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BOOKS IN  
REVIEW

## THE CASE FOR DEMOCRATIC PERSISTENCE

*Carl Gershman*

***Democracy: Stories from the Long Road to Freedom.*** By Condoleezza Rice. New York: Hachette Book Group, 2017. 486 pp.

Condoleezza Rice's new book on democracy is many things at once. As its subtitle *Stories from the Long Road to Freedom* suggests, it is partly a memoir, told chiefly from her perspective as U.S. national security advisor (2001–2005) and then secretary of state (2005–2009) during the George W. Bush administration, that recounts how various countries have managed the challenges of democratic development. These are “cases that I know well from personal experience,” she writes, “and that illuminate important lessons about the path to liberty” (p. 24).

Her book is also a work of analysis that tries to explain the importance of political institutions. Not least, it is a statement of personal democratic conviction, rooted in her experience as a black American growing up in the Deep South when racial segregation was still in force. Rice was born in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1954, the year the Supreme Court declared state-sponsored segregation in schools to be unconstitutional. Her political outlook was indelibly shaped by the momentous struggles for equal rights and racial justice that were waged by the civil-rights movement during her formative years.

That outlook helps explain Rice's deep conviction that the United States has a fundamental obligation to advance freedom and democracy in the world. Her sustained argument in defense of that view comes at a time when democracy is being challenged on many fronts—from without by authoritarian countries like China and Russia, and from within by the

rise of illiberal populism and the erosion of confidence in U.S. democratic institutions. Rice's book seeks to join the debate on these issues and to explain to an American audience why the United States has an enormous stake in supporting democracy abroad. By personalizing her argument, she is able to give her own voice added authenticity and to link her case for democratic internationalism to the American experience.

Her first country story, therefore, is appropriately about the United States. Rice believes that U.S. history contains many important lessons for other countries that are today trying to make the transition to democracy—above all, that democratic development is a very long, difficult, never-ending process that requires patience, persistence, and perspective. She also stresses the crucial role of democratic institutions that restrain the abuse of power, protect the rights of individuals and minorities, and enable societies to work out their conflicts in a peaceful manner. In Rice's view, it was such institutions that made it possible for the United States to overcome the legacy of slavery and legalized segregation. "The lesson for young democracies," she writes, "is that not everything can be settled at the start. But if the institutions are put in place and citizens use them, there is at least a way to channel the passions of a free people and to resolve the hard questions of governing as they arise in future times" (67).

Rice distills additional lessons from various countries that more recently tried to make the transition from authoritarianism to democracy. All these transitions were difficult, and some were not successful, at least in their initial phases. Her intention is not to present a simple and stirring picture of democratic progress, but rather to make complex political developments in distant lands understandable to ordinary American citizens, whose support for helping other countries become stable democracies is a precondition for sustained U.S. engagement in the world.

Her chapter on Russia, for example, explores whether the failure of its transition was inevitable. She suggests that it might have been doomed from the start amid the turmoil unleashed by the Soviet collapse. Yet she is also harshly critical of Boris Yeltsin for centralizing power in the presidency, crushing the parliament, appealing directly to the street and "not to democratic institutions," and creating the conditions of chaos, confusion, and fear that paved the way for Vladimir Putin's authoritarianism. Failure, in other words, was not preordained. Things might have turned out differently if political leaders had acted differently. She concludes that "first presidents matter," and that fledgling democratic institutions have to be nurtured, not ignored or "overrun."

Rice worries that "an undercurrent of nativism" in the population and the "reactionary views" of the Orthodox Church weight the politics of Russia in favor of authoritarian leaders like Putin. Yet she also emphatically rejects the view that Russians are "endowed with some unique, antidemocratic DNA." In fact, Rice does not rule out the possibility that the Putin regime could collapse, and she believes that "there is an educated and

sophisticated population in waiting should an opportunity for democracy come” (124). The recent protests in cities across Russia involving large numbers of young people show that such a hope is not illusory.

Rice is ambivalent about many of the other countries she writes about. Poland, for example, had all the prerequisites for a successful transition: committed and capable leaders shaped by the Solidarity movement; a favorable institutional landscape; incentives for institutional reform created by the lure of EU and NATO membership; and significant economic assistance from the West. She recalls how, at a historic moment in 1989, she had been moved by Jan Nowak (a “fierce fighter” for Poland’s liberty) to “break ranks” in the NSC to get greater aid to Poland. Yet Poland’s early success did not prevent the eventual rise of illiberal populists and nationalists. The lesson she draws is that “democracy’s development is never a straight line” and its defense “is never finished” (163–64).

