses, Strategies, and Impacts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); and Michael Cox, Timothy J. Lynch, and Nicolas Bouchet, eds., *U.S. Foreign Policy and Democracy Promotion: From Theodore Roosevelt to Barack Obama* (London: Routledge, 2013).

explaining the variation in democracy support we continue to see today. In other words, understanding how democracy promotion is not an end-in-itself, but rather a means-to-an-end for the U.S. aimed at increasing American security and prosperity.

Initially, Grigoryan makes a convincing argument that rather than a commitment to Kantian liberal principles, particularly in the Post-Soviet space, the West pursued democracy promotion over the last century in an instrumental manner that was primarily driven by the ideological leanings of the existing government. He argues that the West will not support democratic movement when democracy promotion will not ensure a pro-West government. Even worse, the West will sometimes turn to non-democratic governments in favor of democracy as long as they are pro-West, contrasting the Kantian liberal prediction. Using a detailed comparison of the 2014 efforts to support pro-democracy protestors in Ukraine and the lack of Western action in the 2008 protests in Armenia, as well as a historical accounting of Western democracy promotion since the turn of the twentieth century, Grigoryan argues that the Kantian liberal theory that is used to explain support for democratic movements cannot be sustained and “should be discarded” (180).

In the first half of the article, Grigoryan convincingly lays out why the Kantian liberal arguments cannot explain the reactions to the 2014 pro-democracy protests in Ukraine compared to the 2008 protests in Armenia against falsified election results. Rather than being based upon liberal preferences, he contends “the difference in the West’s reactions...was primarily the consequence of its competition with Russia” (178). He lists four possible arguments that Kantian liberals could make about why there was this discrepancy: the violence of the protestors, liberal credentials of the democratic movements, the fact that Ukraine was more autocratic, and the relative risks of the West supporting these movements. Comparing all of these arguments, he finds that none of these arguments can adequately explain the differences in Western response to the democracy movements if increasing democracy was an ideological commitment of the West. Instead, he decisively shows that supporting democracy promotion in Ukraine served the policy goal of “thwarting the increase of Russian influence in the post-Soviet space, whereas support for the Armenian movement [did] not” (178). With this context, he concludes that Kantian liberalism cannot explain the difference in approaches to democracy promotion in these two cases.

Noting that this could be an anomaly, in the second half of the article, Grigoryan further seeks to show how the Kantian liberal argument also cannot adequately explain the historical record of promoting dictatorship, sabotaging left-wing elected governments, and other actions against democracy during the 120 years of the policy of ‘making the world safe for democracy.’ Beginning with the Philippines and the Woodrow Wilson era, democracy promotion shows a convincing lack of interest in spreading democracy for its own sake, but rather was “motivated by the desire to ensure stability” (184). In this way, in the Wilson era, democracy promotion was yet again a means-to-an-end rather than an end-in-itself, in this case a means to the end of promoting stability and resisting German and European influence. Reflecting on the Cold War and the post-Cold War period as well, Grigoryan walks through the history of American support for democracy and for right-wing authoritarians and highlights the fact that “every single case of support for the forces of democracy happened to be support for pro-U.S. forces as well” (196). In this period, support for democracy only if the newly elected governments would not support the Soviet Union, and democratic aid only came when the prospective government would be pro-West. As he concludes, in each case of democracy promotion, the policies “simultaneously furthered interests that had nothing to do with democracy” (198).

But importantly, while the article does a good job highlighting the flaws in the Kantian narrative surrounding democracy promotion, it also shows that, in keeping with Smith’s arguments, democracy promotion in many ways is one of the organizing foreign policy principles of the U.S., even if for instrumental and not ideological reasons. It highlights how Western democracy promotion efforts were never intended for pure Kantian good but rather as instrumental tools to secure American interests and security. Indeed, even the name of Kant’s foundational essay, “Perpetual Peace,” precisely highlights the reasons why democracy promotion sometimes is attractive for Western policymakers – promoting peace

and security when in their interests.³ Promoting democracy serves the purpose of creating peace or acting as a means-to-an-end, rather than an ideological commitment to greater openness or self-government. The implications of this difference are crucial, and they impact how we should think about American democracy promotion and reactions against it.

