

DO WE KNOW HOW YET?

INSIDER PERSPECTIVES ON INTERNATIONAL DEMOCRACY PROMOTION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

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Executive Summary

Depending on one's perspective, democracy promotion has been a part of US foreign policy for a century, (since the occupation of the Philippines), half a century (since the Marshall Plan), or a quarter century (since Ronald Reagan's creation of the National Endowment for Democracy). Whichever history you accept, democracy promotion came into its own in Eastern Europe and Russia in the early 1990s, where political pluralism, rule of law, and civil society were championed as vital for consolidating the defeat of totalitarianism in Eastern Europe. Under the management of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), democracy has also become a multi-million dollar business involving planners and managers in US government agencies, Beltway contractors, progressive non-governmental organizations, and an aspiring professional class of advocates, lobbyists, service providers and organizers in countries across the former Eastern bloc. Like any business, this one also has its gurus, efficiency experts, management consultants, evaluators, and critics who have combined to generate an extensive body of literature on the successes and failures of the enterprise.

The utility of number-crunching as guide for future programming, or as indicator of what has actually happened, diminishes as one moves either from Washington D.C. out to where programs and projects get implemented, or from the abstract to the concrete. One might perhaps expect Western social scientists—especially in the fields of anthropology, sociology, political science or public policy—to have recognized this deficit in field data, and filled it. Yet for a variety of reasons, including in particular the relative value placed on “pure scholarship” as opposed to “applied” work, and a generally critical stance toward working in proximity to the U.S. government, they have not produced a significant body of empirically-grounded case-studies to supplement the statistically-based big picture. This paper argues that the next step in

understanding how theory gets turned into practice will depend on harnessing, more effectively than to date, the reflections and insights of this group of participants, by enlisting them as collaborators in description, analysis and diagnosis.

Introduction

The title for this paper is a response to a 1973 critical and (in the authors' terms) independent assessment of alleged successes in U.S. foreign aid. They titled the book *We Don't Know How*, and summed up their findings in the following words:

First, development professionals do not know how to carry out an effective economic development program, either a big one or a small one. No one knows how—not the U.S. government, not the Rockefeller Foundation, not the international banks and agencies, not the missionaries. I don't know how. You don't know how. No one knows how.

Second, we don't know that we don't know how. Those who give the money are thousands of miles removed from where it is spent. No channel is provided whereby they can get unbiased opinions about their projects in the field in place of the usual fulsome reports of "great success." One barrier to this is that those who exercise their profession in the field, who "work among the natives," soon acquire a Messiah complex...We have no knowledge of our own ignorance (Paddock and Paddock 1973: 299-300).

I take this thirty-five year old observation—grounded in empirical field research—as a start point to discuss the possible contribution of qualitative social science research to the issues around U.S. efforts to promote democracy in the past fifteen years, especially in the Western Balkans.

Depending on one's perspective, democracy promotion has been a part of US foreign policy for a century, (since the occupation of the Philippines), half a century (since the Marshall Plan), or a quarter century (since Ronald Reagan's creation of the National Endowment for Democracy). Whichever history you accept, democracy promotion came into its own in Eastern Europe and Russia in the early 1990s, where political pluralism, rule of law, and civil society were championed as vital for consolidating the defeat of totalitarianism in Eastern Europe. Under the management of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), democracy has also become a multi-million dollar business involving planners and managers in

US government agencies, Beltway contractors, progressive non-governmental organizations, and an aspiring professional class of advocates, lobbyists, service providers and organizers in countries across the former Eastern bloc. Like any business, this one also has its gurus, efficiency experts, management consultants, evaluators, and critics who have combined to generate an extensive body of literature on the successes and failures of the enterprise.

This story of US democracy promotion has been told from the top down by a number of writers over the past two decades, with different agendas that are often apparent from their book titles (See for example Smith 1994; Wedel 1998; Carothers 1999, 2004; Guilhot 2005; Traub 2008). Over the same period USAID has commissioned multiple evaluations, including most recently a large-scale quantitative research project to assess the net effect of external funding on democratic transition (Finkel et al. 2007).

While such literature goes some way to addressing over-reaching claims about failed policies, the utility of number-crunching as guide for future programming, or as indicator of what has actually happened, diminishes as one moves either from Washington D.C. out to where programs and projects get implemented, or from the abstract to the concrete. What exactly happens when Congress allocates significant-sounding resources to “increasing better-informed citizen participation” in Macedonia, or Hungary, or Kazakhstan? How do ideas of democratic practice and social change, developed over many years in countries like Britain, France, or the United States, and closely associated with economic development, get isolated, integrated and exported to countries with their own historical legacies, now dealing with complex transition? What resources are involved, and what happens to those resources along the way from the Congressional allocation to the participatory town-hall meeting in a Balkan village, thousands of miles from Washington DC? Who are the people and organizations involved in delivering those

ideas and those resources, and what happens to them in the process? What space is left for local democratic theories and practices? In the words of one of the leading writers on these issues, the knowledge which would allow answers to these questions still “resides in the minds of practitioners” (Carothers 2004:3), and for that reason remains fragmented and underanalyzed.

