Chapter One Introduction

When it comes to US foreign policy, whilst 'no country in the world lives and contests its history with quite such passion and ferocity', it is also true that this contestation occurs within the belief in American exceptionalism, the American Mission, a framework that has driven the US since the founding days of the republic.[1] Promoting liberalism and democracy or varying aspects of it have been central to US thinking since the founding days with the belief that the US had to export its system to the benefit of all. Liberty and the pursuit of happiness are universal values to repeat around the world. Whether the US should actively engage in promoting these values or stand as a shining beacon for all to emulate has been a choice for each administration. The notion of exceptionalism has enabled successive administrations to explain and legitimise their foreign policy ambitions through the language of ideals and values, of iterating what it means to be an American. Nick Bryant captures the importance of this historical vision in contemporary times when he states that 'the past is always the present in the United States of America'.[2] Alongside support by domestic and international actors outside of the US foreign policy establishment, this passion for promoting this sense of self keeps the mythology of America's exceptionalism alive. It has provided a frame of continuity for successive administrations. In different eras, different presidential worldviews along with different international and domestic factors have shaped how each administration has acted in the international arena and yet all have employed this language regardless of the policies pursued.[3] In the Twentieth Century, this interpretation of the American Mission manifested itself in liberal internationalism, a commitment to making the world a more secure and stable place through establishing an international infrastructure of multilateral institutions, including the League of Nations, United Nations and other Bretton Woods institutions.[4] In recent times, this longstanding promotion of liberal values was explained through the language and practice of democracy promotion.

Whilst the field discusses at significant length particular administrations and their engagement with democracy promotion as well as continuities and differences between (and within) administrations, there is minimal study of it through the lens of its rise and fall.[5] In

---

[1] Nick Bryant, "Mayflower at 400: What we all get wrong about the Pilgrim Fathers," *BBC News*, September 18, 2020. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-54199565 (Accessed 23.09.2020).
[2] Ibid.
[3] According to Anthony Lake, for example, after the Spanish-American war of 1898, American ideals and interests were aligned, however, 'the resulting policies produced a military crusade rather than a restrained pursuit of peaceful commerce'. "Defining the National Interest." *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science* 34, no. 2 (1981): 202-13. See also Atlas, Pierre M. 2012. "U.S. Foreign Policy and the Arab Spring: Balancing Values and Interests," *Digest of Middle East Studies*, 21 no. 2 (2012): 353-385, Hartz, Louis. *The liberal tradition in America*. Boston, MA: Thomson Learning, (1991 (1955)), Hunt, M. H., *Ideology and U.S. foreign policy*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), Schafer, B. E., *Is America Different?: A New Look at American Exceptionalism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press (1991), and Smith, T., *America's mission: The United States and the worldwide struggle for democracy*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2012).
[4] See Tony Smith's discussion of *classic* and *hegemon* phases of democracy promotion in chapter 12 'From 'fortunate vagueness' to 'democratic globalism'' in *The Conceptual Politics of Democracy Promotion*. Eds. Christopher Hobson and Milja Kurki. Democratization Studies (London: Routledge, 2012), 201-214.
[5] See, for example, Michael Cox, Timothy Lynch, and Nicholas Bouchet, *US foreign policy and democracy promotion from Theodore Roosevelt to Barack Obama* (Routledge studies in US foreign policy, New York:

employing a transformational change framework this book adds to the literature by demonstrating that there were two paradigm shifts in US democracy promotion. The first was a shift towards promoting democracy in US foreign policy by the Carter administration and the second was a shift away from democracy promotion under the Trump administration. Moreover, in mapping out the role of democracy promotion, this book shows that its rise and fall as an effective foreign policy tool mirrored the relative dominance of the US in the international arena. America's unquestioned superpower status during the bipolar (1945-1991) and unipolar (1991-2007) periods saw policymakers utilising democracy promotion in explaining and legitimising US actions around the world. During the bipolar period, the role of democracy promotion in foreign policy was elevated when successive administrations saw its power in ideologically and practically battling communism. During the unipolar period, this lack of competition from super or great powers and a reinterpretation of what was in the national interest led to a willingness to expend greater political capital in resolving second- and third-tier priorities such as democratising unimportant states or intervening in others for humanitarian reasons. This lack of competition enabled the US to intervene in places and ways, which it had not previously considered possible or important. Arguably, under George W. Bush democracy promotion reached its zenith as a rhetoric priority of US foreign policy. During the post-unipolar period (2008 onwards), the relative decline of US power saw an equal reduction in the importance of democracy promotion in US rhetoric explaining its engagement with the world. By 2008, the failures of the US missions in Afghanistan and Iraq and the 2008 financial and economic crises signalled that the period of unipolarity was ending, and other actors were questioning US dominance. Alongside presidential reticence, the emergence of greater restrictions on US power led President Obama to reduce the role of democracy promotion in foreign policy. It was not a wholescale rejection of democracy promotion or of liberal ideology but a recognition that its ability to bring success in all cases was unrealistic. Whilst curtailing these lofty ambitions to spread democracy around the world, the US also met with reinvigorated opposition to its hegemony from top tier states such as China and Russia. This domestic reticence to intervene alongside an international hostile environment to democracy promotion continued through to the Trump administration, whereby it rejected liberalism not only in its manifestations such as promoting democracy and supporting the liberal international order but at a foundational level as well. This rejection was due to the Administration considering liberalism as no longer a project worth pursuing because it was unnecessary to deliver what it considered were in America's national interests. President Biden returned to the trajectory that Obama had been on where democracy promotion and support for democracy had a massively reduced role in foreign policy but added the withdrawal in Afghanistan as part of that equation further distancing the US from the application of American values in foreign policy.

