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Democracy and Human Rights-The Essential Connection

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More than I have been involved in foreign policy, I have been involved in political science during my adult life. I have been a Professor of Political Science at Georgetown University for 25 years and occupied a chair there—the Thomas and Dorothy Leavey Chair named for the distinguished Californians who endowed it. My husband and my friends were also political scientists. We were long-time friends of the Peltasons, when he—Jack Peltason—was Vice Chancellor, then Chancellor at Irvine, then President of the University of California.

I speak today about foreign policy in a democracy, which, as the political scientists among you know, poses some complex problems. As our founding fathers understood, it is not easy to structure a government to provide popular governance and accountability. Democratic government requires that representatives of the people make major decisions and that these representatives be chosen by and remain accountable to some large portion of the electorate. Foreign policy requires that those representatives make policy about remote, unfamiliar subjects.

Foreign policy requires a permanent bureaucracy staffed by persons with expert knowledge concerning the countries with whom we deal. Alexis de Tocqueville, a wise man

with an astonishing insight into about almost every subject that he considered, wrote in his masterpiece *Democracy in America*, and I quote:

“As for myself, I do not hesitate to state that it is especially in the conduct of foreign relations that democracy appears to be decidedly inferior to other governments. Experience, instruction, habit, and the science of petty occurrences that is called good sense directs the ordinary course of society in the domestic affairs of a country. But it is not adequate for foreign affairs...concrete personal experience is less relevant in making judgments about foreign affairs than it is in domestic affairs.”

It requires patience and perspective—not just knowing one’s own country and its culture, but also knowing about all the countries with whom we interact and their cultures and purposes, of course. Globalization also has confronted us with new and unprecedented issues, with allies and adversaries in remote places—such as Afghanistan or Iraq.

After the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979, the United States rather suddenly had to make policy about these remote peoples. Moreover, a large Afghan community settled in Washington, D.C. Some had been very deeply involved in the political life of Afghanistan before the Taliban took control. If you listen to Afghan women-in-exile, their husbands, and their children talk about the Taliban, you understand that they have *very* negative feelings that need to be taken seriously by any government seeking to deal with Afghanistan.

Making policy about Afghanistan turned out to be a great deal more complicated than most Americans believed after the Soviet Union invaded and devastated much of the country, and kidnapped many Afghans. Afghans are a complex society and very tough people. They usually defeat whomever goes to war against them. Among the people they defeated were the Soviets. Afghans were the first people to defeat Soviet armies, a fact of which they remain proud today.

Americans became involved on the periphery of that war. We helped Afghans, or at least tried to. We were not always certain which warlords we should help. It is still not entirely clear even today that we chose the right warlords, but we did our best. Eventually, with our help and the Afghans' ferocity, the Soviets were persuaded to depart from Afghanistan. You may recall the Soviet general, in leaving Afghanistan, carried a great armload of roses, which he distributed to Afghans as he walked across a bridge as they retreated. I have never seen a retreat carried out with such panache. When the Soviets departed, American forces in Afghanistan also departed soon thereafter. That decision made a lot of sense from the perspective of the Americans, because we thought Afghans could then govern themselves. Once they were rid of the Soviets, they could look after their own affairs. Americans almost always think that is appropriate for other peoples.

I was serving in the U.S. government at the time, a member of the Cabinet and the National Security Council, and present in our government's discussions on these subjects. There was not much discussion about whether it was or was not prudent for the United States to walk away from Afghanistan. It seemed appropriate, and we assumed that the Afghans were eager to take control of their affairs. They certainly had not wanted the Soviet Union to control them.

So the Americans departed. Not long after, a war broke out among the various warlords, ethnic groups, and factions in Afghanistan. Those wars among warlords and ethnic groups were bitter, extremely unpleasant, and characterized by more and more personal violence among families, clans, and groups. These long struggles fractured the society. The Taliban emerged the strongest of the various clans and factions. The Taliban were more dogmatic, harsh, and intolerant than anticipated, their repression of everyone, especially of

girls and women more onerous. Socrates views of anarchy recalled his conviction that people tolerated anything better than anarchy, including tyranny. The Taliban moved ruthlessly to consolidate power in Afghanistan. But the Afghans did not tolerate Taliban tyranny better than what had come before. Soon after, they began their terrible repression of girls and women. Before the Soviet invasion and after it, Afghan women had participated in social and professional life. Much of the medical profession had been staffed by women, who were physicians as well as nurses. In schools and education institutions as well, women played a major role in instruction. Under the Taliban, however, women were sent home. Girls were sent out of the schools. Women were ordered to resign from hospitals and schools and leave public and professional roles to men. Women were punished if they did not promptly retire from public life.