One might perhaps expect Western social scientists—especially in the fields of anthropology, sociology, political science or public policy—to have recognized the deficit in field data, and filled it. Yet for a variety of reasons, including in particular the relative value placed on “pure scholarship” as opposed to “applied” work, and a generally critical stance toward working in proximity to the U.S. government, they have not produced a significant body of empirically-grounded case-studies to supplement the statistically-based big picture.¹

An additional reason may be one of access and logistics. The practitioners whom Carothers invokes constitute a far more geographically, linguistically and ideologically diverse community than we might at times imagine. Besides the U.S. based professionals—whether at USAID as one of the dwindling number of career personnel, on staff at one of the big NGOs or contracting firms, or earning a living from one project to the next as a consultant—are an even more diverse set of participants in the countries and regions where the international community, in different forms, has been a major source of employment for over a decade. This paper argues that the next step in understanding how theory gets turned into practice will depend on harnessing, more effectively than to date, the reflections and insights of this group of participants, by enlisting them as collaborators in description, analysis and diagnosis.

¹ In the broader area of development aid, work of this kind is achieving increasing prominence: recent examples include Gould and Marcussen (eds.) 2004; Lewis and Mosse (eds.) 2006. New directions in the ethnography of democracy and democracy promotion are exemplified in Coles 2007; Paley (ed.) 2009 (forthcoming).

International Intervention and Democracy Promotion in the Balkans and Eastern Europe

In particular, insight from these sources is demanded to resolve what appears to be a divide in the existing literature. Taking the Dayton Accords of 1995 as a start-point, the last thirteen years have seen considerable investment in the Balkans, along lines that look quite different from those in Eastern Europe. Bosnia, like the OSCE's establishment of a "Presence" in Albania to restore order in 1997, and NATO's air campaign against Serbia in 1999, and subsequent deployment of KFOR, demanded the costly deployment of armed, foreign troops in the region. But they also involved parallel, civilian-led efforts in the region to assist, promote, or consolidate the emergence of democratic institutions. Various agencies, including governments and non-governmental organizations, from outside the region and within, as well as substantial resources, were engaged in this process, in which civil society was a particular focus.²

Now, in late 2008, much of this activity is winding down, as international agencies declare victory in the region, and shift resources to other parts of the world. It is now eight years since the internationally-welcomed ouster of Slobodan Milosevic in Serbia, and seven since the U.S. and the European Union persuaded Macedonia's leaders to draw back from the brink of another ethnic conflict. In recent months Kosovo has declared independence: a pro-European government was elected in Serbia, Radovan Karadžić was finally arrested and sent to the Hague to stand trial; and, in Macedonia, a new governing coalition has brought together two parties with histories of rival ethno-national radicalism.³ All this provides grounds for optimism that

² My colleagues in this initiative were political sociologists Ana Devic and Eric Gordy, political scientist Chip Gagnon, and anthropologist Steven Sampson, all of whom have published compelling work in this field.

³ The two parties are The Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization-Democratic Party of Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE), and the Democratic Union of Integration (DUI). Formed in the 1990s, VMRO-DPMNE initially won votes for its embrace of rightist Macedonian nationalism, before moving toward the political center in the late 1990s. DUI was formed after the 2001 armed insurgency by the movement's leader, Ali Ahmeti, and attracts the largest percentage of ethnic Albanian votes.

international investments of time and energy to assist in the processes of political, economic and social transition in the region have borne fruit.

A variety of recent scholarship would seem to confirm that such optimism is well-founded. Recent quantitative and comparative research by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), demonstrates a correlation between investment and output in the field of democracy promotion (Finkel et al. 2007). Independent scholarship is also locating some evidence that U.S. assistance played a positive role in different democratic revolutions across Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union (Bunce and Wolchik 2006; McFaul 2007).

These recent examples of careful, scrupulous scholarship, though, contend with a significant body of earlier work that is highly critical of the effect of external actors. A prime target has been international intervention in the former Yugoslavia, and especially in Bosnia-Herzegovina, as academics have accused the international community respectively of faking democracy, failing to recover justice, or setting up a "European Raj" in Bosnia (Chandler 2000; Doubt 2000; Knaus and Martin 2003). The primary thrust of this critique was directed at "top-down" forms of constitutional and political engineering, which simultaneously work in favor of nationalist leaders who appeal only to ethnic voting blocs, while also reserving executive power for the Office of the High Representative. But the underdevelopment or powerlessness of Bosnian civil society also attracted commentary, with a number of analysts suggesting that the presence of international NGOs, and the nature of international funding policies, engender asymmetrical power relations between foreign and local organizations and stifle indigenous activism and participation in the third sector (Smillie and Todorovic 2001; Sali-Terzić 2001; see also Kekic 2001).

