

# **HOW FREEDOM IS WON**

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It is a pleasure, and an honor, to be with you at this important meeting on a critical subject at a challenging time, at the invitation of such illustrious convenors -- Václav Havel, Natan Sharansky, and José María Aznar. They have made immeasurable contributions not only to the freedom of their own people, but to the freedom of people and peoples around the world.

Each is now again a private citizen, ever effective, and an 'NGO' in his own right.

I am here today as Chairman of a particular mission-driven NGO, Freedom House. Many of you will be familiar with Freedom House, its work, publications, and global rankings, but you may not all be familiar with its origins. Freedom House was founded in 1941 to support American engagement in the cause of freedom abroad – then under such ominous attack by Nazism and fascism in Europe and Asia, and when American public opinion was divided on whether America should involve itself in “other people’s battles.” Freedom House’s founders were Eleanor Roosevelt and Wendell Willkie, the Republican her husband had just defeated in the 1940 presidential election. Freedom House has continued to be bipartisan, and has continued to be dedicated to the preservation and expansion of freedom around the world.

We should also recall, here in Prague, that the name Freedom House was chosen as a direct response to the Nazi Party’s Munich *Braunhaus*. Freedom House has long outlasted the *Braunhaus*, but the need to defend freedom has not disappeared, far from it.

A few brief words about what we do:

Analysis. Freedom House conducts and disseminates independent analysis about freedom and its elements. Freedom House each year produces the authoritative *Freedom in the World*, the publication of record of how freedom fares in each country, enabling one to see its progress or otherwise over time around the globe.

Advocacy. We amplify the voice of those around the world who believe in the inalienable, universal right of individuals to be free. We urge the US and other governments committed to democracy and human rights to make the advancement of freedom a priority in their foreign and international aid policies.

Thirdly, action: Freedom House supports and facilitates the work of those seeking to advance freedom in their own societies. We have multinational teams of trainers and advisors working with human rights defenders and civil society activists around the world.

Some Observations on Freedom and Democracy: In analyzing and reporting on the state of freedom in any particular country, Freedom House disaggregates freedom into its components. Are elections, and the judiciary, free and fair? Does the state provide for or permit free trade unions, a free press, and respect property rights? Is there freedom of expression, and of association? Are rights and freedoms equally available to men and women, and to all of the societies' ethnic or religious groups? We focus on how men and women actually experience fundamental freedoms - civil liberties and political rights - rather than on the formalities of democratic process as such.

Indeed, elections often serve as facades. And yet, even in conditions when outside observers expected them to be no more than facades, elections can and have served as critical catalysts for breakthroughs, when the people of a nation can and did overcome efforts by autocratic regimes to manipulate and 'manage' the process. Chile in 1988, Serbia in 2000, and Ukraine in 2004 are certainly cases of civic action galvanized by fraudulent elections that successfully moved countries large steps forward.

We believe the presence of a strong, self-mobilized, 'bottom-up' civic activism in each of these cases played a fundamental role, and that these experiences have broader lessons for us.

We are asked, what are the right ways to make the transition from a totalitarian/authoritarian regime to a democracy? Since Freedom House has been tracking such transitions for over 30 years, we undertook a study to see what the record might suggest. *How Freedom is Won: From Civic Struggle to Durable Democracy*, looked at the 67 countries where dictatorships have fallen since 1972. The study records the powerful importance of citizens, citizen engagement, and NGOs – and the much lesser utility of other, especially violent, methods. In fifty of the sixty-seven transitions, nonviolent civic force was pivotal: The stronger and more cohesive the nonviolent civic coalition operating in societies in the years immediately preceding the transition, the deeper the transformation in the direction of freedom and democracy. The broader the popular participation in the resistance to tyranny, the greater the freedom after the change.

When less violence was used by the opposition more freedom followed: In the data examined, there was more than a three to one chance that a country in transition would attain a high freedom rating post-transition if the opposition to dictatorship did not employ violent force.

What the study strongly suggests, in short, is that how one chooses to fight determines what one wins. Sustainable democratic outcomes resulted from those transitions featuring the centrality of civilian-based nonviolent action, whereas those involving oppositional violence, and, equally interesting, elite accommodation unaccompanied by an active ‘bottom’up’ civic activism showed much weaker correlations with democratic outcomes. Negotiations among elites, without an active “bottom up” civil society activism, only rarely led to durable democracy after transitions.

This central role played by citizen-based movements, and NGOs, has of course not gone unnoticed by today’s authoritarians, who have been paying close attention to the expansion of the democratic community in the past decade and more. There is as a consequence a growing pushback against democracy, and democracy promotion, spearheaded by resource-rich authoritarian regimes. While democrats worldwide are

comparing best practices and lessons learned in recent transitions, the autocrats are also examining the same recent history and developing new tactics for thwarting peaceful change.

Countries – including Russia, Venezuela, Iran, Uzbekistan and Zimbabwe, among others – are engaged in an increasingly coordinated campaign. They do this in a variety of ways. They exploit the shortcomings of new democracies (and enduring inequities in the old democracies) to discredit the very idea of democracy itself in campaigns on regime-controlled media outlets.

They target for harassment and denigration independent civic organizations, watchdog groups, and independent media. A rich portfolio of techniques -- the state's power to license media, or the ability of tax police to harass independent NGOs, for example -- are used to constrain and silence critical voices. The goal is an environment in which the principal sources of effective, sustained democratic opposition are neutralized.

Most interestingly, however, is the assault on the legitimacy of democracy promotion itself. There was a time just a few years ago when many of these autocratic states claimed to be democratizing, and perhaps to some extent they were. Today, however, they are exploiting natural tensions in the democratic world to distract and divide us.