An Afghan student of my acquaintance decided to visit his native country and see for himself the quality of life under the Taliban. He grew his beard and hair to the length prescribed by law and went off to see life under the Taliban. He was horrified by what he saw. Punishments were carried out in public places—public floggings of women and men, executions, stoning. Many Afghans were deeply shocked. More and more went into exile.

I concluded that if Americans had understood the likely consequences of U.S. withdrawal, we probably would not have departed when we withdrew from Afghanistan in 1991 in the expectation that the Afghans would be able to manage their affairs. We perhaps should have anticipated that at least one of the warring groups would seek to settle the issues of government by force. Had the U.S. preserved a presence in Afghanistan we might have helped a moderate faction cope with the challenge of Taliban extremists and with Al Qaeda

guerillas who were using Afghanistan as a base for their own activities. After the attacks of 9/11, the U.S. did help them rid themselves of the Taliban, as well as of Al Qaeda.

The Taliban, you may recall, not only governed much of Afghanistan, but also provided refuge, education, and training to Al Qaeda as they prepared their attacks on New York and Washington. Americans had no foreboding or expectation that such might be a consequence of the United States walking away from Afghanistan in 1991.

This time we cannot claim ignorance. We know enough now about the possibilities of anarchy, indoctrination, violence, conquest, and civil war that we should—indeed must—recognize the need to help others cope with these problems—in Afghanistan, for example, or Iraq.

This is the sort of knowledge based on experience of which Tocqueville spoke when he wrote about the varieties of experience needed to make policy in remote places. “Experience, instruction, habit, and all the homely species of practical wisdom that are required to make sensible rules about everyday life are required for those who would govern and those who would advise those who would govern.” In every country there are requirements for sophisticated understanding of the culture, society, religion, and habits of its people. In order to make policies that achieve goals, we must know the society and culture. In order to find people who can govern, exercise power responsibly, and represent the values of the society, it is necessary to identify people who can lead. The requirements of democratic leadership are at least as demanding as those of autocratic leadership.

Harry Truman, one of my all time favorite presidents, wrote in his memoirs, I quote

“Our populace, unlike that of any other great nation, is made up of strains from every population around the world. And when we became the most powerful nation in the world, we tried to put into effect the ideals of all races and

nationalities. All of which we have written into our Constitution and Declaration of Independence.”

If all kinds of people are indeed present in our country and culture, as Harry Truman suggested, then we are safe in projecting our ideals and concerns to all races and nationalities. At least we think we are. We think our character is a reliable guide to the expectations of others. We make what I think of as “the democratic assumption” about goals of other people and places. We assume that other people’s goals are similar to ours and that other people’s approach to achieving those goals is similar to ours.

Most students of our time are familiar with Samuel Huntington’s *Clash of Civilizations*, a fascinating book. I have been an admirer of Professor Huntington all my professional life, even though I was originally quite critical of the first chapter of this book and did not believe a clash of civilizations was at hand. He was right and I was wrong. At the time that he wrote *The Clash of Civilizations*, we were already on the razor’s edge of the clash of civilizations. Today, we have confronted the clash of civilizations in diverse places and we understand that some of the people with whom deal are quite different than the “bourgeois” men and women in the 18th century whom so many philosophers assumed all Americans resembled.

In Iraq, we know that the people with whom we deal have lived under Saddam Hussein for forty years and have developed some very different habits and values than almost anyone we know. We know that we need to change some of our expectations in order to survive in our interaction with people socialized and educated by Saddam. And, in fact, we are changing our expectations day by day. In our history we have been accustomed to dealing principally with modern Europeans who live in industrial democracies. Today in Afghanistan, and in Iraq, and elsewhere we deal with a good many non-Western non-European peoples

with no experience with democracy. We have felt the global reach of contemporary foreign affairs and the global consequences of some of our foreign policy decisions. Some of those consequences have been very negative. We confront more dangers and destruction in the world today than ever in our history. We know our policies today are made in an expanding globe, though we do not fully understand all the implications of this fact.