Perhaps the leading exponent of this deep skepticism over aid's contribution is Thomas Carothers, who over the course of the last two decades has produced an impressive body of individual and shared research and analysis on U.S. democracy promotion (see for example Carothers 1996; 1999; 2004; Ottaway and Carothers 2000). Although his recent focus has turned to U.S. efforts in the Middle East, and the relationship of democracy promotion in the so-called war on terror, Carothers' earlier work made two claims of particular relevance to the work of the US in Eastern Europe and the Balkans. First, he questioned the euphoria around "civil society" as a panacea, and quick delivery vehicle for democracy – noting especially the tendency to conflate civil society with the existence of NGOs (Carothers 1999-2000). And second, he challenged what he called the "transition paradigm" that, in his view, had outlived its usefulness and was hampering or misleading effective policy development (Carothers 2002).

The two arguments meshed in the conclusion to the later piece, where Carothers pointed to the inadequacy of diffusing effort across different domains, such as judicial reform, civic education, civil society assistance and media work, on the basis of an "institutional 'checklist'" (2002: 18). He argued that the category of "transition" countries includes very different contexts, and that each case demands analysis of the "particular core syndrome that defines the political life of the country in question" (2002: 19), which should then drive a targeted investment either within one key sector or, more likely, at a key nodal point of inter-relation between domains that have in the past been viewed as functionally separable. Examples he provided include pressure to develop political parties not through training or study tours, as U.S. projects have in the past, but by working to change the way in which political parties are financed (2002: 19).

The Domains of Critique: Intellectual, Moral and Professional bankruptcy

Carothers' work, which has been enormously influential in this regard, draws together different strands of critique with different genealogies and trajectories. In the first place, he emphasizes the intellectual shortcomings of a simplistic view that sees civil society as always and everywhere a force for good. The counter-example on which he draws is Sheri Berman's account of Weimar Germany's rich associational life, in which she concludes "civil society may not necessarily promote liberal democracy, as the neo-Tocquevilleans would have it, but rather may simply corrode the foundations of the current political order while providing an organizational base from which it can be challenged" (Berman 1997: 428).

This challenges an orthodoxy which can be traced back to Almond and Verba's writing on the importance of "civic culture" in democracy, which found new currency in the work of Robert Putnam in the 1990s (Almond and Verba 1963; Putnam et al. 1993). Like Berman, and other critics of Putnam's view of Italian history, Carothers argues that political institutions and parties are the key, and a more vital part of the context (Tarrow 1996; Encarnacion 2003); and thus that it is necessary to understand the different political dynamics of different contexts.

A linked criticism is that members of the international development community compound their over-enthusiasm for civil society by operating on the assumption that civil society's health or vibrancy is a function of the number of NGOs. Carothers again shares his critical view with a number of academic analysts of development discourse (Henderson 2003; 71-4: see also Creed and Wedel 1997; Abramson 1999; Sampson 1996, 2002; Van Rooy (ed.) 1998).

A second major thread in Carothers' work, though, draws less from scholarly sources and has more in common with investigative journalism in the muckraking tradition. His critique of

what he terms the “smorgasbord” approach to democracy promotion targets wastefulness: his call is for better-informed policy decision-making, in order to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of programming. In this regard, his work has roots and resonances in two traditions of criticism. There are now a number of journalistic and insider exposes of the lucrative side of the democracy business for Western consultants and their chosen local counterparts, which cast US taxpayers and foreign citizens as the dupes of a confidence game played by unscrupulous intermediaries (Hancock 1989; Samuels 1995; Bivens 1997; see also Wedel 1998).

A more system-focused body of work, meanwhile, emphasizes the political economy of international aid, of which democracy assistance is one part. These works identify the existence of “aid chains” running from donor country capitals out to designated beneficiaries in the receiving country, often representing some kind of marginalized or excluded group or voice (Wallace et al. 2006; Carr et al. 1998: 44-64; Sogge 2002: 65-85). Along these chains are multiple dyadic “principal-agent” relationships, between one party issuing directives and another expected to fulfill them (Cooley and Ron 2002; 15ff; see also Murrell 2002).

All those involved have interests in the chain continuing to function, as well as an interest in remaining indispensable to the chain’s functioning, which together drive processes of systematic over-optimism perhaps most neatly summarized by Charles King, when he writes:

The ratchet principle works all the way from Washington to the Georgian village: USAID overstates the success of democratization in Georgia to maintain federal appropriations levels; USAID-funded organizations overstate their successes to USAID; and local NGOs overstate their successes to their international NGO partners (King 2001: 103; for a similar observation on chains of reporting during the Vietnam War, see also Paddock and Paddock 1973: 32-3).