Rice emphasizes the importance of political leadership. Among the leaders she praises are Colombia’s President Alvaro Uribe and Liberia’s President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. Her harshest words are reserved for Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, who turned down her appeal to “reform before your people are in the streets” (335), and who helped the Muslim Brotherhood to dominate the opposition by repressing civil society and systematically blocking the development of moderate alternatives. She contrasts Egypt with Tunisia, where a successful democratic transition was led by civil society groups, especially labor unions.

While stressing the need for leaders to use political institutions to solve problems, Rice devotes less attention to the role of civil society in pressuring leaders to govern honestly and effectively. Its role is especially important in postcommunist countries such as Ukraine that continue to suffer from the Soviet legacy of corruption and unaccountable centralized power. She is correct in attributing Ukraine’s problems of governance after both the 2004 Orange Revolution and the 2013–14 EuroMaidan uprising to infighting among Ukraine’s democratic leaders. But her advice to Ukrainians “to stop having revolutions and to start governing” fails to recognize the endemic aversion to the rule of law among post-Soviet elites (200). The protests were civil society’s resistance against massive corruption, and though they could not change government behavior overnight, they have contributed to the growth of a new generation of democratic citizens committed to a culture of freedom and social responsibility.

Such democratic learning is essential if countries such as Egypt and Ukraine are to get beyond their past failures. Kenya is another such country, and Rice hopes that there a learning process, generated by repeated attempts to conduct peaceful elections in a society with deep ethnic divisions, will help people to regain confidence in democracy. Regrettably, Kenya’s disputed 2017 election, with the first round annulled by the Supreme Court and the second boycotted by the opposition, shows that the process of democratic learning and ethnic reconciliation still has a long way to go.

The most important story Rice tells is about Iraq, and here the main lesson she draws—that it is necessary to work with “what is there”—is directed at the United States. While Rice’s tone is always moderate, she is sharply critical of U.S. mistakes in Iraq: not the original decision to go in, which she continues to believe was justified on security grounds, but a systematic failure to understand the country’s “institutional landscape” or effectively to engage with indigenous political and social groups (especially Iraq’s Sunni minority).

Rice criticizes Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld for not deploying sufficient forces to secure the country after its liberation and for wanting “to install another strongman” after Saddam was removed, a step that President George W. Bush believed would just lead to more terrorism and instability. She is especially critical of L. Paul (“Jerry”) Bremer, Bush’s appointee to run the Coalition Provisional Authority during the transition to an elected Iraqi government, who she believes committed a number of very damaging “unforced errors.” One was the decision, taken without review by the National Security Council, to disband the Iraqi army. A second was the decision to give control of the de-Baathification process to Ahmad Chalabi, a Shia leader whom Rice distrusted and who used the process “to carry out a vendetta against the Sunnis” (294). A third Bremer error was taking over the management of relations with the Sunni tribes from U.S. envoy Zalmay Khalilzad, who was sensitive to tribal culture and a subtle negotiator, while Bremer was new to the country and consumed by his responsibilities in Baghdad. Rice believes that these errors fueled the insurgency in Sunni provinces by enabling Saddam’s officers to ally with disbanded army personnel and their tribal allies.

Rice knows that a different strategy might not have worked, but she believes that it “might have at least put a floor under the collapsing country and diminished the violence” (419). The Administration eventually reversed its strategy: Rumsfeld was removed, the “surge” added more troops, and the Sunnis were integrated into the process. Rice took heart that “Iraq was on its way to a better future,” and that “American sacrifices—and those of Iraqis—were beginning to pay off” (325). Unfortunately, though, Iraq had become a deeply divisive issue in U.S. politics, and after President Barack Obama fulfilled what Rice ruefully calls “his campaign promise to pull all American forces out of Iraq,” Iraq’s stability quickly unraveled.

Rice worries that the “trials and tribulations” of the Iraq war have made Americans associate democratization with violence, instability, and the use of American military power. “I have never believed that,” she says emphatically, “and never will” (431). She emphasizes the importance of nonviolent programs of democracy training and support, as well as of development assistance that promotes self-reliance through democratic governance. But she warns that such programs, and the global order itself, are threatened today by what she calls “the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse—populism, nativism, protectionism, and isolationism” (441–42).

