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## Spreading Democracy

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## Spreading Democracy

Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, & Ronald Reagan

By [Brian Flanagan](#) - speech delivered to the United Nations Association of Kalamazoo

In his new book, *The Post-American World*, author Fareed Zakaria is boldly proclaiming the end of America's unipolar moment. China, the European Union, India, and Russia are rising; regional and global organizations are rising; nongovernmental organizations and multinational corporations are on the rise. The era of American global preeminence – Zakaria believes – has come to a close. The current issue of *Foreign Affairs* is all about this very question. Has America's moment come and gone?

In the wake of World Wars I & II, a multi-polar world – one characterized by a balancing of power between nations in the East and the West – gave way to a bipolar world in which the Americans and the Communist Russians dominated. Later, the fall of the Soviet Union spelled the rise of American primacy. Now, as the first decade of the twenty-first century winds down, we may well be transitioning to something new: non-polarity – a world in which power is spread over a multitude of nation states, supernational governments, nongovernmental organizations, and multinational corporations.

Of course, we do not yet know what the future holds. But while this debate is in the air, it is an appropriate time to revisit the global struggles that established the current order and recall what it was that American political leaders stood for, what we claimed to be fighting for, what we hoped to accomplish. If we do this, we may better understand the American age and we may better see our way forward.

### American Exceptionalism

Americans have always thought of themselves as exceptional. Since the founding, we have believed that American democracy, the American Constitution, even the American way of doing business are models that all the world should follow for their own good. Our principles, according to this thinking, are universal. It says so right there in the *Declaration of Independence*:

"We hold these *truths* to be self-evident, that *all men* are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

The *Declaration*, in a sense, declares independence for humanity. The American dream – life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness – is not exclusively American; these principles are the principles of all nations and all peoples. It says so on our national seal: "Novus Ordo Seclorum" – a new order for the ages, *not* simply for Americans at this particular moment in time. Thomas Jefferson's empire for liberty drew on this belief in the universality of American principles. Manifest destiny was a system rooted in a faith in the American way of life. It's no surprise, then, that we carried with us into the modern age this faith and this wish to spread American political principles to all corners of the globe.

What I want to do today is look back at three modern presidents who served at the critical moments that led up to America's unipolar moment. I want to look at Woodrow Wilson to understand the two ways that we have tried to spread democracy and the American way of life. I want to look at Franklin Roosevelt to understand two goals that have been used to justify our attempts. And I want to look at Ronald Reagan to understand the two criteria that any American president's attempts to spread democracy and freedom must fulfill to pass the test of public approval. (Of course, the methods, justifications, and criteria for spreading democracy could be exemplified by any combination of these three presidents; chronology dictates today's ordering.) If you bear with me, I'll try to do this succinctly, and we can explore and clarify together during questions and answers.

### Woodrow Wilson

I'll start with Woodrow Wilson. Wilson served as president of the United States from 1913 through 1920. He could be stubborn and he could be disagreeable. For example, as president of Princeton, Wilson got into a bitter spitting match with the graduate dean, and a faculty friend reminded him that "there are two sides to every question." "Yes!" agreed Wilson, "the right and the wrong!" He was not known for his open mindedness once his decision was made. Walter Hines Page, Wilson's ambassador to England, discovered this when he persisted in voicing an opinion that was contrary to one of Wilson's decisions. Wilson, literally, jumped from his desk chair in the Oval Office with his fingers in his ears, and ran out of the room. Wilson aimed at a progressive, domestic presidency, focused on extending democracy at home to the dispossessed, disenfranchised, and those left behind by the modern economy. "It would be the irony of fate," Wilson said, "if my administration had to deal chiefly with foreign affairs."

Of course, we all know that that ironic fate did indeed befall Wilson. Almost from the start of his administration, Wilson dealt with a series of crises south of the border, in Mexico, Haiti, Nicaragua, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic. Of course, ultimately, Wilson would lead the United States into the First World War – the bloodiest in history up to that time. But although he was forced into foreign affairs by circumstances, Wilson brought his progressive political principles with him.