I have just come from six weeks in Geneva in the United Nations Human Rights Commission meetings which take place every year in the spring. The Human Rights Commission always has approximately 53 elected members. Each of the members are chosen from regional groups—the African, Latin-American, European, and Asian groups, each of which selects some countries to send to the Human Rights Commission.

The Human Rights Commission is, like the United Nations itself, a *mélange* of every region, every people, and every culture. It is difficult for people in the Human Rights Commission to understand one another. Many of the governments in the Human Rights Commission have no interest in understanding one another. Apparently, not all want to be free. Some of the governments present do not desire to find constructive solutions to problems. They want to impose their own preferred solutions. The United States and the western group (called WEOG), seek to find constructive solutions to problems. At least we think we do.

There were some interesting and unexpected aspects of this year's Human Rights Commission of 2003, which reminded me again of why it is complicated to govern and to make wise policies with the consent of the governed. In a democracy, of course, if you do not have the consent of the governed, then your policy will not be very successful for very long.

In a democracy, you must have the consent of the governed or you will not be qualified to continue as a policy maker. In a democracy, you must begin with the right values.

I have been impressed all my adult life by our Declaration of Independence, especially by the paragraph that says

“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. *To preserve these rights governments are instituted among men deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.*”

I believe this is the most brilliant statement of a doctrine of political legitimacy in political philosophy. It reminds us always that the very function of government is to preserve the rights of the governed. That doctrine of legitimacy makes very clear that foreign policy and human rights require the consent of the governed. Without the consent of the governed, they are not legitimate. I sometimes think about this statement when there are discussions about whether or not the United States, or Britain, or Australia, or any country must or must not have the consent of the Security Council to use force. That is not required in our doctrine of legitimacy. Our doctrine of legitimacy is based on the consent of the governed—not the U.N. but the governed—that is true for our foreign as well as our domestic policy. It is that consent of the governed that makes our policies legitimate. It is also the protection of our human rights. We are endowed by our creator with certain unalienable rights, among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Like the authors of the universal declaration of human rights, Americans believe that human rights are shared by all and can only be protected by the rule of law. In theory and in fact, the rule of law protects a government based on consent.

The Human Rights Commission has a very special relationship to the governed. The universal declaration of human rights says, I quote

“where as disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind. Whereas it is essential if man is not to have recourse as a last resort to rebellion against tyranny and oppression that human rights should be protected by the rule of law.”

The rule of law is the ground of our constitutional government, which is government based on consent. Government based on consent is government by the governed. We are a lucky but vigilant people.

Perhaps we can ultimately expand the islands of self government and of peace in the world—with peacekeeping for example? Peacekeeping is an activity about which there have been high hopes. Many of those hopes have been dashed, because often where there is violence there is no peace to keep. Often it turns out then that the people who were going to keep peace do not really want to risk their lives in the process. We can all understand that. None of us wants to risk our lives in remote places. But the problems that require peacekeepers are the problems of our times, our world, and we will become more and more involved in dealing with them and affected by our success and failure.

Our Declaration of Independence states a dream and a doctrine of government by consent. An important part of the history of the United States has been devoted to making a reality of this dream for all Americans. As the world has shrunk, we have sought to share the dream beyond our borders.

For the United States, the enjoyment and protection of the rights stipulated in our Declaration of Independence and institutionalized in our Constitution lie at the heart of our identity as a nation. The struggle to ensure that those rights are respected by each and every one of our citizens—a struggle that is still in progress—has been the engine of our history and our development as a nation.

Jeane J. Kirkpatrick

Kirkpatrick served as U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations from 1981-85, and was a member of Ronald Reagan's cabinet and the National Security Council during this period. She is a founding Co-Director of Empower America. In March 2003 President Bush appointed her to head the U.S. delegation to the Human Rights Commission of the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. Since 1985 Kirkpatrick has taught at Georgetown University where she holds the Thomas and Dorothy Leavey University Professorship, and teaches courses on democracy and international politics. She is also a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and Director of Foreign and Defense Policy Studies at AEI.

Kirkpatrick holds a Ph.D. from Columbia University. Her books include: *The Withering Away of the Totalitarian State*; *Legitimacy and Force: National and International Dimensions*; *Dictatorships and Double Standards: Rationalism and Reason in Politics*; *Political Women* and *The New Presidential Elite*.