Rice nonetheless remains optimistic about the future of democracy. She believes that pessimists today make the mistake of expecting democracy's march to be "linear"; they fail to recognize that, despite the recent democratic "recession," the overall trajectory of "third wave" progress in Latin America, Africa, Asia, and Central Europe "is worth celebrating." She also rejects the idea that China offers a successful authoritarian alternative, arguing that its "top-down model of economic growth has run out of steam" (389). Besides, China faces many other systemic crises, from "a horrible demographic problem" and "a pollution nightmare" to pervasive corruption that the government has been unable to control despite a harsh crackdown. She believes that India has a much better chance to bring its "endemic corruption" under control because it has democratic institutions to keep authorities in check and assertive citizens who are demanding governmental accountability. Democracies are often less efficient, she writes, "but they may ultimately be more effective and resilient" (401).

Rice is hopeful about democracy, but her book's central message is that its future will be imperiled unless Americans can overcome their "crisis of confidence about our own democracy—who we are and what we value" (435). For that to happen, she argues, three things will need to occur. First, "the standard-bearers for those who voted to shake up the system [will] need to find the humility to know and accept democracy's paradox"—namely, that while democracy's genius is openness to change, its stability depends upon institutional constraints. This is the closest she comes to mentioning the Trump presidency. Her message to Washington is the same as it is to leaders in other countries—that "it is easier to tear down democratic institutions than to build them and work through them" (442). She warns that the new U.S. authorities will now have to deliver real prosperity for their supporters and not just blame foreigners and immigrants for taking their jobs.

Second, her message to defenders of the existing global order is that they will need to become much more sensitive to the problems of Americans who feel threatened economically and culturally by globalization and the erosion of traditional values. Rice links these problems to the rise of identity politics and urges that Americans reverse "the trend toward dividing people into ever-smaller groups, each with its own particular grievance and narrative [that] comes at the expense of the unifying identity that all democracies need" (442). She believes that America's unifying identity comes from its being a country "that is based on an idea: that human freedom is the source of human dignity and progress" (434).

Stating the American idea in this way conveys its universality: "This cannot be true for us and not for them" (434). It thus imposes a moral obligation on the United States to give "voice to the voiceless," which it can do only if it first rebuilds a consensus at home on its international role and responsibilities. This is Rice's third aim. While the purpose of her book is not to propose a new U.S. foreign policy, she does provide

the core elements of one: to defend the nation's security, to assist those who are trying to build free societies, and to maintain and form alliances that promote a stable world order. For such a policy to have credibility with the American people and gain the support of both Democrats and Republicans, its advocates will have to show that they have absorbed the lessons of past U.S. engagements in Iraq and elsewhere—the mistakes as well as the successes.

Rice's book is an important first step in identifying some of those lessons. Its strength is in linking the argument for renewed U.S. leadership to America's national identity and its long struggle "to make 'We the people' as inclusive as possible." This experience explains why the United States, despite all its problems, remains in Rice's view "a north star for those seeking liberty" in the world. Her own personal history and her strong belief that the United States must become a better democracy can enable Rice to be a leading voice in shaping a new common narrative for the United States regarding not just foreign policy but American democracy itself. Never in recent memory has such a unifying vision been more urgently needed.

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*Carl Gershman* is president of the National Endowment for Democracy.

## BOOKS RECEIVED

*The books listed below were recently received by the editors. A listing here does not preclude a review in a future issue.*

### *Advanced Democracies*

***The CIA and the Politics of US Intelligence Reform.*** By Brent Durbin. Cambridge University Press, 2017. 330 pp.

***First to the Party: The Group Origins of Political Transformation.*** By Christopher Baylor. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018. 321 pp.

***Impeachment: A Citizen's Guide.*** By Cass R. Sunstein. Harvard University Press, 199 pp.

***Making Sense of the Alt-Right.*** By George Hawley. Columbia University Press, 2017. 218 pp.

***Political Opportunities for Climate Policy: California, New York, and the Federal Government.*** By Roger Karapin. Cambridge University Press, 2016. 344 pp.

### *Africa*

***Boko Haram: The History of an African Jihadist Movement.*** By Alexander Thurston. Princeton University Press, 2018. 333 pp.