

Remarks by Kenneth Wollack
Journal of Democracy Symposium on
"Democracy Promotion: The End of the Transition Paradigm?" by Thomas Carothers, Vice
President for Studies, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
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When first extended, I was greatly appreciative of Tom's invitation to comment on his critique of what he calls the "transition paradigm." This was a real honor. However, after reading an advance copy of the upcoming article in the *Journal of Democracy* and then the invitation for this event, I began to have second thoughts. In his Journal piece, Tom finds guilty the democracy promoters who, he argues, invented and then continued to slavishly adhere to a naive and outdated notion of a natural sequence of stages of democratization. The invitation that we all received announcing this gathering then identifies me a "one of Washington's most experienced democracy promoters." With this dubious label, I feared, I was, in Tom's eyes, guilty in the extreme.

At the outset, let me say that Tom has once again made an important contribution to the policy discussion on an important topic. As practitioners, my colleagues and I, while not always agreeing with everything Tom postulates, consider ourselves fortunate to benefit from the views of an outsider who supports what we do, on one hand, and, on the other hand, offers constructive criticism from time to time. We and many others take very seriously what he says. And his assessments often spark serious and intense discussions within NDI. I believe that is what Tom would want. And we are a better organization as a result of the policy debate that he stimulates.

I probably re-read Tom's upcoming article a half dozen times, struggling with how I would respond at this gathering. I often found that I agreed and disagreed simultaneously with almost every point he raised. At first, I wanted to simply concur with his critique but argue that experienced democracy promoters, practitioners like NDI, are innocent of the sins Tom enumerates. For it appeared that Tom proffers a model of a democracy promoter that is as simplistic as the paradigm he suggests we collectively worship.

NDI has always believed that democracy promotion is but one part of a mix of foreign aid and development initiatives that includes economic development and socio-economic considerations. We have always tried to avoid the rigid approach Tom talks about. We recognize complexity and shifting political sands. We try to identify specific country challenges and we try to design programs that address the challenge while taking culture, tradition and history into consideration. I also think we recognize that the so-called "next generation" challenges include corruption issues, economic progress, (or at least a mix of the economic and political,) party financing, party reform and renewal, technological issues like e-governance, women, youth and minority participation, leadership development and addressing public apathy and disaffection through greater linkages between the citizenry and political institutions and politicians. And, I would point out, that we learn a lot from our mistakes.

It would be unhelpful to this important debate, however, to try to set organizations like NDI aside and criticize a group of anonymous democracy promoters. Instead, I would like to adopt the advocate's role, kind of an angel's advocate to Tom's devil's advocate.

At the top of his article, Tom says that democracy promoters impose a simplistic and incorrect conceptual order on complexity. To the extent that this happens then Tom should be commended for pointing out a problem. But I would argue that democracy promoters may not have it nearly as wrong a Tom would argue, and remind all of you that democracy promotion is a cause oriented activity and we should not be embarrassed to say so. Therefore, it requires optimism and enthusiasm that can, for the uninitiated, disguise a lot of hard minded realism that goes into our discussion and decisions behind the scenes. So, while I've spent many years fighting against the very simplistic frameworks and templates that Tom describes, I'm going to put myself in the shoes of democracy promoters everywhere.

While practitioners in this field never considered ourselves operating under a transition paradigm, if we did, perhaps it was more benign than Tom would make it out to be. The real danger, which he only alludes to, is when a paradigm leads not only to a faulty assessment of the state of democracy in a particular country, but also to irrelevant, dangerous or ineffectual programs. It would be, perhaps, more helpful to examine the individual cases where this may have occurred. But I would assume that even absent a paradigm, there would be poor assessments and bad programs. I am not certain that looking at a country or democratization challenge through the paradigm prism would, ipso facto, result in poorly conceived programs. Is this a paradigm problem or something else?

Tom understandably criticizes AID documents that may have painted a rosy and inaccurate picture of democratic transitions in countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo, Zambia and Guinea. And he cites Georgia as a place where the transition paradigm has led to overly optimistic assumptions about democracy there. But we should inquire whether or not actual democracy programs address the current democratization challenges in these countries and whether these programs have adapted to changing political situations. I believe that we, and others, are asking the right questions in these countries and, with AID support, carrying out cutting edge programs that do not necessarily correspond to the overly optimistic transitional language cited by Tom. Moreover, the decentralization at USAID has resulted in dozens of missions overseas, each of which approaches democracy promotion programs differently. The technocratic ideal of rational sequences on which the indicator frameworks and strategic objectives are built is, as Tom notes, in existence but, to be fair, is not applied uniformly. The democracy implementers are as varied and complex as the political environments within which they operate.

It is true, we promoters may use the jargon that Tom claims makes up the transition paradigm - openings, breakthroughs and consolidation. But these are short-hand descriptions of political situations - language used for organizing purposes and not strung together as an immutable truth and, for more than a decade, we have been quite accustomed to working in what Tom calls the Grey Zone - between authoritarianism and democracy. This is hardly a new phenomenon that represents what Tom characterizes as a "crash of assumptions." Mexico, Kenya, and, after breakthrough elections more than 10 years ago, Pakistan, Zambia and Albania are only a few examples. If there was a period in which we believed in a linear democratization path, it was many years ago and very brief.