This brings us to the first way Wilson – and many presidents since – sought to spread democracy beyond America's borders. Wilson, elected for his progressive goals at home, focused on the potential of the American example abroad. On July 4, 1914 – one year after taking office and one month before the outbreak of war in Europe – Wilson spoke at Independence Hall in Philadelphia – the birthplace of the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution. "We set this Nation up," he said,

"to vindicate the rights of men.... America will come into the full light of the day when all shall know that she puts human rights above all other rights and that her flag is the flag not only of America but of humanity."

This is Wilson's expression of the universality of American principles. The United States was founded, as Lincoln had said, to show the world that government "of the people, by the people, and for the people," could survive and indeed thrive. Wilson went on to say,

"I do not know that there will ever be a declaration of independence and of grievances for mankind, but I believe that if any such document is ever drawn it will be drawn in the spirit of the American Declaration of Independence, and that America has lifted high the lights which will shine unto all generations and guide the feet of mankind to the goal of justice and liberty and peace."

The first way Wilson tried to spread democracy, then, was by providing and trumpeting the world's greatest example of a functioning and thriving democracy at home. Wilson understood that if the American order became the envy of the world, its form could become the model for the world. This is what John F. Kennedy meant later when he said that America's fire "can truly light the world." This is what Ronald Reagan meant when he called us a "shining city upon a hill."

Now, this hands-off, idealistic view of spreading democracy by example did not prevent Wilson from engaging in the second method by which presidents have sought to spread democracy: direct intervention and force. Embracing the Roosevelt corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, Wilson took a particular interest in intervention in the Western Hemisphere. As Wilson spoke at Independence Hall, a confrontation grew between the United States and its neighbor to the South, Mexico. Long-time Mexican President Porfirio Diaz had been overthrown before Wilson took office and replaced by Francisco Madero. Madero's leadership was short lived. He was overthrown in a coup, imprisoned, killed, and replaced by General Victoriano Huerta. Huerta quickly gained control of his government and was legitimized when many nations recognized his authority. Wilson, however, did not like the means by which Huerta gained the presidency. Wilson had this to say:



Reagan at Berlin

“We hold ... that just government rests always upon the consent of the governed, and that there can be no freedom without order based upon law and upon public conscience and approval.... We can have no sympathy with those who seek to seize the power of government to advance their personal ends or ambition.”

Wilson refused to recognize Huerta's government. In fact, he told Huerta that the United States would only recognize the legitimacy of the Mexican government under four conditions: (1) a cease fire had to be established between Huerta and rebels who had risen up to oppose the coup; (2) free elections had to be held in Mexico immediately; (3) Huerta himself could not be among the candidates for office; and (4) all sides had to honor the results of the election.

Huerta, of course, refused the terms. Wilson raised the stakes. He cut aid to the Mexican government, began providing aid to the rebels (led by Pancho Villa and Venustiano Carranza), he sent American naval units to ports on Mexico's west coast to cut off arms shipments, and he began efforts to build international support to overthrow Huerta. This was all Wilson's way of saying, “Live up to America's standards, or else.” Of course, it didn't take long for a few bored American seamen to go ashore and get into trouble. Several were arrested by the Mexican government. At about the same time, Wilson received intelligence telling him that a German ship was en route to Veracruz on Mexico's East coast to supply the Huerta government with arms. Under Wilson's orders, American warships shelled the harbor and marines invaded Veracruz – over a Mexican domestic dispute, remember. Huerta's government and the Mexican rebels both expressed outrage over American actions, and Argentina, Brazil, and Chile stepped in to mediate the dispute. Wilson, realizing his mistake, quickly retreated. Huerta eventually resigned under the pressure of a continued civil armed rebellion.