For instance, the Clinton administration's first National Security Strategy articulates this exact point when it states:

“Our national security strategy is based on enlarging the community of market democracies while deterring and containing a range of threats to our nation, our allies and our interests. The more that democracy and political and economic liberalization take hold in the world, particularly in countries of geostrategic importance to us, the safer our nation is likely to be and the more our people are likely to prosper.”⁴

Throughout other National Security Strategies, including those of the administrations of George W. Bush and Barack Obama, similar references to democracy promotion are never justified for Kantian reasons as the liberal narrative posits.⁵ Instead, references to democracy promotion are almost always discussed in terms of instrumental and strategic reasons that promote American security and prosperity. Promoting democracy is thus not justified through Kantian liberal preferences, but rather as a means to an end to increase American interests. If the means do not promote the preferred ends, the West pursues different policies other than democracy promotion. In this sense, Smith and Grigoryan can both be correct. The organizing principle of U.S. foreign policy since the Spanish-American War has primarily been that of democracy promotion, but purely for instrumental reasons rather than ideological commitments.

In fact, since President Woodrow Wilson's time in office, democracy promotion was never genuinely thought of as an end-in-itself, but rather a means to an end, namely greater security and prosperity for the United States. Wilson himself championed democracy promotion throughout Latin America, for instance, on the belief that it would reduce conflict, rebellion, and the influence of other European powers. He wanted to define “national security in terms of fostering a form of government” that “carried the promise of an enduring peace” to the region.⁶ This was chiefly about achieving American security through democracy promotion rather than a radical commitment to democracy itself, as his approach towards decolonial movements following World War I illustrated.

What precisely democracy means, and how democracy promotion should be carried out, has changed drastically over the hundred years since Wilson's time in office.⁷ But the general idea of greater democracy leading to greater American security, rather than being a goal in itself, has largely remained. Particularly after World War II, this idea became a fundamental aspect of American and Western discourse and thinking as it related to international politics, creating a multitude of opportunities to help promote democracy of influence democratic affairs. But at the same time, the U.S.

³ Immanuel Kant, *Toward Perpetual Peace and Other Writings on Politics, Peace, and History*, ed. by Pauline Kleingeld and trans. by David Colclasure (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

⁴ William J. Clinton, *A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement* (Washington, D.C.: White House, 1994), 2. <https://nssarchive.us/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/1994.pdf>.

⁵ George W. Bush, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, D.C.: White House, 2002), <https://nssarchive.us/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/2002.pdf>; Barack Obama, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, D.C.: White House, 2010), <https://nssarchive.us/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/2010.pdf>.

⁶ Tony Smith, *Why Wilson Matters: The Origin of American Liberal Internationalism and Its Crisis Today* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 87.

⁷ Frank Ninkovich, *The Wilsonian Century: US Foreign Policy since 1900* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

did not attempt democracy promotion everywhere, and the goal of promoting American strategic interests also came before any ideological commitment to democracy. Reflecting on the use of democracy promotion as a means-to-an-end throughout the article, Grigoryan helps highlight the tensions in American delusions and thinking surrounding democracy promotion. It is crucial to remain clear on what the actual goals (or ends) of democracy promotion are, while also highlighting why the use of democracy promotion as a means-to-an-end only leads to harming democracy promotion efforts in the long run.

While the article has many strengths, there are a few areas that could make the argument more impactful. First, the article would be significantly improved if it directly engaged more than Tony Smith's arguments about America's history of democracy promotion, but other significant works that address when the U.S. and the West are most likely to engage in democracy promotion. For instance, Seva Gunitsky has argued that it is after hegemonic power transitions that states like the United States are most likely to try to influence the domestic politics of other states.⁸ He argues that we should see the greatest attempts at democracy promotion during periods of power transitions or hegemonic shifts, like the end of World War II or the end of the Cold War. In a different vein, Elizabeth Saunders has argued that different presidential perceptions of where threats originate can help determine when they will try to engage in forceful democracy promotion.⁹ Under this logic, different presidents, such as Dwight Eisenhower, John Kennedy, and Lyndon Johnson, all had different perceptions on the sources of threat from a foreign government, which resulted in varying views on when democracy promotion should have been attempted.