The criticisms of democracy promotion, then, can be parsed out into attacks on different domains of bankruptcy. Scholars, as one might anticipate, are concerned with the shaky intellectual foundations of the enterprise; the empirically-minded, in particular, question the

apparent victory of faith over logic in the strong hold that an idealized notion of citizen participation has on the imagination of advocates. But a substantial body of criticism turns out to have a strongly puritan cast—combining pragmatic and moralistic concerns—in responding negatively to mismanagement and misrepresentation, whether conceived of as the product of individual venality and hypocrisy, or as the byproduct of organizational culture. The web of relations created in the democratization industry is characterized by its uneven distribution of power and knowledge, and by particularism and self-interest, properties which strike many as undercutting the very principles that the mission, ostensibly, disseminates.

Alternative Genealogies of Theory, Practice and Critique

The debate has been lively, especially with regard to U.S. democracy promotion in East Europe, Eurasia and Russia from the 1990s onwards. But spreading, nurturing, fostering, encouraging, teaching or preaching democratic practice and theory have a far longer and wider history, and so does skepticism toward such goals. As noted above, two different origin points for U.S. efforts are often singled out: the Philippines at the very beginning of the twentieth century, and Western Europe after the Second World War.

Of the Philippines, Woodrow Wilson wrote in 1902 that the U.S. had a duty, after taking control of the islands from the Spanish, to “impart.. if it be possible by contact and sympathy, and example, the drill and habit of law and obedience which we long ago got out of the strenuous processes of English history” (quoted in Traub 2008:14). Regarding his proposal for a U.S. response to the challenges faced by the countries of Western Europe in 1947, Secretary of State George Marshall stated “Our policy is directed not against any country or doctrine but against hunger, poverty, desperation and chaos. Its purpose should be the revival of a working economy

in the world so as to permit the emergence of political and social conditions in which free institutions can exist.” (quoted in Hartmann 1968: 37).

These two capsule descriptions by the overseers of these two efforts are revealing. The occupation and colonization of the Philippines—which involved also an extended counter-insurgency campaign in which upward of 200,000 Filipinos died—was driven by a master-narrative of the U.S. as benevolent teacher, civilizer, or modernizer, who understood the long-term needs of the Filipino people better than they or their leaders, and operated with their ultimate best interests at heart. It was conceived as extending, ultimately, the reach of self-government, through an early version of “hearts and minds” outreach by dedicated missionaries.

The Marshall Plan, by contrast, was economic assistance with a restorative and defensive orientation to help Western European governments repair the physical damage wreaked by war, and offer an alternative to the appeal of communism. Particularly striking, in retrospect, is the fact that European governments were left free to determine how they used these resources: one of the committees involved in setting the parameters of the program expressed the belief that to insist on a free enterprise approach might achieve higher productivity, but that to impose conditions would constitute “an unwarranted interference with the internal affairs of friendly nations” (cited in Hartmann 1968: 43).

Through the Cold War, the underlying tension here—between spreading U.S. values and helping defend against the Soviet threat from without (or a communist threat from within) was obscured in debates over foreign aid in general, and its role in the spreading, defense or consolidation of democracy in particular. This was in part a product of the persistence of across-the-board resistance to any and all forms of foreign aid, built on a strong tradition of isolationism associated with classical republicanism. Although the Marshall Plan is now considered as a

shining accomplishment, it actually faced a stiff fight in the U.S. Congress, where opponents labeled it as “the road to bankruptcy” or a “hodge-podge of gifts of large sums of money to foreign nations, founded upon no principle at all,” and asserted that “Friends cannot be bought, and we do not make allies of nations by interfering in their internal affairs” (cited in Coffin 1964: 67).

But as the reality of the Cold War became evident to U.S. pundits, lawmakers, presidents and the broader public—in the Communist overthrow of the Czechoslovak government on February 27 1948, and subsequent Soviet and Chinese pressure in Asia—the idea of foreign aid, and also support for democracy as an instrument of self-defense took firm hold. Critiques of U.S. foreign aid were published, often attracting considerable publicity (see for example Lederer and Burdick 1961; Paddock and Paddock 1973), but the critiques were of practice not principle, and were shaped by the same Cold War priorities which ran through John F. Kennedy’s 1961 establishment of USAID and Lyndon Johnson’s subsequent engagement in Southeast Asia (one quarter of USAID’s total 1967 budget was spent in Vietnam), and also Ronald Reagan’s 1983 establishment of the National Endowment for Democracy and support for right-wing forces in Latin America. These presidents, and others that came between them, drew on high-flown idealistic rhetoric, and championed the causes of democracy and long-term development: they were able to do so because they put such issues in the broader context of a life-or-death struggle against totalitarianism.