When Carranza replaced Huerta as president, Wilson quickly recognized the government, eager to be done with the Mexican fiasco. But it continued. General Pancho Villa had continued to rebel against Carranza's government and, infuriated by Wilson's recognition of that government, Villa invaded and burned Columbus, New Mexico, killing 17 Americans pulled from a train car and 16 others in the town. Wilson sent a 6,000-troop punitive expedition deep into Mexican territory to seize Villa, and once again he was met with the outrage of the Mexican government and its neighbors. As his attention shifted to growing tensions in Europe, Wilson ordered the expedition home. He never captured Pancho Villa, but suffered great embarrassment. Despite this disastrous attempt to create democracy through direct intervention, Wilson would later send troops into Nicaragua, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic, to teach them how to “elect good men.”

When the First World War broke out in Europe, Wilson immediately declared American neutrality. Eventually, though, persistent German U-boat attacks on American commercial ships and other developments brought Wilson and the United States into the war. Framing the war as a battle between Democracy and Militarism, Wilson brought the same vision to the Old World that he had in his approach to the New. Speaking to a Joint Session of Congress to request a declaration of war against Germany on April 2, 1917 – three years after his Independence Hall speech – Wilson committed Americans to fighting, “for the things which we have always carried nearest our hearts,

“for democracy, for the right of those who submit to authority to have a voice in their own Governments, for the rights and liberties of small nations, for a universal dominion of right by such a concert of free peoples as shall bring peace and safety to all nations and make the world itself at last free. To such a task we can dedicate our Lives and our fortunes, everything that we are and everything we have, with the pride of those who know that the day has come when America is privileged to spend her blood and her might for the principles that gave her birth and happiness and the peace which she has treasured.”

“The world must be made safe for democracy,” Wilson told Congress. “Its peace must be planted upon the tested foundations of political liberty.” Here, again, we see Wilson's vision for spreading American principles abroad.

Three years later, during his final message to Congress – what we call the State of the Union address today – Wilson synthesized what had been his two-prong strategy for spreading American democracy. “This is the time of all others,” Wilson said, “when Democracy should prove its purity and its spiritual power to prevail.”

“There are two ways in which the United States can assist to accomplish this great object. First, by offering the example within her own borders of the will and power of Democracy to make and enforce laws which are unquestionably just and which are equal in their administration.... Second, by standing for right and justice as toward individual nations. The law of Democracy is for the protection of the weak, and the influence of every democracy in the world should be for the protection of the weak nation, the nation which is struggling toward its right and toward its proper recognition and privilege in the family of nations.”

So, we'll spread it by example, and we'll spread it through direct intervention.

## Franklin Roosevelt

All right. It's time to move on to our second president so that we have time for the third and for questions. Franklin Roosevelt served as president from 1933 to 1945. His death in office prevented him from carrying out his unprecedented fourth term, but nevertheless he is the longest-serving president in U.S. history. Roosevelt was a Wilsonian. In fact, he had served as Wilson's assistant secretary of the Navy during the First World War, and he had been the Democratic nominee for vice president in 1920 – running on a losing ticket that supported American entrance into the League of Nations and the continuation of Wilson's policies abroad. FDR served during two great crises – the Great Depression and World War II. It has been said that Roosevelt's most important task – his most important accomplishment – was to prove that democracy, capitalism, and the American way of life could survive such catastrophes. He went about it creatively, breaking many a precedent and setting new standards for the size and energy of the federal government. He broke the mold and the presidency and the federal government has never been the same.

It's easy for many of us to forget today just how polarizing a figure FDR was and continues to be – it's especially easy for people my age and younger to forget. One of Roosevelt's favorite stories to tell was about a newspaper boy in a Republican stronghold – Grand Rapids, perhaps. A commuter walked into the newsboy's station every day, and every day he paid for a copy of the *New York Herald Tribune*, glanced at the front page, and handed the paper back to the boy before rushing to catch his train. Finally, one day, the boy was unable to contain his curiosity and so he asked the man, “Why do you pay for a paper every day and only look at the front page?” “I'm interested in the obituary notices,” the man told him. “But they're way over on page twenty-four, and you never look at them,” said the boy. “Boy,” said the man, “the son of a bitch I'm interested in will be on page one!”

