Just before the new century began, Marc Plattner, co-editor of the influential Journal of Democracy, wrote of the brave new globalized world coming into existence:

A borderless world is unlikely to be a democratic one. For while the idea of 'world citizenship' may sound appealing in theory, it is very hard to imagine it working successfully in practice. Indeed, some aspects of globalization 'point to a long range danger to democracy.'

While Plattner is uneasy about these developments, other observers, such as Strobe Talbott, largely discount the risks. An entire industry of transnational agencies and non-governmental organizations is pushing forward changes designed either to deny or override the national sovereignty of democratic states against surprisingly muted or inchoate opposition. Taken together, these changes amount to a serious political and intellectual challenge to democratic sovereignty vested in the liberal democratic nation-state.

It is a distinctly new challenge. Until now, democrats have faced two major opponents: pre-democrats and anti-democrats. The pre-democrats, adherents of some form of ancien regime (of throne, altar, tribe or clan), have been mostly vanquished over the past several hundred years. Since 1917, three anti-democratic ideologies have presented an alternative vision to liberal democracy: Nazism/fascism, communism, and today militant Islam or Islamism.

The radical Islamist threat is both deadly and serious, and it could last for a considerable period of time. Islamists might gain powerful weapons and thereby cause much death and destruction. Nevertheless, it is in the highest degree unlikely that they will in the end conquer liberal democracy.

Yet, the twenty-first century could well turn out to be, not the democratic century, but the 'post-democratic' century—the century in which liberal democracy as we know it is slowly, almost imperceptibly, replaced by a new form of global governance.

The ideology and institutions already exist in embryonic form and are developing rapidly. The philosophical basis for global governance begins with the premise that all individuals on the planet possess human rights. International law is the paramount authority that determines these rights, while international agreements establish and expand new rights and norms. International institutions (for example, the UN, the International Criminal Court and the World Bank) monitor, adjudicate, negotiate, cajole and administer the international agreements and laws in varying degrees. International non-governmental organizations (NGOs) claim to represent 'global civil society', or the 'peoples' of the planet. And the NGOs work with international institutions and participate in international conferences helping develop the new norms for global governance. Moreover, global governance is not really 'international', but 'transnational' in the sense that it is not concerned strictly with relations between nations, but with political arrangements above and beyond nation-states. Indeed, it could also be described as 'post-international'.

The global governance regime is promoted and run by complementary and interlocking networks of transnational (mostly Western) elites, including international lawyers, international judges, NGO activists, UN and other international organization officials, global corporate leaders and some sympathetic officials and bureaucrats from nation-states. These transnational elites are, for the most part, ideologically compatible. They could be described as 'transnational progressives' (many are part of the generation of 1968) supporting what they perceive as ‘progressive’ causes across national boundaries (that is, supporting the ‘other’, the oppressed, minorities and opposing the death penalty, unilateral military action by the United States, and so on). Denationalized corporate elites who are non-ideological, but seek economic advantage, often have a symbiotic relationship with the transnational progressives. Global governance is not to be confused with world government. Nation-states (both democratic and undemocratic) continue to exist, but their authority is increasingly circumscribed by the growing strength of the global institutions, laws, rules, networks and ideological norms noted above.

Unlike democratic sovereignty, global governance can provide no straightforward answers to the most important questions of political science (who governs? where does authority reside? how are rulers chosen?) In a democracy, authority resides in a self-constituted people ('government by consent of the governed'). These self-governing people choose their rulers through elections and can replace them if they are not responsive to the people. The people limit the power of rulers through a constitution and basic laws. Bad laws can be changed by elected national legislatures.

In theory, human rights and international law are the moral basis for the global governance regime, but both of these concepts are fluid, porous, and constantly 'evolving'. They are, at any given moment, what transnational elites tell us they are. (For example, at the present time, international agreements maintain that children have an 'absolute human right' to conduct any...
correspondence with anyone in the world without interference from their parents, which, strictly interpreted, would gain children the right to communicate with paedophiles on the Internet.) NGOs participate in the writing of global treaties alongside democratic and non-democratic governments, but they are essentially pressure groups, elected by no-one and responsible only to themselves. Nor are the other elites, the international lawyers, judges, activists and officials who participate in the global governance system responsible or accountable to any self-governing ‘people’. How can these rulers be replaced? How can ‘the governed’ repeal bad laws and regulations that their ‘governors’ have imposed upon them? Global governance provides no democratic answers to these questions.