The End of History and the Resilience of Ideology

In an insightful critique of foreign intervention in post-socialist Eastern Europe, anthropologists Gerald Creed and Janine Wedel argued that U.S. agencies chose to use

approaches to aid based on their experience in the Third World, rather than the First (Creed and Wedel 1997): that is to say, the missionizing model implemented in the Philippines trumped the less heavy-handed approach which characterized Marshall Plan assistance in Western Europe. When first introduced in Congress, for example, the Support for East European Democracy (SEED) Act insisted that the original beneficiary countries Poland and Hungary adopt market-based approaches to government.⁴

After the collapse of the Soviet Empire undermined almost half a century of rationalizing foreign assistance as anchored in national security, USAID's survival depended on locating a powerful new source of self-justification. More encompassing models of national security had in fact been developed as early as the 1970s, which saw potential for widespread disorder if basic human needs—water, food, and health provision—were not met. Although these arguments were well known within development circles—and had, in fact, been at the heart of the “new directions” movement in USAID programming announced in 1973 after the withdrawal from Vietnam—they never gained the same traction in Congress or among the wider public as “fighting communism” had. The post-Cold War situation demanded an equally potent ideology to reenergize U.S. exceptionalism and sense of purpose: and market fundamentalism initially filled the void.

For as long as Ronald Reagan's former vice president George H.W. Bush was in the White House and the challenge of the First Gulf War limited voters' and lawmakers' foreign policy horizons, Eastern Europe demanded, and received, little further attention: markets would

⁴ The SEED Act, which passed into law as public law 101-179 on November 28, 1989, had three explicitly stated goals which demonstrated the mixture of market evangelism and security maintenance informing US assistance programs. The Act set out as its goals “to contribute to the development of democratic institutions and political pluralism;” “to promote the development of a free market economic system;” and not to contribute to the communist party or defense of security forces of any Warsaw Pact member. (H.R. 3402: accessed online at <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/F?c101:6:./temp/~c1015QGvKZ:e4313>: December

do the job, as they would everywhere. But as the euphoria of the Soviet Empire's collapse and Saddam Hussein's defeat faded, the U.S. faced up to a number of international flashpoints where the massive deployment of U.S. military force or financial shock therapy did not provide a solution—most notably Somalia, Bosnia and Haiti. Having inherited these challenges from his predecessor, and having campaigned on a pledge to reinvent government, President Clinton targeted USAID for reform.

President Clinton nominated Brian Atwood as USAID's new director, and he made his intentions clear from the beginning. During his confirmation hearings in April 1993, Atwood invoked President John F. Kennedy's Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, then went on to assess USAID in stark terms, citing analyses that reported the agency as "burdened by a surfeit of goals and objectives, encumbered by excessive red tape, and beaten down by poor morale." He went on to suggest that "somewhere along the line we have forgotten to ask whether we are succeeding in doing anything meaningful or simply succeeding in spending and accounting for the money that was appropriated."⁵ In this statement, he was in broad agreement with critics like Allan Hoben, who had written that the incentive structures in USAID rewarded "procedural and tactical knowledge" and "becoming experts in moving money regardless of their technical competence or the impact of their work on a country's development" (Hoben 1989: 264). In accordance with the Government Performance Results Act of 1993, Atwood applied current practices of management, auditing and assessment to the work of USAID. He also re-defined the ideological work of the Agency as an instrument of U.S. foreign policy, reducing the number of

13, 2008). The 1992 Freedom Support Act, which extended SEED funding to the rest of the former Eastern bloc, retained the first two goals.

⁵ U.S. Department of State Dispatch Volume 4 Issue 19, May 10, 1993. Accessed online at <http://dosfan.lib.uic.edu/ERC/briefing/dispatch/1993/html/Dispatchv4no19.html> on December 10, 2008.

defined goals from 33 to five, one of which was the promotion of democracy (Hoy 1998: 35).⁶

Although Atwood shrank the Agency by 1,000 personnel in the first year, cut back missions that were serving no clear purpose, worked to integrate USAID's efforts with foreign policy priorities, and increased cost-effectiveness through international cooperation, Republican leaders wanted to go further and faster in shrinking taxpayer-funded foreign aid, and relinquishing what they perceived as unjust expectations of U.S. contribution by the international community at large. Atwood's pragmatic language of international interdependence, and the need for long-term strategic thinking and investment to reduce the threats for future administrations remained clear and, arguably, prescient. In a speech to the Council on Foreign Relations on September 11 1998, for example, three years before the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, he laid out his vision for USAID's broader contribution to overcoming America's enemies:

To combat terrorism, many traditional tools are still needed, but in modified forms. We need an intelligence community that is flexible enough to thwart terrorists that have mobility, ample resources and a range of horrifying new weapons. We need military forces who are as comfortable in nontraditional security-related roles as they are in combat. We need law enforcement agencies that can operate effectively beyond our borders with foreign counterparts. We need a diplomacy that pursues international cooperation aggressively, is quick to confront aberrant behavior and is effective in building international consensus... If we do not address the root causes, no future Administration is going to be able to preserve American interests in an increasingly volatile world. That is the role for foreign aid into the next century (Atwood 1998).⁷

Atwood nonetheless failed to convince adversaries who framed the debate in cruder terms, arguing (in a metaphor rich in associations with rugged individualism and the evils of

⁶ The Government Performance Results Act was inspired by recent scholarly work (Osborne and Gaebler 1992). A further key innovation was the creation of the Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI), a nimbler and less bureaucratic organization that would spearhead U.S efforts in post-conflict countries, or other settings which posed particular challenges.