FDR knew, when he took office, that he was faced with the greatest domestic crisis of his time. The Great Depression broke the back of the world's largest economy, and FDR quickly got to work on his famous first Hundred Days in office, creating the TVA, NRA, AAA, CCC, WPA, and all the ABCs that helped to restore faith in the American economy and government. He did not know that Hitler – who came to power the same year as FDR – along with Mussolini, and Tojo would quickly change the face of the Atlantic and Pacific, and reshape the Roosevelt presidency. In fact, Roosevelt began his first term by focusing his foreign policy on continuing the efforts of his Republican predecessors – Warren Harding, Calvin Coolidge, and Herbert Hoover – to heal relations with Latin America after the interventionist presidencies of Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, and Woodrow Wilson. Roosevelt's Good Neighbor Policy rejected the Roosevelt corollary to the Monroe Doctrine and America's imperialist impulse in the Western hemisphere, embracing instead cooperation and friendship as the basis for extending commercial and diplomatic relations in the region.

The United States was a profoundly isolationist nation when FDR came to office. The domestic crisis took center stage in the minds of Americans, and the terrible destruction caused by the First World War was still fresh in their collective memory. The American people did not want to enmesh themselves in European problems and European affairs. This brings us to the reason we are talking about Franklin Roosevelt and the American impulse to spread democracy, because as I mentioned at the outset, FDR is going to illustrate two goals that have been used to justify American interventions and efforts to spread democracy.

Under the circumstances of the 1930s, Roosevelt would have had no chance to justify intervention abroad – as Wilson had in Latin America – based purely on this idea that political liberty and individual freedom were not just American qualities, that they were in fact the universal rights

of humanity. He couldn't have done it. Even after Germany invaded Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and France; even after Japan invaded China and Italy invaded Ethiopia; even after Hitler, Mussolini, and Tojo formed the Berlin-Rome-Tokyo axis to fight resistance to their advances; Roosevelt was unconvinced. Militarists were on the march, overtaking free and independent nations, and yet the numbers showed that Americans by-and-large wanted to remain on the sidelines.

It wasn't until Britain – and control of the world's most powerful Navy – was contested by Germany that Americans began to inch toward involvement in the war. Why? Roosevelt and other leaders began to explain to Americans that their own national security was at stake. "Never before," Roosevelt told the country in a fireside chat in December 1940, "has our American civilization been in such danger as now." He called the Axis powers "an unholy alliance of power and pelf to dominate and enslave the human race." And as Grand Rapids's own Senator Arthur Vandenberg proclaimed at the time, the oceans had "ceased to be moats" protecting the United States. Should the Nazis come to dominate the Atlantic and Japan the Pacific, no American would be safe. American commerce would be disrupted. America would be further isolated from a world in which democracy and freedom were withering on the vine. "If Great Britain goes down," Roosevelt told the American people,

"the Axis powers will control the continents of Europe, Asia, Africa, Australasia, and the high seas – and they will be in a position to bring enormous military and naval resources against this hemisphere. It is no exaggeration to say that all of us, in all the Americas, would be living at the point of a gun."

Franklin Roosevelt had to convince Americans that their national security was at stake, and preserving our national security was the first goal that FDR – and most presidents since – used to justify our attempts to spread democracy abroad. He said that the U.S. must be "the great arsenal of democracy," making possible "Democracy's fight against world conquest" by dictators and preserving American security and independence. Many Americans remained unconvinced of their stake in the fight until December 7, 1941, when the Japanese fleet brought home an understanding of the true threat for many Americans at Pearl Harbor.

Of course, Roosevelt was not without Wilson's more inspiring, more uplifting vision of a world made safe for democracy. Less than a month after his "Arsenal of Democracy" message, FDR delivered what has been remembered as his "Four Freedoms" speech, his annual message to Congress. Roosevelt reminded Congress that, "During sixteen long months this assault has blotted out the whole pattern of democratic life in an appalling number of independent nations, great and small. The assailants are still on the march, threatening nations, great and small." Including, of course, ours. He then proceeded to outline his vision for the post-war world – perhaps the most ambitious since Wilson delivered his Fourteen Points speech. "In the future days, which we seek to make secure," Roosevelt said, "we look forward to a world founded upon four essential human freedoms." Okay, so you can already see where this is going. We are going to secure the freedoms that we enjoy at home for all of humanity abroad.