There is a distinctly anti-American flavor to this campaign, exploiting antipathy to current US policies and characterizing the intervention in Iraq as “democracy promotion”, equating the chaos and violence in Iraq with the indigenous nonviolent efforts of Ukrainian civic activists.

They try to mischaracterize democracy promotion more generally – which is mainly about sharing information and ideas, much less about money or material assistance – as illegitimate intervention in the internal affairs of sovereign nations.

Last year, shortly after he signed a law that requires NGOs to re-register and that prohibits the use of foreign funds for political activity, Vladimir Putin pointed to the West's colonial history as a rationale for his government's opposition to those promoting democracy

*“If we go back 100 years and look through the newspapers, we see what arguments the colonial powers of that time advanced to justify their expansion into Africa and Asia,” he said.*

*“They cited arguments such as playing a civilizing role, the particular role of the white man, the need to civilize ‘primitive peoples.’ If we replace the term ‘civilizing role’ with ‘democratization,’ then we can transpose practically word for word what the newspapers were writing 100 years ago.”*

And they use their own persecution of dissidents and activists as a reason for us to stop helping those who seek our assistance. The government of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Iran has been particularly successful in portraying outside aid as a problem to be solved. And this campaign is having an impact, as prominent regional specialists and journalists have taken to complaining about the democracy promotion efforts, whether public or private, rather than about the persecution.

I submit for your consideration that the community of democracies, and by that I include national and international civil society groups, as well as governments and agencies, ought to be able to overcome these efforts at misinformation and misdirection.

There is an important, indeed irreplaceable role for governments to play in helping to advance the spread of democracy. At Freedom House we encourage this. But we also know that the economic and security interests of states will often compel governments to adopt policies that will make democracy promotion efforts seem inconsistent or hypocritical or self-interested.

The non-governmental community, on the other hand, is unencumbered in this way. We can provide information, advice and assistance that is not distorted by *raison d'état*.

At Freedom House, we intend to continue to provide assistance to freedom's advocates worldwide. At the same time, we believe that attention needs to be given to establishing norms amongst ourselves, norms which would be considered sensible practice by most people around the world who are not committed to authoritarian rule. We should work to fashion a consensus on what should be held to be legitimate cross-border exchange, which should not be subject to interference by governments. You may agree that it should not be acceptable practice in today's world for governments to block the exchange of knowledge and of ideas across borders.

It might be useful to define clearly what that democracy promotion is and is not.

It is not about imposing an ideology

It is not about foisting a Western concept on other peoples

It is not about telling people what they should aspire to

It is not about using the rhetoric of freedom and democracy as a tool for governments to advance parochial interests

Advancing freedom *is* about respecting people's aspirations for liberty in their own cultures and helping them, on request, with the resources – intellectual, political and material – to realize them.

I believe that we do need to engage in a reinvigorated discussion of freedom, to clarify the nature and value of freedom and the most effective ways it can be advanced. Indeed, this conference may serve as an example and platform.

I have in mind a particular initiative –we propose to call it *A Global Dialogue on Freedom* – the aim of which would be to enable a global discussion of freedom and its

elements, at the local level. I mean by this a discussion that is conducted within countries, by the citizens or groups within the country, by their lights and in their way – using, at least for the first few years, the common base and methodology developed by Freedom House. Freedom House takes great pride in the expert assessments we publish describing the state of political rights and civil liberties in every country. How much better if at the same time those being assessed and ranked could assess and rank themselves. Indeed, we might well discover that we were previously unable to capture all the important nuances or detail necessary to truly understand how freedom might find particular expressions in particular settings.

The essential thing is that those making up particular societies examine the state of their own building blocks of freedom -- freedom of expression, of belief, of assembly, freedom to choose one's leaders, to enjoy a fair hearing by an impartial and competent judge. In evaluating the elements of freedom and what they mean to people in each society, individuals would implicitly attach a value to each component – and then they might sooner or later want to increase the amount or value of the freedoms they enjoy. Thus they might undertake actions to secure and protect and enhance the value of their freedoms, and likely improve our own understanding as well.

C. Wright Mills noted that

*Freedom is not merely the opportunity to do as one pleases; neither is it merely the opportunity to choose between set alternatives. Freedom is, first of all, the chance to formulate the available choices, to argue over them – and then the opportunity to choose.*

At Freedom House, we believe the process of evaluation itself is enlightening. Political life is about differences, but we believe there is remarkable agreement even in diverse settings as to the core elements of freedom. Perhaps this too, at least to a degree, may be open to debate, or clarification. It is worth reaffirming that no country or culture is likely to get it all “right.” Established democracies, as we here know full well, are never perfect. Citizens of democracies must and do continuously reexamine their societies.

Freedom House is committed to doing its part. This fall, we will produce an in-depth examination of freedom in the United States, entitled *Today's American: How Free?*. This will be a balanced assessment of the state of freedom in the U.S, including press freedom, the competitiveness of our electoral system, the state of civil liberties, and include a focus on race relations and discrimination.

Finally, at Freedom House, we also believe that analysis can and should lead to sensible action. After reexamining and revisiting fundamental concepts of freedom, and evaluating the state within their own societies, individuals within societies may choose also to act. And others may choose to assist them in securing their freedoms.

And for those of us committed to supporting the advance of freedom, we know that investing in the people on the ground working in their own societies will make a difference. That is the central lesson to be derived from the study I cited earlier, *How Freedom Is Won*.

Thus, while discussions over tactics and methods of supporting freedom can and should take place, we who live in freedom must not remain paralyzed over whether and how to prevail against those whose interests lie in denying freedom to others. While governments can do their part, individuals and groups outside of the formal governmental structures should be leading this effort. Freedom House pledges to do what we can to support the global effort to reaffirm the value of freedom, and to support its advance.

Thank you.