To contextualise democracy promotion in US foreign policy, it is important to recognise that it is one aspect of its grand strategy. In its analysis, this research will determine the degree to which it is a central component to that administration's foreign policy.[6] It also shows how the technical detail of what constitutes democratisation missions moves from a focus on elections

---

Routledge, 2013), and Tony Smith (Ed.), *America's Mission The United States and the Worldwide Struggle for Democracy (Expanded Edition)* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

[6] This research takes the view that a grand strategy is a 'set of national policies in peace and war that both set out the goals of the state in international politics and prescribe how a broad range of national resources should be utilised in pursuit of those goals. [… It is] the study of states' attitudes to the international environment – of how they mobilise which elements of their power in pursuit of which causes in global politics.' Nick Kitchen, "Systemic pressures and domestic ideas: A neoclassical realist model of grand strategy formation," *Review of International Studies*, vol. 36, 121 http://doi.org//10.1017/S0260210509990532.

to developing all institutional and civil society elements. Moreover, this book breaks democracy promotion down into three levels. The conceptualisation level refers to the development of ideas, values and interests that drive the policy. It is where the terms and contours of the paradigm occur, the founding principles of democracy promotion. The rhetoric level refers to the way in which the language of democracy promotion explains and legitimises US foreign policy. It is what the administration and its officials say when describing why and how the US is engaging in world affairs. Typically, as this research demonstrates, the US tends to combine the language of American values and interests in these explanations. Following from these levels, there are times when democracy promotion is solely a rhetoric device and times when it goes beyond the rhetoric and democratises a target state. The implementation level is the reality behind the rhetoric application of democratisation; it is when the language of democracy turns into actual activity. At this level, activities include diplomacy by various officials and agencies such as the State Department, and specific programmes and projects such as those designed to deliver democratic institutional and societal reforms through public agencies such as the US Agency for International Development (USAID), profit, and non-profit private organisations.[7]

To place the rise of US democracy promotion within the context of the world is to consider the interplay between the endogenous factors to US foreign policy making in Washington, D.C. and the exogenous factors in the globe that shaped and enabled democracy promotion to become a useful tool for explaining and legitimising US foreign policy actions. There was an increase in the practise and discussion of modernising the world at the end of the Second World War that led to the establishment of the United Nations, Bretton Woods institutions, and the development of modernisation theory.[8] By the early 1970s, scholars and practitioners began discussing the viability of developing states turning democratic if the political elite demanded change.[9] By the 1980s, the successful re-emergence of the power of liberalism to explain why the expansion of the number of democracies was a good thing for peace, as identified in the democratic peace theory, combined with a commitment to support the establishment of democratic institutions.[10] Whilst democracy promotion was becoming a viable foreign policy option, it was happening within a Cold War context whereby more democracies meant less states sitting alongside the communist Soviets. During the 1970s and 1980s, many states were democratising in Southern Europe, Latin America and Asia. Their transitions, labelled the 'third wave', were instrumental in the democratising community concluding that there was a 'pressing need for an analytic framework to conceptualize and respond to the[se] ongoing political events'.[11] By the 1990s, the collapse of the USSR led to 28 states abandoning communism, and about eight moved to liberal democracy, and by the 2010s, a new wave of popular opposition to authoritarianism occurred, labelled the Arab Spring.[12] This forced President Obama to reengage with the language and practice of

[7] See Matthew Alan Hill, *Democracy Promotion and Conflict-based Reconstruction* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011).
[8] Lamoreaux, Naomi R., et al., *The Bretton Woods Agreements: Together with Scholarly Commentaries and Essential Historical Documents*. (1944: Bretton Woods) New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019) Simon Jackson and Alanna O'Malley. *The Institution of International Order: From the League of Nations to the United Nations* 1st ed. Vol. 38. Routledge Studies in Modern History. Milton: Routledge, 2018.
[9] Otherwise known as transition theory and transitology.
[10] Hill, *Democracy Promotion*, 2011.
[11] Thomas Carothers, 'The end of the transition paradigm', *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 13, no. 1: 5-6, 2002 and see Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*, University of Oklahoma Press, 1993 for a discussion on these transitions.
[12] Michael McFaul, 'The Fourth Wave of Democracy and Dictatorship: Noncooperative Transitions in the Postcommunist World,' *World Politics* vol. 54, no. 2, 2002: 212–44..

democracy promotion albeit in a light fashion. Even these social movements against authoritarianism did not alter the direction of US foreign policy away from actively intervening in these places under the umbrella of values.

The other side of this paradigm change is that we are now living in an era when democracy promotion is no longer a useful tool in the grand politics of the US. This may not be a bad thing for international stability. Democracy promotion no longer has the capacity to deliver and legitimise the grand liberal hegemonic project. The evidence in this book clearly adds detail to the discussion on the way in which the US employed liberal democracy as a method to ensure hegemony but in that mission, it was never able to deliver concrete successes of consolidated democracies. What it did deliver was an instable international arena because of its obsession with using violence through military intervention to deliver its goals of a growth in liberal democracies, an 'open economic order' and 'international institutions'.[13]

Matthew Alan Hill
ORCID: 0000-0003-1959-6863

[13] John J. Mearsheimer, *Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (Yale University Press, 2018): 188 https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv5cgb1w.9