"The first is freedom of speech and expression – everywhere in the world.... The second is freedom of every person to worship God in his own way – everywhere in the world.... The third is freedom from want – which, translated into world terms, means economic understandings which will secure to every nation a healthy peacetime life for its inhabitants – everywhere in the world.... The fourth is freedom from fear – which, translated into world terms, means a world-wide reduction of armaments to such a point and in such a thorough fashion that no nation will be in a position to commit an act of physical aggression against any neighbor – anywhere in the world."

With this speech, Roosevelt returned to Wilson's theme of the universalism of American ideals. Freedom of speech, expression, and religion are not American phenomena, they are natural rights that belong to every man and woman in the world. Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are not privileges provided by the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution, they are the inalienable rights of humanity, secured in the U.S. by the Declaration and Constitution. Roosevelt's first two freedoms were his case for democracy, and of course the third freedom – freedom from want – would have been understood as his case for American-style capitalism.

Now, the fourth freedom – freedom from fear – brings us to the second goal Roosevelt used to justify American intervention and the promotion of democracy: collective security. As the Second World War neared a conclusion, Roosevelt met with Churchill and Stalin in Tehran, Iran, and discussed the possibility of making the wartime United Nations partnership into a permanent international organization. In his January 1945 State of the Union address, FDR reminded Americans that, "Under the threat of a common danger, the United Nations joined together in a war to preserve their independence and their freedom." Now Roosevelt aimed to make this internationalist, interventionist spirit permanent, because he understood that once the war ended, isolationist sentiments could easily return in the United States. And this was a real threat to national and collective security. It was already clear by that time that Stalin's Soviet Union was a rising power. Roosevelt understood that if the United States did not remain active on the world stage, if it did not assert itself and counterbalance the rising communist regime, the world would suffer. Within a decade, the people of the world would look back and see that we rid ourselves of one threat to freedom – military dictatorship – only to be overtaken by another – brutal, soviet communism.

The United Nations, said Roosevelt, "must now join together to make secure the independence and freedom of all peace-loving states, so that never again shall tyranny be able to divide and conquer." Wilson, of course, had put his concept of a League of Nations front and center in his vision for the post-war world, but for many reasons, we all know, Wilson failed to get his Republican opponents on board. Roosevelt, and Truman, enjoyed much greater success. The United Nations – and this notion of collective security – was the proverbial foot in the door for the Truman administration to continue pursuing internationalist policies after the war. It made possible the Marshall Plan to aid struggling democracies in Europe. It made possible the NATO alliance to oppose the Soviet threat. It made possible American intervention in the Korean civil war to prevent further spread of Soviet-style communism. Of course, the argument can and should be made, that combined with the Truman doctrine of containment, it led directly to U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War.

So, Wilson helps us understand two ways American presidents have attempted to spread democracy: by example and by force. Roosevelt helps us to understand two goals that have been used to justify American intervention and attempts to spread democracy: national security and collective security. Of course there is a third prominent goal – national interest – that we'll get to in our exploration of the next president on our agenda: Ronald Reagan.

## Ronald Reagan

Ronald Reagan served as president of the United States from 1981 through 1988. He will be best remembered for the Reagan Revolution in economics and his connection to the end of the Cold War. He was sixty-nine when he took office, making him the oldest man ever inaugurated president. If you are a Barack Obama supporter, you hope Reagan remains the oldest for some time to come. President Reagan wanted to keep things simple. He wanted government to be weak at home and strong abroad. He rejected economic theory and political philosophy in favor of five words: family, work, neighborhood, freedom, and peace. Like Wilson, he simplified many issues into black and white terms. The Cold War, for example, was a fight between good and evil; it wasn't hard to choose sides. But while Reagan would have appreciated Wilson's simplification of World War I to God and devil terms, he also appreciated the complexity and energy of Franklin Roosevelt – a Democratic president who Reagan voted for four times.