I wanted to respond to two particular issues Tom raises. The first relates to the need for political party development. I am particularly pleased that he recognizes a democratization issue that NDI and IRI have long argued has been devalued, if not ignored. In recent years, it has been civil society which became the favored child of international assistance. It has been described as the well-spring of democracy. The international community has buttressed civic organizations, aided them, and abetted their rise, often from the ashes of discredited political parties. This has been a good and necessary endeavor; NDI has participated in it and continues to do so.

Yet the focus on civil society moved beyond fashion. For some, it became an obsession. There is a distinct danger in this. We have found, most starkly in places like Peru and Venezuela, that civil society without effective political institutions quickly creates a political vacuum. It sows opportunities for populists and demagogues who promise to cut out the middlemen such as legislatures which are the foundation of representative democracy. In short, there must be a call to action, as Tom has made, for the international community to respond to the need to build, sustain and renew political parties on equal footing with our commitment to the demand side of the political equation - civil society.

There are signs over the past two years of new positive changes, if only incremental. In its new inter-American Democratic Charter, the OAS recognized that the "strengthening of political parties is a priority for democracy."

The World Bank is exploring ways to include legislatures as well as civic groups in the development of Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers. The PRSP process forms the basis for concessional lending and debt relief in nearly 70 countries. And with the support of NDI, the three largest international groupings of political parties, representing 340 parties in 140 countries are joining forces to promote political party modernization, reform and renewal. But much more has to be done before parties are seen as natural, if not indispensable partners by development agencies worldwide. When political parties fail to fulfill their special role, the entire political system will be put in jeopardy, putting at risk all other development assistance.

The second issue, relates to the failure of democracy promotion organizations that have an exclusively political perspective to appreciate let alone incorporate economic issues that effect the democratization process. I would concur with Tom that we have to have a better understanding of the linkages between economic and political reform. At NDI, we have co-sponsored a number of programs with the Center for International Private Enterprise on the "Politics of Economic Reform" and in 1999, we brought together in Yemen political and civic leaders from 17 countries to address what we called *Managing the Twin Transitions: Economic and Political Reform*. But we can do much more to bridge the political and economic communities.

However, I would argue that Tom should more appropriately address this concern to the economic development community which is comparatively flush with resources and has traditionally ignored political linkages. In the past, it was hoped that development aid could achieve the kind of growth and opportunity that leads to social stability.

But it became increasingly apparent that a growing number of problems in the developing world are beyond the reach of traditional economic aid because, while they have economic consequences, the problems are not fundamentally economic, but political in nature. Truly sustainable development requires the capacity to resolve problems without resort to violence or repression. International donor agencies and financial institutions have only begun to recognize the interconnectedness between political and economic reform and I would urge Tom to also urge them to understand and appreciate the political dimensions of development.

In some ways, Tom's article is a sophisticated statement of the obvious - that democracy, a highly desirable but elusive state of affairs, has either not taken hold or has been severely compromised in many places of the world, despite a general rhetorical commitment on the part of 100 plus governments. But to say that the "dominant paradigm" has outlived its usefulness may be an overreaction.

It is true that there is too much oversimplification as Tom rightfully points out. But, I think in the final analysis, that it be might very wrong to abandon the thought that there is a transition to democracy or a movement toward democracy.

Democracy promotion, after all, is a mission-oriented effort. And, in the cacophony of labels, categories and paradigms, the human dimension can be lost. People are driven to sacrifice time, money and energy because, as Lane Kirkland once said, "it is simply the right thing to do." We work in the Kosovos and Angolas and Algerias of the world, not because we are victims of faulty analysis but because it seems right to have the same aspirations for Angolans and Algerians as we have for Serbians and Chileans and Americans. Even more so for the democratic advocates in the countries where we work. They are making real life sacrifices in the belief that things can and will get better. The real paradigm is accepting the universal appeal of democracy - that human beings will aspire to fulfill their humanity. It could be demoralizing and ultimately self-defeating to adapt to a world of "feckless pluralism," "dominant powers" and "gray zones." We don't adopt a Hobbesian view of the world even when we discover that democrats can be more democratic in opposition than in government. The Frederick Chulubas and Sali Barishas of this world did not lead us to view Nelson Mandela or Aung San Suu Kyi more warily.

I recognize that that is not what Tom advocates. Somewhere in the article there is a passing reference to a "hopeful vision" and there is an assertion that given how difficult democratization is, "efforts to promote it should be redoubled." But somehow, I fear that this message is buried and therefore gets lost particularly on the professional cynics, who don't believe positive change is possible and thrive on messy, untidy situations. Today, these cynics are most prevalent in the Middle East. Only this week, in an article entitled "Our New Defeatist Attitude," Sebastian Mallaby describes Tom's analysis as "gloomy" and asks his readers to overcome the pessimism in the ongoing struggle between activists and defeatists.

I want to thank Tom for once again making us think more critically on what we do and how we do it. I know the debate and discussion will continue as soon as I return to my office.