⁷ The full text of Atwood's address is available online at http://www.usaid.gov/press/spe_test/speeches/1998/spb2a8~1.htm, accessed December 10, 2008.

handouts) that U.S. aid (its citizens' money) simply enabled foreign elites to behave badly. The resonance of that metaphor combined with widespread U.S. public ignorance concerning the percentage of GDP that is given as foreign aid (less than 0.15% annually) to keep USAID perpetually off-balance. Continuously escalating calls for accountability, efficiency and effectiveness in government made the Agency's situation still more tenuous, as it was compared unfavorably with other federal agencies with better-understood and less variable domains of responsibility (Hoben 1989:258; see also Tandler 1975: 41; Lancaster 2007).

After the Republican Party took control of Congress in 1995, they launched a sustained assault to eliminate USAID's autonomy, and make it wholly subservient to the State Department. Though USAID survived this assault, subsequent years have demonstrated the extent to which US foreign aid is tied directly to the politics of the present: assistance is bundled with other forms of investment, and programs are stopped or suspended when sanctions are imposed to try to influence foreign governments to adopt policies in tune with U.S. interests. The effect has been to make long-term, strategic development goals hostage to international politics.

“Audit Culture” and the Politics of Metrics

The focus on financial efficiency and strict accounting principles also had other negative consequences. The 1970s saw already USAID being downsized, and implementation of programs outsourced to “nimble” non-governmental organizations and contracting firms. Already in 1980, analysts argued that “many of the PVOs have become heavily dependent on US government monies, making them increasingly indistinguishable from agents of the US government,” (Lappé, Collins and Kinley 1980: 138), while other authors pointed to the increased level of overheads, operating costs and commissions that such outsourcing generated.

In the 1990s and 2000s these trends accelerated: PVOs now compete with each other for contracts, so that “best practices” are not freely shared, but come to be treated as proprietary information.

USAID personnel often move into the private sector, with the result that personal relationships and career plans impinge on decision-making. Organizations build their reputations on their ability to write good applications and disburse funds on time: because government contracts are so much more lucrative than others, a small stable of contracting firms and non-governmental organizations have become specialists in getting USAID contracts and cooperative agreements. They operate as proxies for the U.S. Government, ostensibly delivering “flexibility” and “efficiency,” but ultimately in thrall to the donor, and by lengthening the aid chain and increasing the number of transactions, raising the costs of doing business.

This view can be traced in, for example, the work of Mary Kaldor on global civil society, or a polemical piece by Kamat who argues that NGOs become more like bodies from which they draw funding than the societies they intend to represent or serve (Kaldor 2003; Kamat 2003; see also Berríos 2000). The point is made with particular force in an evaluation of the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance’s work in Bosnia, authored by John Fawcett and Victor Tanner, who wrote that by 1996, US NGOs had become “docile and well-coordinated contractors” (Fawcett and Tanner 2000: 164): the “organizational impetus slowly but irresistibly gravitated toward the money allocated to the “doable” programs” (ibid.:166) and “a mentality based on market share is edging out advocacy” (ibid.:175).

Democracy Aid from Within: Complementing Existing Approaches

This short survey of the foreign aid industry and its critics is offered as background to debates over democracy promotion in the Western Balkans. I felt compelled to engage with this wider literature when I realized that there was a deep disconnect between the Western scholarly critiques, including some of those that I cited at the beginning of this introduction (see especially Chandler 2000) and the accounts offered by smart, principled and committed practitioners with hands-on experience in the region.

Put simply, I found that the people on the ground were not the unscrupulous, venal, power-hungry and (often) witless caricatures who populated the pages of some accounts. Although I could potentially mine my notebook for “gotcha” moments where Western professionals, in relaxed mode, vented the frustrations of their daily routines in language that was dismissive of local expertise or even borderline racist, I just as often heard articulations of admiration and respect for the work of domestic counterparts. My overall sense was that these people cared, often passionately, about doing the best job they possibly could, and also in putting knowledge to work in the world.

It certainly remains easy to locate and document instances where U.S. efforts are clumsy or ill-conceived, or where they betray arrogance or ignorance. There are still undoubtedly descendants of Hancock’s “Lords of Poverty” or Bivens’ gravy-train riders at work in development circles. But in its own circuit of unintended consequence, scholarly attention to such figures and their missteps and misappropriations feeds into a “no-fault” culture, and a sense of an agency under siege, in which individuals and organizations reduce risk-taking behavior, devote energy to doing things by the book (even when that defies logic or common-sense), and

do their utmost to cover up any thing that might be viewed as a mistake (Lancaster 2000:42; Snook 1999).