Now, unlike the first two presidents we talked about, Reagan was not surprised by the large role foreign affairs came to play in his presidency. He was the eighth Cold War president navigating through a bi-polar world order. The U.S. was fully and long-established as the leader of the free world and the champion of Western values. Reagan was comfortable with that fact. It is an understatement to say that Reagan had strong feelings about the Soviet Union and its communist form of government – the "evil empire" as he called it – and about the role of the United States in rolling back Soviet communism. But Reagan also understood, as Wilson and Roosevelt had, that Americans would not be led blindly, by their president, into a foreign policy of his choosing. The American people had to be convinced. (This understanding, by the way, is what killed Woodrow Wilson. After returning from the Paris Peace conference at the end of World War I, rather than heed his doctor's warning to mind his health, Wilson departed on an aggressive coast-to-coast speaking tour to lobby Americans to support acceptance of the peace accords and entrance into the League of Nations. Wilson suffered two strokes along the way – one of them was massive – and this set him on a declining path that led to his eventual demise in 1924.) In any event, Reagan's is a useful presidency for understanding the two criteria that must be met in order to achieve public approval for efforts abroad to spread American values and democracy.

On June 8, 1982, Reagan addressed members of the British Parliament in what is remembered as his Westminster speech. "Around the world today," he said, "the democratic revolution is gathering new strength."

"No, democracy is not a fragile flower. Still it needs cultivating. If the rest of this century is to witness the gradual growth of freedom and democratic ideals, we must take actions to assist the campaign for democracy."

Sounds Wilsonian, doesn't it? Now, he appeals first to the altruism of Americans – their selfless concern for the well-being of others.

"We must be staunch in our conviction that freedom is not the sole prerogative of a lucky few, but the inalienable and universal right of all human beings.... The objective I propose is quite simple to state: to foster the infrastructure of democracy, the system of a free press, unions, political parties, universities, which allows a people to choose their own way to develop their own culture, to reconcile their own differences through peaceful means."

Reagan's speech at Westminster turned out to be one of his most historic speeches. It was where he began to define the Soviet Union as the "evil empire" and to define the Western cause as "the march of freedom and democracy which will leave Marxism-Leninism on the ashheap of history...." It also launched his campaign for democracy in Central America, which would grow to include international meetings on free elections, constitutionalism, and self-government, as well as significant aid to democratic governments and rebels opposing non-democratic governments. It appealed to the altruism of the American people and the West. This is the first criterion. It appealed to their desire to spend their resources to promote freedom and prosperity for others.

But appealing to altruism is not enough. Altruism – as we are seeing in Iraq – is not sustainable over the long haul, especially if things don't go according to plan. A president's foreign policy must also appeal to the pragmatic self-interest of Americans. This is the second criterion. If we enter World War I, Wilson argued, unrestricted submarine warfare against Americans and German meddling in the Western hemisphere will come to an end. If we enter World War II, Roosevelt argued, another Pearl Harbor will be avoided and the Nazi threat will be halted. Of course, in both cases, foreign markets will remain open to American commerce. These are all good things for Americans. In Iraq, Saddam Hussein will be removed from power and the Iraqi people will gain their freedom. Good. By the way, a threat to American security will be removed, the Iraqi oil fields will be protected, and a stronger market for American goods will be created in Iraq, in the short term, and potentially throughout the Middle East in the long term. Great.

Reagan had to convince Americans that a freer and more democratic Central America was in their self-interest – particularly in Nicaragua, where the leftist Sandinistas had seized power in 1979. The Sandinista leader, Daniel Ortega, according to the administration, was developing closer ties with Cuba and the Soviet Union, driving moderates from the country, and consolidating his control of the government. So on the one hand, according to Reagan, the Sandinistas were a threat to the Nicaraguan people – depriving them of their freedom and their right to self-government – and they were a threat to the more democratic governments of El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, and Costa Rica. But on the other hand – and perhaps more importantly to Americans – a communist Nicaraguan government was contrary to American self-interest. In a February 1988 speech, Reagan warned that Nicaragua, with the support of Cuba and the Soviet-bloc, "is being transformed into a beachhead for aggression against the United States."