Global governance is implicitly a grand ideological project (and a utopian and coercive one, with universal aspirations). It is post-democratic in the sense that it originates from but transcends democracy just as the ‘postmodern’ originates from but transcends modernity. Its success would mean that liberal democracy might very well be replaced with a new form of regime.

CHALLENGING DEMOCRACY

What does the challenge of post-democracy mean philosophically for the advance of genuine democracy in the world, and practically for American global strategy? I suggest that ultimately the greatest challenge to liberal democracy in the twenty-first century will come from within. What I have described as ‘post-democracy’ is, unfortunately, a serious alternative regime to the liberal democratic nation-state and the principle of democratic sovereignty. Thus, history may not end with the ideological triumph of liberal democracy.

As noted, this alternative regime would consist of networks of overlapping transnational institutions, organizations, agreements, treaties, laws, regulations, and rules; run by transnational elites and informed by a transnational progressive ideology. This ideology is an amorphous and eclectic mix of soft academic Marxism or Gramscian thinking, social democracy (minus its George Orwell–Tony Blair ‘armed democracy’ wing), multiculturalism, radical feminism, environmentalism, or whatever else constitutes the latest in progressive thought at any particular moment. That said, the public face of transnational progressivism is slick and PR-savvy. Its sophisticated advocates (for example, Human Rights Watch’s Kenneth Roth or Amnesty International USA’s William F. Schulz) work with corporate heads, foundation officials, American, EU and UN bureaucrats who provide the funding, and with whom they are locked in a symbiotic relationship.

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If this sounds incoherent, a good part of the strength of post-democracy lies in its incoherence. By disguising what and how political decisions are made, it renders them unstoppable and perhaps irreversible. As noted earlier, global governance provides no serious democratic means for the ‘governed’ to repeal decisions (that they may find repellent), but that their new ‘governors’ have, nevertheless, imposed upon them without their consent.

Another strength is that post-democracy has support from elites of the Right as well as the Left. It should not surprise us that the transnational project has been rhetorically (and sometimes financially) embraced by many multinational American-based corporations. It is perhaps understandable that transnational corporations should seek to emphasize that they are global rather than national entities. Yet it was also rather unseemly for the corporate counsel of Motorola to denounce as ‘nationalistic’ Ralph Nader’s suggestion that American-based corporations begin their stockholders’ meeting with ‘The Pledge of Allegiance’ to the ‘country that bred them’ and ‘defended them’.

Likewise, it was unseemly, when the late Carl Gerstacker, Chairman and CEO of Dow, wrote several decades ago that he dreamed of establishing the world headquarters of this American chemical giant on the ‘truly neutral ground’ of an island ‘beholden to no nation or society’. Of course, Dow, Motorola and a host of other corporations, whose executives have made foolish comments about their company’s relationship to America are, indeed, ‘beholden’ to the American nation. Without American sovereignty, mores, culture, laws and military power, they would be neither prosperous nor protected. It should not surprise us that corporations that accept the progressive agenda at home (racial/gender preferences, multiculturalism, etc.) are willing partners of NGOs who promote this agenda abroad.

If present patterns of discourse continue, in the end, the transnational regime would claim to be the ultimate fulfilment of democracy. Democracy, it would be explained, has simply ‘evolved’, like ‘human rights’ and the ‘new international law’. In some respects the European Union is the model of post-democratic governance. If there is one thing that both friends and foes of the European Union agree upon, it is that the EU has a ‘democracy deficit’. Although power is, technically, supposed to reside with the member nation-states through the Council of the EU (that is composed of representatives from the nation-states) and the European Parliament (elected by citizens in the nation-states), in actuality a great deal of the authority is wielded by the unelected bureaucracy—the European Commission (EC) in Brussels. The EC has a monopoly on initiating legislation—
in essence, an advance veto. In contrast, the Council and Parliament—
theoretically responsible to voters—
can only withhold approval of policies
already formulated by the Commis-
sion, something they rarely do in prac-
tice.