Such a culture impedes information-sharing and institutional learning, and thereby contributes to inefficiency and repeated mistakes. “Gotcha” scholarship also serves the agenda of those who decry foreign aid as a waste of US taxpayer money, supplying them with ammunition to serve their often partisan needs. In both regards, a relentlessly critical perspective on the practices of foreign aid unwittingly contributes to the further shrinking of the already tiny allocation of funds to civilian-led, development-oriented initiatives to bring about positive change. In a post World War II world where U.S. foreign policy has been overwhelmingly militarized (Lutz 2002), scholarly work that identifies USAID as the “bad guy” can itself be criticized as blinkered and ultimately unproductive.

What is demanded, then, is openness to diverse reflections on how international democracy promotion operates in the Western Balkans. There is a growing literature of this kind, written by U.S. professionals who have worked in the field for either USAID or one of its NGO implementers. The essays in *Transacting Transition*, for example, an edited collection from 2006, focused on particular programs and projects intended to build confidence, mobilize local communities, or increase better-informed citizen participation, and probed how those terms translated into practice on the ground (Brown (ed.) 2006).⁸

What is clear from most of their accounts, or from conversations with the authors, was the intimate involvement of local counterparts in these activities. Besides interpreters, which were required because only one of the practitioners who contributed to the volume knew more

⁸ Most of the chapters were authored by former practitioners: the one exception was a chapter on Catholic Relief Services’ commitment to authentic partnerships by Chip Gagnon, one of my original collaborators in the project.

than a little of the local language where they worked, they also employed local staff as drivers, administrators, or field officers. They also had to deal with a wide range of potential allies or adversaries, including citizen activists, local non-governmental organizations, town mayors, journalists, and political party hacks. The perspectives of these different actors are vitally important to our understanding of how the process of democracy promotion actually plays out on the ground. But they are, for obvious reasons, not fully represented in the narratives of international practitioners, appearing only in the margins and the footnotes.

They are also, perhaps more surprisingly, often absent or muted in evaluations commissioned by USAID and its implementers. Common to these evaluations is a refrain of time and budgetary constraints which militate against these voices emerging. One program in Bosnia in which, for example, \$14 million in US government were dispersed over three years, stipulated that the cost of evaluation for this, and another program which dispersed a further \$5.2 million, could not exceed \$30,000, and the authors report that their planned 20 day stay in Bosnia to collect data had to be cut to 13 days, in part for this reason (Taylor 2000).

Though the authors report conversations with a wide range of local staff, who are generally praised for their energy and commitment, there is little by way of a sense of how these conversations went. Such accounts make it clear that the world of democracy promotion has its sharp demarcations in which, as Kimberly Coles describes in her work on OSCE's activities in Bosnia, "locals" can find themselves, paradoxically, excluded from full participation in change-making efforts in which they are key stakeholders (Coles 2007:60-83).⁹

⁹ At the same time, democracy promotion has become a career track not just for Westerners, but for local professionals who may continue to work either in their own country, or take their expertise overseas. Such people could be argued to have "gone native" in the opposite sense to that in which that term is generally used, and find themselves operating under similar constraints to those of their international counterparts, such that if they are frank in their reflections, their comments would be viewed as hostile or as a breach of trust, and their future livelihood in this field threatened.

As a result of the omission or exclusion of these voices, some questions go unanswered. Working with a group of colleagues, I came up with the following list of questions which evaluations, for the most part, leave unanswered, but which we consider worth exploration to better understand the dynamics of democracy promotion.

- How does the presence of international organizations (IOs) affect civil society? For example, do the employment opportunities offered by IOs increase individuals' skill-sets, with long-term benefits for the society, or do they weaken local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), by hiring away their staff?
- How much do international organizations know about the specific cultural contexts in which they are working? How do they acquire such knowledge, and what factors inhibit their learning?
- How do local understandings of democracy differ from those envisioned by international donors and staffers? How do those local understandings shape the ultimate impact of democracy assistance programs?
- How do the internal organization and policies of international organizations influence professional relationships between international and local staff? In particular, do the internal practices of IOs encourage or discourage collaborative professional relationships among international and local staff?
- When local staff of an IO or local counterpart offer critical feedback on designing, implementing, and evaluating democracy promotion projects, are international staff receptive in listening and incorporating those ideas? Under what conditions and in what phases of the democracy promotion process do international staff seem the most receptive to local input?

In the course of research undertaken under the auspices of a multi-year collaboration at the Watson Institute at Brown University, I have been trying to gather first-hand perspectives on these questions. As well as familiar methods—open-ended, qualitative interviews with people closely involved in civil society initiatives—I have also solicited responses through other means, including an online essay competition, launched during 2007, inviting scholars and practitioners in the region to put their intimate knowledge to work.¹⁰

The results, as I had anticipated, confirmed some of the views expressed by critics outside these programs, and also highlighted other dimensions. Among the compelling, evidence-based conclusions from the essays were the following points:

