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US foreign policy isn't thuggish

America doesn't export democracy with 'thuggish violence' – the Iraq and Afghanistan invasions were about security

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The US has been criticised both for timidity and thuggishness in promoting democracy in Afghanistan. Photograph: John Moore/Getty Images

Simon Jenkins's [attack](#) on the west's allegedly "thuggish" efforts to export democracy reveals a misunderstanding of US foreign policy and the place of democracy promotion within it.

Anger at the many failures of the US occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq should not lead us to conflate these with democracy promotion itself. The United States went to war in these countries because it believed, rightly or wrongly, that their rulers posed a serious national security threat. The short-term solution was to topple the Taliban and Saddam. Neither war was fought to turn Iraq and Afghanistan into Western-style democracies.

Yet, for historical and ideological reasons, American policymakers once again have found it hard to frame their actions exclusively in security terms. Hardcore Nixonian realpolitik rarely finds many takers in Washington. Instead, a powerful liberal tradition drives it to pursue democratic transformation irrespective of the original motive compelling intervention. From Kabul to Baghdad, the hope has been once again that democracy would be the welcome by-product of a more urgent security goal.

To say the United States today exports democracy with "massive, thuggish violence" is a caricature at best. In fact, it very rarely uses its massive military power in support of democratisation – nor does it seem sure how it could, as Afghanistan and Iraq show. If anything, American hard power has been an underwhelming tool of democracy promotion, with the exception of the reconstruction of Germany and Japan after the second world war.

If the United States were the cynical bully some say it is, it would have been simpler for it to install friendly autocrats in Kabul (as the Soviets did) and Baghdad (to balance Iran). The caricature America would have washed its hands of these two troubled political systems long ago and invested its capital in oil deals not ballot boxes. Instead, the United States chose the herculean task of trying to shape a totally new political order in societies it understands poorly.

The prospects for democratisation in Iraq may not be bright but they are not pitch black either. It is wrong to dismiss an election that may actually lead to one elected leader being voted out of office in favour of an opponent. In any country with no history of democracy this is not something to be sneered at, however flawed the process.

Things look worse in Afghanistan following last year's fraudulent presidential election, which the west was powerless to rescue. America should be criticised for the timidity and impotency of its democracy promotion in this instance, not for any thuggish coercion. Paradoxically, it is because of its democracy impulse that Washington now finds itself stuck with an uncooperative and increasingly autocratic ally in Hamid Karzai. The parallels to South Vietnam in the early 1960s are uncomfortably close.

Simon Jenkins comes close to saying that the Afghan leader is justified in rigging elections, flouting democratic governance and tolerating corruption because Afghan reality dictates it – and western governments are wrong and/or hypocritical in criticising him, however weakly. To argue that there is no point in trying to encourage democratisation because Afghanistan and Arab countries have never been democracies is a fatalistic tautology and, to their citizens, a counsel of despair.

Similarly, only a shallow pessimism argues that western countries should not promote democracy abroad because they themselves are corrupt and flawed, or that it does not really matter whether countries experiment with elections because they are over-rated. Elections do not equal democracy but they are a *sine qua non*. Some westerners may be disillusioned or blasé about elections but that feeling is not shared in most democratising countries where there is real hunger for them and a clear understanding that they represent progress.

In a sense, Jenkins's caricature of US actions in Afghanistan and Iraq springs from the kind of misunderstanding of democracy promotion that led Bush's over-optimistic "freedom agenda" down blind alleys. Failing to distinguish between war and democracy promotion, it fails to address if and how military power might be used to support the latter. It misreads the complex ways in which a liberal impulse influences how the US sees the world, its role in it and what it can hope to achieve through democracy promotion.

The caricature of US democracy promotion also overlooks the myriad low-key and peaceful ways in which America (and other nations, by no means all western) strive in often difficult circumstances to help citizens living under autocratic regimes gain a greater measure of control over how they are governed. Even if American mistakes in Afghanistan and Iraq have brought the idea of democracy promotion into disrepute, it deserves to be improved and not abandoned.

- Timothy Lynch and Nicolas Bouchet are the conveners of a [conference on American democracy promotion at the Institute for the Study of the Americas on 28 April](#)