



Time for the US to end democracy promotion flim-flams

BY JAMES BOVARD, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR — 03/16/18 01:10 PM EDT

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Democracy promotion has long been one of the U.S. government's favorite foreign charades. The Trump administration's proposal to [slash funding for democratic evangelism](#) is being denounced as if it were the dawn of a new Dark Age. But this is a welcome step to draining a noxious swath of the Washington swamp.

Nineteenth century humorist Josh Billings quipped, "A fanatic is someone who does what the Lord would do if He knew the facts of the matter." Similarly, the U.S. government intervenes to rig elections in case foreign voters don't know the facts of the matter. The U.S. has interfered — usually covertly — [in more than 80 foreign elections since World War Two](#) to boost its preferred candidates.

Former CIA chief James Woolsey was asked last month on Fox News whether the U.S. government was continuing to meddle and "mess around in other people's elections?" Woolsey replied with a smile and said: "[Only for a very good cause. In the interests of democracy.](#)" Obviously, democracy is ill-served if any U.S.-preferred candidate lose.

Nowadays, the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) is the flagship for U.S. political meddling abroad, and Trump proposes to [slash its budget by 60 percent, from \\$170 million to \\$67 million](#). When Congress created the agency in 1983, it [prohibited NED and its grantees](#) from directly aiding foreign political candidates. But that law restrains NED as effectively as

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NED has been caught interfering in elections in [France](#), [Panama](#), [Costa Rica](#), [Nicaragua](#), [Czechoslovakia](#), [Poland](#), and many other nations. NED's operatives helped spark bloody coup attempts in [Venezuela](#) and [Haiti](#); their efforts also helped topple the elected government in [the Ukraine in 2014](#) and ignite the ongoing civil war.

The CIA and NED tag-teamed to worsen the biggest U.S. foreign policy catastrophe of this century. After [the CIA covertly bankrolled pro-U.S. factions for the Iraqi parliament elections in 2005](#), NED President Carl Gershman hailed the result as "[one of the great events in the history of democracy](#)." But the animosity fanned by that rigged election helped spur a catastrophic civil war in Iraq which vastly increased the death toll for American soldiers.

Philosopher Hannah Arendt noted that during the Vietnam War, the U.S. government's "[policy of lying was hardly ever aimed at the enemy](#) but chiefly if not exclusively destined for domestic consumption, for propaganda at home and especially for the purpose of deceiving Congress." Similarly, NED exists to provide deniability to American politicians for their foreign meddling.

Gershman likes to portray NED as a "[private and non-governmental](#)" organization — as if billions of tax dollars had mysteriously showed up in its coffers via Congress over the decades. This facade usually passes muster with the docile American media but foreigners often see through the ruse — especially when Gershman publicly practically [calls for ousting elected foreign leaders](#) such as Russia's Vladimir Putin.

NED delivers much of its budget to two political front groups. The International Republican Institute has funded centrist or right-leaning political operations around the globe. Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), the Institute's long-term chairman, boasted in 1997: "[When we provide the democratic opposition in Albania with 12 Jeep Cherokees and they win an election](#), I'm incredibly proud." Obviously, no U.S.-favored politician should be obliged to hustle for votes in a ramshackle Yugo.

The National Democratic Institute also uses its NED windfalls to play favorites abroad. When [its chairman, Madeline Albright](#), was secretary of State during the Clinton administration, she uttered what could be the eternal rallying cry for all subsequent U.S. meddling: "[We are the indispensable nation. We stand tall](#) and we see further than other countries into the future."

President Trump's proposed budget cut (which also slashes democracy promotion funding in other agencies) is spurring predictable teeth gnashing. Council of Foreign Relations fellow [Stewart Patrick lamented last week in The Hill](#): "By the Trump administration is destroying the credibility of the United States as a champion of freedom around the world." But the U.S. government already lacks "champion of freedom" cachet except inside the Beltway and among profiteers on the foreign policy gravy train.

Democracy can be a wonderful thing but foreign aggression in its name usually doesn't work out happily. President Obama [invoked democracy to justify bombing Libya](#), leaving that nation in chaos, with terrorists running amok and [slave markets openly operating](#). Promoting [democracy](#) was also

[one of Obama's excuses](#) for the U.S. government fueling Syria's civil war, which has [left hundreds of thousands of people dead](#).

U.S. interference taints every foreign election it touches. American politics continues to be [roiled by Russian-financed Facebook and Twitter](#) advertisements from a year and a half ago. This unending uproar should help Americans recognize how U.S. interventions in foreign referendums can pollute local political waters.

Unfortunately, many Washingtonians are blinded by self-serving sanctimony. National Democratic Institute president Kenneth Wollack claims that equating U.S. and Russian interventions in foreign elections is like ["comparing someone who delivers lifesaving medicine to someone who brings deadly poison."](#) But the opiate crisis illustrates how easily therapeutic concoctions can produce vast carnage.

Democracy often provides a vast improvement in governance in foreign lands but bribery, finagling, and bombing are poor ways to export freedom. Can Washington politicians and policy wonks explain why the U.S. government deserves veto power over elections everywhere else on Earth? If not, it is time to end the "we see further" claptrap.

James Bovard is a [USA Today columnist](#) and the author of 10 books, including ["Lost Rights: The Destruction of American Liberty"](#) (St. Martin's Press, 1994).

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