

Truman, Reagan, and Bush Were Right

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In the face of Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi's use of the armed forces to gun down anti-government protesters across the country, President Obama seems to be tongue-tied and lack a clear view of America's interest in the uprising and the obligations imposed by American ideals.

Two weeks ago, his tongue was freer and his vision clearer. On February 11, shortly after Vice President Omar Suleiman's brief televised announcement that Hosni Mubarak had resigned as president of Egypt and his powers had been transferred to the military, President Obama declared at the White House that "nothing less than genuine democracy will carry the day." It is a heady hope and a just aspiration for the people of Egypt.

But what is "genuine democracy"? What are its foundations? What beliefs, practices, and associations nourish it? And what is within the competence and commitment of the United States — whose experts have been caught flat-footed by the popular uprisings sweeping the Arab world and whose intelligence agencies, Defense Department, State Department, and National Security Council remain woefully understaffed with officials who know Arabic and understand Islam — to bring it about?

President Obama emphasized elections that conform to the highest standards. Genuine democracy, he explained from the White House, "means protecting the rights of Egypt's citizens, lifting the emergency law, revising the Constitution and other laws to make this change irreversible, and laying out a clear path to elections that are fair and free." And genuine democracy must be inclusive: "Above all, this transition must bring all of Egypt's voices to the table."

Such enthusiastic demands were, in the moment, an understandable reaction to the stirring images broadcast around the world of jubilant Tahrir Square demonstrators celebrating Mubarak's ouster. And it is right and fitting for the president of the United States to stand with those demanding an end to authoritarianism and a voice in the making of the laws under which they live.

Nevertheless, President Obama's rhetoric risked inflating expectations and confusing priorities. With the triumphant return from Qatar to Egypt of influential radical Sunni Sheikh Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, persisting demonstrations in Bahrain, and civil war in Libya, establishing reasonable expectations and clarifying priorities is critical.

Within 18 months of its victory in the Jan. 2006 Gaza elections determinedly sought by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Hamas staged a bloody coup in which it threw Fatah out of the government and forcibly imposed one party rule. And just last month, even as the people of Tunisia and Egypt banished their dictators, Hezbollah dealt a serious blow to the prospects for freedom in Lebanon and stability in the region by unseating pro-Western Prime Minister Saad Hariri and replacing him with Hezbollah puppet Najib Mikati.

Our own constitutional tradition, moreover, while uncompromisingly grounding government in the consent of the governed, maintains a lively awareness of tyranny of the majority. That's why the founders built into the Constitution substantial limits on government. And that's why our constitutional tradition teaches that democracy is not the highest aim of politics, but rather the regime best suited to securing individual freedom for all, the leading goal of legitimate and lawful government.

The powerful waves of discontent still washing over the Middle East will oblige the White House to keep its attention focused on the long-suppressed demands among Arab peoples to determine their own destinies. President Obama and his team can draw inspiration and guidance from the three most consequential advocates among his modern Oval Office predecessors of the preservation and extension of democracy and freedom abroad as a defining principle of American foreign policy.

On March 12, 1947, with Communism on the march imposing totalitarian government throughout eastern Europe, and with Greece and Turkey tottering, President Harry S. Truman addressed a joint session of Congress. Communist aggression, the president declared, had forced the free world into a global struggle between "alternative ways of life."

In response, Truman announced the doctrine to which his name became attached: "One of the primary objectives of the foreign policy of the United States is the creation of conditions in which we and other nations will be able to work out a way of life free from coercion." America should concentrate on creating the material conditions of freedom, which meant providing "economic and financial aid which is essential to economic stability and orderly political processes."

On June 8, 1982, with intellectual and political elites on the left believing that Western liberal democracies had much to learn from Communism about social justice and not a few on the right thinking that concerning world affairs it was best for America to mind its own business, President Ronald Reagan addressed members of the British Parliament to warn of "threats now to our freedom, indeed to our very existence, that other generations could never even have imagined." Prominent among them were "global war" in which the use of nuclear weapons "could mean, if not the extinction of mankind, then surely the end of civilization as we know it," and "the enormous power of the modern state" which, readily abused, worked "to stifle individual excellence and personal freedom."

To defeat these novel threats to freedom, Reagan announced a long term undertaking “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.” Out of this mandate, which broadened Truman’s understanding of the conditions under which freedom flourished and posed a task Reagan recognized would “long outlive our own generation,” was born the National Endowment for Democracy.

On Nov. 6, 2003, to honor NED’s twentieth anniversary, President George W. Bush, addressing the United States Chamber of Commerce in Washington, D.C., became the first U.S. president to focus what he called “the freedom agenda” — an elaboration of the Truman Doctrine and the principles Reagan expounded in his speech at Westminster — on the Muslim Middle East. His perspective, like that of Truman and Reagan, looked not merely to the moment but beyond the horizon. Securing and extending freedom in the Middle East, he insisted, must be “a focus of American policy for decades to come.”

The universal claims of human freedom did not dictate a single set of political institutions, Bush observed, but all democracies that protect freedom, he insisted, must conform to certain “vital principles.” They must “limit the power of the state”; establish the “consistent and impartial rule of law”; “allow room for healthy civic institutions — for political parties and labor unions and independent newspapers and broadcast media”; “guarantee religious liberty”; “privatize their economies, and secure the rights of property”; “prohibit and punish official corruption, and invest in the health and education of their people”; “recognize the rights of women”; “and instead of directing hatred and resentment against others, successful societies appeal to the hopes of their own people.”

Truman, Reagan, and Bush were right.

In forthrightly proclaiming support for those demanding freedom and democracy in Egypt, President Obama aligned himself with a proud American foreign policy tradition, with both progressive and conservative roots. He should claim that tradition as his own and, in the face of Gaddafi’s war against the Libyan people, reaffirm it. At the same time, and in the spirit of that tradition, the president should adopt a long-term perspective, contributing to the advancement of democracy abroad by recommitting America to the arduous, gradual, patient work of cultivating the conditions — material, moral, and political — under which freedom flourishes.