This becomes important when reflecting on the specific case of Ukraine and Armenia, where each of the above theories could be alternative arguments that help explain the differing reactions of the West. With the Armenia crisis occurring under President Bush and the Ukraine crisis arising under President Obama, it could be that differing perceptions of the importance of democracy promotion in each administration determined these outcomes, as Saunders's theory would predict. Or it could be that post-financial crisis in 2014, perceptions of Western strength compared to Russia made different assessments of whether democracy promotion was necessary, as Gunitsky's thesis would predict. While neither of these arguments directly fits with the Kantian liberal narrative ultimately, they could answer when we are more or less likely to see democracy promotion over time.

Beyond this, a central question omitted from this analysis is why the Kantian narrative persists even in the face of the evidence of democracy promotion as an instrumental tool to promote American power and interests. Further research investigating the disconnect between actual motives and narratives is needed. Understanding exactly why this narrative persists and why it is seemingly more acceptable than the instrumental formulation of democracy promotion is critical to understanding this idea's persistence. Two such arguments about this tension between the Kantian narrative and the instrumental uses of democracy promotion, Michael Desch's "America's Liberal Illiberalism" and Jonathan Monten's "The Roots of the Bush Doctrine," try to illustrate how liberalism itself compels using illiberal means to spread American interests in democracy and security.¹⁰ Further engaging these arguments to illustrate why this disconnected belief in democracy promotion remains essential to understand Western foreign policy and grand strategy, and how the

⁸ Seva Gunitsky, *Aftershocks: Great Powers and Domestic Reforms in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

⁹ Elizabeth N. Saunders, *Leaders at War: How Presidents Shape Military Interventions* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011).

¹⁰ Michael C. Desch, "America's liberal Illiberalism: The Ideological origins of Overreaction in US Foreign Policy," *International Security* 32:3 (2007): 7-43; Jonathan Monten, "The Roots of the Bush Doctrine: Power, Nationalism, and Democracy Promotion in U.S. Strategy," *International Security* 29:4 (2005): 112-156.

instrumental uses of democracy promotion continue to actually permit this narrative to continue to exist, would greatly aid the analysis.

Finally, one possible extension to Grigoryan's argument that is not proffered in the article is the effect of this instrumental use of democracy promotion on actual democracy promotion efforts worldwide. Unfortunately, the long history that the article articulates has made it clear that democracy promotion efforts are often driven by a desire to support American interests, including greater security and prosperity. Tying these efforts to increased American interests then makes it more likely that Russia, China, Iran, and other states will view the interest of the United States in democracy as directly aimed at improving their strategic interests, and come to view all democracy promotion efforts, whether motivated by national interests or not, with skepticism. This only serves to harm local democracy activists in the long run since they are the ones who are targeted for repression when they are merely seeking greater political expression and political freedom. Instead, they will be viewed principally of being agents of Western powers rather than committed to democracy. Given that the U.S. used democracy promotion efforts instrumentally in the past, it has become near impossible to change those perceptions in the future that democracy promotion is not an instrument for great American power. Thus, unfortunately, the Kantian liberal commitment to democracy is actually harmed in the long run by the instrumental use of democracy promotion that Grigoryan outlines. Genuine support for Kantian liberal democracy would mean embracing democratic movements that would not support Western interests, which is unlikely to occur.

As the Biden administration has emphasizes the importance of democracy in world affairs, and concerns about democratic backsliding continue to meet with the challenges of potential great power competition, instrumental uses of democracy promotion will almost certainly continue to occur.¹¹ Understanding that throughout history Western support for democracy has been a means-to-an-end rather than an end-in-itself is critical to understanding how to contextualize Western commitments to democracy in some places and different times compared to others. Once scholars grasp the fact that the historical commitment to democracy promotion in foreign policy is a means-to-an-end for greater American security and prosperity rather than as an end-it-itself, we can explain puzzling choices and variation in support of democracy by the West across time.

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¹¹ Joseph R Biden Jr., "Why American Must Lead Again: Recusing US Foreign Policy after Trump." *Foreign Affairs* 99 (2020): 64-76.