"It is the first step in a strategy to dominate the entire region of Central American and threaten Mexico and the Panama Canal. That's why the cause of freedom in Central America is united with our national security. That is why the safety of democracy to our south so directly affects the safety of our own nation."

Freedom from the Sandinista regime, then, was good for the Nicaraguan people, but it was also in the self-interest of the American people.

The Reagan administration covertly – and eventually illegally – supported the Nicaraguan Contras who fought against the Sandinista government. Of course, the Iran-Contra scandal came out of this effort to oust the Sandinistas, and it should be noted that two years later the "undemocratic" Sandinista regime accepted the legitimate outcome of the 1990 Nicaraguan elections and gave up power peacefully. Daniel Ortega, the Sandinista leader, ran for president in each Nicaraguan election afterward until he won in 2006. He is currently serving his second term as president and is part of Latin America's recent left turn that concerns so many. The law of unintended consequences, by the way, is an amazing thing. In arguing for intervention in Nicaragua, Reagan compared the Contras favorably to U.S.-backed freedom fighters in Afghanistan – including Osama bin Laden – who forced the Soviet Union to negotiate and withdraw from their country. In any event, Reagan – and his Cold War predecessors – did enough to convince Americans of their self-interest in Central America and the Caribbean. During the 1980s and 90s, the U.S. government intervened in Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Panama, Jamaica, Haiti, and Grenada.

Now, I'm going to take Reagan out of Nicaragua and put him in Berlin. By now we all know the most famous words the president uttered there: "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" But we don't often pay enough attention to the sentences leading up to those famous words.

"We welcome change and openness; for we believe that freedom and security go together, that the advance of human liberty can only strengthen the cause of world peace. There is one sign the Soviets can make that would be unmistakable, that would advance dramatically the cause of freedom and peace. General Secretary Gorbachev, if you seek peace, if you seek prosperity for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, if you seek liberalization: Come here to this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!"

Well, history unfolded; the Berlin Wall fell, and with it the Soviet Union and what was believed – at the time – to be the last ideological threat to the spread of democracy, capitalism, and the American way of life. Charles Krauthammer, in the pages of *Foreign Affairs*, proclaimed the start of the unipolar moment.

We have seen through the administrations of Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, and Ronald Reagan that the United States has at times tried to spread democracy through example and through force. It has justified its actions through the establishment of national security and collective security mechanisms. It has inspired American support by appealing to their altruism, and by appealing to their pragmatic self-interest. But to what ends, you might ask. Well, we can say that in 1900, only 10 democracies existed in the world. After two World Wars, some 30 democracies existed. By 2005, 119 of 190 countries – 63% of the world – had become democratic. Is this the direct result of American actions? Of course not: at least, not exclusively.

We know that other countries – Great Britain, for example – have long promoted democracy. Market economics and growing political and economic interdependencies have tended to liberalize governments. Technology – and particularly fiber optics cables laid across the oceans courtesy of the American dot com boom and bust – has vastly increased interconnectivity and opportunity, both liberalizing factors. Richard Florida and Thomas Friedman have correctly pointed out that this dramatic and swift increase in global connectivity has allowed creative and talented foreigners – who have traditionally sought higher education and economic opportunity in the U.S. – to take their American higher education and American ideals back to their homelands to seek opportunity. This is a contributing factor to the spread of democracy. Yet, American ideals, the American example, the American economy, and – indeed – American political leaders have been a significant driving force behind all of these factors. Victories in World Wars I and II did indeed make the world safer for democracy. The end of the Cold War, and the start of America's unipolar moment, may have been the most significant factor of all. Indeed, 90 of the world's 119 democracies only became democratic after 1975.