Many Continental European elites
are already committed to slowly and
steadily building some form of trans-
national post-democratic regime, that
would—as its top priority—limit and
constrict the democratic sovereignty of
the United States. They would also
like to limit the sovereignty of other
democracies, particularly those allies
of the United States that are outlier
democratic nation-states, including
Britain, Israel and Australia, who have,
in different ways, stood aloof from the
European continent’s political style
and modes of thought.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?
But democracy can defeat post-democ-
N adm. The first step is the recognition
and intellectual conceptualization of
the post-democratic threat. To get a
firm grip on the post-democratic prob-
lem we must think ideologically—even
more ideologically than the neo-con-
servatives have to date. Ironically, the
current neo-conservative critique is in-
sufficiently ideological. It offers an in-
complete dialectic that abruptly stops
after democracy triumphs. Following
Hegel (and Kojève and Fukuyama) the
critique roughly posits that the dialectic
(and thus serious ideological con-
flict) is completed with the victory of
modern democracy.

Ironically, Mao was more percep-
tive in recognizing that, even after the
revolution, the dialectic (that is, his-
tory, ideology) continues and that,
therefore, ‘there is always a right and
always a left’ and ‘things always divide
one into two’. Today, democracy begets
post-democracy. Thus, we must say to
our neo-conservative friends (para-
phrasing the Trotsky-Burnham ex-
change of the late 1930s), ‘you may not
be interested in post-democracy, but
post-democracy is interested in you’.

Fortunately, for practical policy-
makers the conceptual tools needed to
grasp the serious nature of the post-
democratic threat to American prin-
ciples and American interests are
available. The intellectual spade-work
identifying and conceptualizing this
challenge has already been accom-
plished by specialists in international
law, including John Bolton, Jeremy
Rakfin, David Rivkin, Lee Casey,
Robert Bork, Jack Goldsmith, John
Yoo, Stephen Krasner, Curtis Bradley,
Jed Rubenfeld, and Kenneth Anderson. Policymakers need to read, absorb,
and build upon their work.

The United States should be pre-
pared to champion not simply general-
ized notions of building democratic
institutions and promoting ‘human

NGOs that consistently act as if they are strategic opponents of the democratic sovereignty of the American nation should be treated as such

rights’ and ‘democratic values’ that are
susceptible to post-democratic ma-
nipulation, but the principle of demo-
cratic sovereignty within the
institutions of the liberal democratic
nation-state. Hence, the concept of
democratic sovereignty, as a core
American value, should be officially
incorporated into the National Secu-
rity Strategy of the United States and
promoted by the State Department,
the National Security Council and the
other institutions of the President’s
foreign policy apparatus.

Post-democratic challenges to
American democratic sovereignty
should be clearly identified and re-
sisted. NGOs that consistently act as
if they are strategic opponents of the
democratic sovereignty of the American
nation should be treated as such.

They should not be recognized or sup-
ported at international conferences,
not permitted to roam battlefields, and
not given special briefings or access to
US government officials.

In particular, these NGOs should
not be given the legitimacy and cred-
ibility that comes from a certain status
as quasi-allies of American democracy
in human rights arguments in non-
democratic and developing countries.
Most importantly, the post-democratic
NGOs and their allies in the self-des-
ignated ‘international human rights
movement’ actually harm the cause of
genuine human rights. They claim to
speak for ‘humanity’, as other utopian
elites once claimed to speak for the
‘workers’ or the ‘people’. Yet, like pre-
vious utopian elites, they speak for a
particular ideological movement. They
purport to support the ‘rule of law’. Yet,
they denigrate the ‘rule of law’ as it is
actually practised in functioning lib-
eral democracies, while constantly re-
inventing new utopian versions of
‘law’.

As the United States expands its
initiatives to foster democracy abroad,
these post-democratic NGOs and ‘hu-
mans rights activists’ should not be
given federal funds and grants to pro-
mote what they will surely claim is ‘de-
mocracy building’, but is, in reality,
their own narrow ideological agenda.
This issue has direct practical conse-
quences since President Bush has
called for a major effort and increased
funds to promote democracy and
democratic institutions. It is crucial
that this initiative and these funds are
not co-opted and captured by post-
democrats.

For the most part, European sup-
port for American policies comes from
countries acting as nation-states (for
example, Britain, Poland, Italy, Spain,
Portugal and Denmark) in opposition
to the policy of the European Union.
If a ‘common European foreign
and defence policy’ had existed, it would
not have supported US action in Iraq.
Prudence and principle dictate that US
policy tilt toward the democratic na-
tion-states of Europe and away from
any further encouragement of the po-
Democratic procedures within democratic nation-states are a more effective, more comprehensive, and above all, a more just way of deciding what are universal human values.