- Ostensibly apolitical techniques of democracy promotion—including for example the use of “dotmocracy”—have their own political effects—in this case, prompting an adverse reaction from recipients who view such techniques as infantilizing and therefore asserting a teacher-pupil, power-laden relationship between foreigners and locals. These effects are largely invisible in official evaluations of these reforming programs, which generally emphasize “partnership.”
- Initiatives introduced or supported by election-oriented members of the Administration or Congress in the name of “fiscal accountability” or “a more effective public diplomacy” stall work at the local level by increasing friction in the aid chain, and diverting resources and energies away from the work of incremental reform.
- A key challenge, for actors throughout this system, is to navigate attempts by actors in the aid chain to siphon off funds (in the case of education programming, for example, ranging from US NGOs to local school principals), as well as the obstacles posed by

¹⁰ A selection of the essays, together with an introduction from which this paper is largely drawn, are

donor bureaucracies (which at times dam the flow of funds), without jeopardizing the relationships of trust and cooperation on which any program ultimately depends.

- Local realities have impacts that planning can never anticipate, but that first-hand observation reveals and can address. One example offered by an implementer of a UN peace education program in Albania is an effective reminder of the often-overlooked importance of broader social and cultural contexts as they impact the everyday. The implementer in question explained how he needed to purchase a washing machine before he could expect school-kids to engage each other in democratic debate.¹¹ He then used the example itself to argue, less obviously, against the idea that existing conditions—in this case, prejudice against rural schoolchildren—must perforce block, or fundamentally alter the direction of efforts at change-making. The point is that smart implementers can improvise and adapt to such challenges at the tactical level, while maintaining their strategic goals.
- Such voices indicate the value of longer-term perspectives. In particular, social ties persist between people who were intimately involved in some of the programs, so that those who were once targets or beneficiaries are now active participants who carry the work forward – dealing with obstacles, for sure, but offering an account richer than those of either outside evaluators or critics who generally impose time-limits and benchmarks that demarcate “success” or “failure.”

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¹¹ The context was one in which rural schoolkids were attending school away from their homes, and had to wear the same clothes over an extended period, leading their urban counterparts to accuse them of poor hygiene, and to treat them badly. Installing a washing machine at the dormitory used by the rural kids changed the dynamic.

- Finally, we must recognize the very different dimensions of “civil society.” At one extreme, it is associated with idealized, non-adversarial, community-based local democracy of the kind reportedly embodied in classical Athens, Switzerland, or the New England town hall meeting, and connected with ideals of the common good (Mansbridge 1980; Barber 1984; Bryan 2004). At the other, in particular in the context of Soviet-dominated Eastern Europe, it describes the orientation of intellectual dissidents seeking to build pluralist democratic cultures “...in societies with a relatively thin stratum of intelligentsia and nomenklatura and a traditional lethargic life-style among the “masses” of peasants and workers – and every little in between” (Eliaesen 2006: 9). This carries forward for people in the region who see much of the new NGO activism as “colorless” and unreflective of the political agenda that it represents and abets – the outsourcing of responsibilities from the government.

All these valuable insights derive from first-hand accounts from insiders, which represent a missing part of the story of democracy promotion in the Western Balkans—a missing part that authors like Paddock and Paddock wrote about, in the context of U.S. development aid, over three decades ago. As noted above, USAID is currently conducting major evaluations of the impact of democracy promotion programs, and US and EU-based scholars offer their own analyses of the work’s progress. But what all these accounts lose, in their effort to present the big picture, is a more intimate and immediate sense of what is going on on the ground. Anthropologists have long referred to this as local knowledge, but more apt is a German term for having a “fingertip feeling” for a situation or context—*fingerspitzengefühl*. While its value is relatively uncontroversial, a variety of political factors, ranging from narrow self-interest to domestic pressures on USAID—as described in the early part of this paper—combine to prevent

its circulation.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, and provocation, I would argue that one obvious marker of the absence or perishability of *fingerspitzengefühl* in the case of literature on democracy promotion is the near-total absence of non-English terms for social phenomena in the evaluations. It is a truism that learning a foreign language is a vital part of understanding mores and values as well, yet other than including some historical background, the evaluations discussed here include next to no discussion of what might be termed local “keywords” that might help readers appreciate what Carothers referred to as the “particular core syndrome” of the countries where foreign intervention seeks to promote progressive change (Carothers 2002: 19; see p.7, above).

One such word that I have come to understand as key to understanding social and political life in parts of Macedonia is *inaet*—which can be translated as stubbornness, pigheadedness, or mulishness. As these translations indicate, *inaet* can be perceived as a negative force, of reluctance to contemplate change, or even active resistance. But I suggest that with real fingertip feeling, one can see this quality in positive terms—as many Macedonians do. It could also be translated as doggedness or persistence—values which are arguably vital for thinking about democracy, and finding ways to make it work, over the long-term. It is surely too early to be able to rebut Paddock and Paddock’s critical judgment on foreign aid, that no one knows how. But we can perhaps conclude that a small dose of *inaet*, and taking the time to recognize the underexamined politics of evaluation, the overlooked perspectives of insiders, and the misunderstood keywords of local life, might put us on the path to knowing more.

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