Since I'm here as a result of a piece that appeared in the Sunday edition of the *New York Times*, it's only appropriate that I end with a piece from the Sunday *Times* that appeared two weeks ago today. Thomas Friedman, in an editorial called "Who Will Tell the People," said that the American people are more eager than ever to engage in nation-building. Except this time, they want to do the nation-building at home in the United States. Friedman described how over the last three decades the values of the greatest generation – "work hard, study, save, invest" – have been replaced with subprime values. "You can have the American dream – a house," wrote Friedman, "with no money down and no payments for two years." He described the experience of flying from New York's Kennedy Airport to Singapore or Berlin, as flying "from the Flintstones to the Jetsons." I think we've seen the same erosion in our democracy. By all indications – voter turnout, participation in local government,

willingness to serve the public – our democracy has suffered in recent decades. If you have read Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* you understand that participation in political and civic associations – the lifeblood of American democracy according to Alexis de Tocqueville – is at an all-time low.

I will conclude by humbly suggesting that if we are indeed experiencing the end of the unipolar moment, this may very well be an appropriate time to cede just a little of our self-imposed responsibility for global democracy. We cannot withdraw; we cannot turn our back on the world. Nor is it in our self-interest to do so. But we can look inside ourselves, at our own democracy, and ask: Are we spreading democracy and freedom and prosperity by example today? Or, at least, are we providing the best example we are capable of? That's for you to decide. If you don't think we are, *join* a civil association – like the U.N. Association – *support* a candidate, *have* high expectations for your public officials, *help* your neighbor, *build* your community, *participate* in local government, *run* for office, *be* a catalyst for change. Engage in nation-building. Thank you.

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## Postscript

*In Q & A after his speech, Flanagan was asked about the Bush administration and the role of neo-conservatism in carrying forward the Wilsonian crusade for democracy. He had this to say in response:*

I should take this opportunity to address this question of whether or not our current president – George W. Bush – is Wilsonian. This has been a very popular question. My answer is, *of course* he is. He is linked to Wilson through this lineage of crusaders for democracy. Wilson came first – he built on Theodore Roosevelt's internationalism to try to spread democracy throughout the Western hemisphere and to preserve it in Europe. FDR learned the tricks of the trade while he served as Wilson's assistant secretary of the Navy. Reagan – who considered himself a New Dealer and a Rooseveltian during his youth and continued to admire FDR through his own presidency – carried the crusade forward. George W. Bush, who unfortunately used the word "crusade" in a speech about dealing with Muslim countries, at least *believes* he is a Reagan disciple – so there is this direct lineage from Wilson through FDR and Reagan to Bush.

Robert Kagan, in an article that appeared recently in *World Affairs Journal*, defined neo-conservatism – the ideology that has informed Bush's foreign policy – as the application of "a potent moralism and idealism [to] world affairs." It connotes,

"a belief in America's exceptional role as a promoter of the principles of liberty and democracy, a belief in the preservation of American primacy and in the exercise of power, including military power, as a tool for defending and advancing moralistic and idealistic causes, as well as a suspicion of international institutions and a tendency toward unilateralism."

Viewed in this light, neo-conservatism brings little to the table that is new. Most neo-conservative themes have been with us for quite some time. As we have already seen, the belief in American exceptionalism is as old as the nation itself. And as we have seen today in the policies of Wilson, Roosevelt, and Reagan, American moralism has often bled into military intervention – particularly in the Western hemisphere.

I suspect that regardless of who is elected in November – whether it be John McCain or Barack Obama – the next president will *continue* to think of the U.S. as the world's greatest promoter of liberty and democracy. All modern presidents have. With many threats to liberty and democracy on the horizon, military intervention is not unlikely.

However, I expect that the next president will stake out a more favorable position toward multilateral efforts and international institutions – the UN and NATO included – than Bush and the neo-conservatives have. There has been, throughout history, a tendency for new presidents to react against their predecessors: to shape their approaches to office based on lessons they have taken from their predecessor's approach. For example, Bill Clinton was known to deliberate at great length on questions big and small, and to continue deliberating and second-guessing even after his decision was made. The result: George W. Bush came to office and established himself as the "decider-in-chief." This was a direct reaction against Clinton's approach. Bush was going to make a decision quickly and stick to it. Similarly, I believe the next president's approach to the office will be strongly influenced by the Bush presidency. Whether it's Obama or McCain, the next president will likely distance himself from Bush on the UN and multilateralism, immigration, environmental policy, and a host of other issues.

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