VANESSA WALKER

A Question of Democracy in U.S. Foreign Policy

ABSTRACT This essay is part of a roundtable titled “The Scholarship, Influence, and Legacy of David F. Schmitz.” The roundtable includes an introduction from Andrew L. Johns; essays by Vanessa Walker, Steven J. Brady, Kimber M. Quinney, and Kathryn C. Statler; and a response from David F. Schmitz. KEYWORDS U.S. foreign relations, Cold War, historiography, David F. Schmitz

In the opening pages of Thank God They’re on Our Side, David Schmitz writes, “Neither the makers nor the critics of American foreign policy in the twentieth century have resolved the conflict between the desire to encourage democracy abroad and the need to protect American interests.”1 This tension is at the core of Schmitz’s work, which questions democracy’s role in U.S. foreign policy throughout the twentieth century. What does it mean to have a democratic foreign policy? What role can and should the nation’s democratic values, institutions, and identity play in its relations abroad? These questions are particularly visible in three interrelated areas of Schmitz’s work. These include U.S. support for right-wing dictatorships in Latin America and beyond; the role of Congress, particularly Senator Frank Church (D-ID), in shaping and monitoring the foreign policy prerogatives of the president; and human rights as a challenge to Cold War paradigms of national interest and security in the 1970s. Through these overlapping themes, Schmitz illuminates the paradoxes of integrating America’s democratic identity into its international relations.

In both Thank God They’re on Our Side and The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships, Schmitz explores why, despite the United States’ avowed commitment to liberal democracy, its leaders have consistently and

systemically supported authoritarian regimes in the twentieth century. These studies reveal policymakers’ reliance on a “lesser of two evils” rationale: that policies that supported anti-democratic regimes violated the stated ideals of the United States but served its national interests in a complicated, dangerous world. This rationale was perhaps best articulated by President John F. Kennedy in 1962. Speaking about Dominican strongman Rafael Trujillo, Kennedy laid out “three possibilities in descending order of preference: a decent democratic regime, a continuation of the Trujillo regime or a Castro regime. We ought to aim at the first, but we can’t renounce the second until we are sure that we can avoid the third.” Schmitz amply demonstrates how U.S. policymakers “developed and institutionalized the logic, rationale, and ideological justifications for U.S. support of right-wing dictatorships that have influenced American policy ever since.”

Although policymakers frequently relied on a binary of ideals and interests, Schmitz pushes beyond that to examine how, over time, U.S. leaders began to imagine strongmen as part of the “free world” and therefore aligned with both American security needs and values during the Cold War. This policy was not simply a “cynical realism or a cold disregard for the peoples of other countries.” The United States’ overwhelming preference for stability over messy democracy was often grounded in racialized assumptions about other peoples’ capacity for self-government and vulnerability to radical ideas that were not in their own best interests. According to the logic of generation after generation of U.S. policymakers, these foreign populations needed strong leaders—sympathetic to U.S. business and security interests—to guide them through transitional periods. Equating dictators with freedom, however, blinded American leaders to the contradictions and failures of their policy and often provided “short-term benefits that became long-term problems.” Rarely did dictators behave according to U.S. demands, leaving U.S. leadership subject to the whims and mandates of foreign despots.

“A policy designed to produce stability and order, block communists and radical nationalists from power, and protect American economic and security

2. Ibid; David F. Schmitz, *The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid, 5.
6. Ibid, 309.
interests often failed on all accounts,” Schmitz observes. As the Vietnam War and Watergate crises demonstrated, it also caused significant damage to American democracy and civil society.

Beyond charting this pattern of U.S. policymaking across six decades and as many continents, Schmitz’s work on right-wing dictatorships raises some important questions more broadly about American foreign policy in the twentieth century. First, the consistent support of right-wing dictators raises questions about periodization and the Cold War. Much of the early scholarship of the Cold War treated the post-1945 era as distinct. Schmitz, however, shows that post-1945 commitments to anti-communism—expressed through support of right-wing dictatorships—built on pre-existing traditions, assumptions, and policies, arguing “The self-imposed obligations of a great power had been developing since the expansion of the 1890s and the interventions of the preceding decades.” As his books make clear, “the Cold War represented a continuation and an intensification of policies developed during the first half of the century that placed the fear of Bolshevism, socialism and the spread of disorder at the center of policymakers concerns.” In doing so, he joins a plethora of scholars who have centered the Cold War in longer trends of decolonization and empire.

The ideological basis and fundamental assumptions of American policy remained remarkably consistent, not just during the Cold War but afterward. Schmitz’s work begs us to consider, in the absence of a unifying anti-communist theme, if the “ideological, economic, and racial arguments used to rationalize American support of right-wing dictators continue to shape

7. Ibid.
9. Schmitz, Thank God They’re on Our Side, 305.
10. Ibid.
policy toward certain nations” today. Schmitz, in his conclusion to *The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships*, hints at his opinion, writing that, “Since 9/11, the war on terrorism has relied on similar logics to support authoritarian regimes.” He continues, warning “The hostility bred by American support for oppressive right-wing dictatorships will continue to harm the United States as the memories of its actions and its support for undemocratic forces continues to help shape politics in various areas of the world.”

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, scholars and commentators alike frequently credit the United States’ Cold War “victory” to its commitment to democracy and liberal values. Schmitz, by contrast, challenges the notion that American leaders consistently promoted democracy abroad throughout the twentieth century. This does not mean, however, that American ideas of democracy have stopped at the water’s edge. Schmitz writes, “The means of policymaking matter.” To be democratic, American foreign policy did not have to actively promote liberal capitalist democracy in other countries. Rather, a democratic foreign policy meant that U.S. officials could not simply abdicate the nation’s central values and mechanisms in the processes of making foreign policy. In *The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships*, Schmitz concludes “To resolve this contradiction between American interests and democratic values will take a full commitment to make the promotion of the nation’s most cherished values and principles the top priority in foreign policy.” Schmitz turns to the U.S. Congress in the 1970s to find one vision of what such a commitment might look like.

Political scientist David P. Forsythe has observed, “the Constitution invites a struggle between the political branches for control of foreign policy.” It was a fight that Congress seemed to take up with relish in the 1970s, as the massive failures and miscalculations of the war in Vietnam became increasingly apparent, and the slow burning crisis of the Watergate crisis.

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13. Schmitz, *The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships*, 244.
15. Schmitz, *Thank God They’re on Our Side*, 308.
16. Schmitz, *The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships*, 244.
scandal revealed the critical connections between foreign policy and democratic governance at home. Schmitz argues that Vietnam was a critical juncture in U.S. support for right-wing dictatorships, a “logical outgrowth of this policy, resulting in massive intervention to salvage discredited regimes.” This period undercut the United States’ rationale and support for authoritarian regimes and brought multiple challenges to the foreign policy consensus on containment.

Senator Frank Church was among the earliest members of Congress to challenge Cold War orthodoxy in the 1970s, presenting Vietnam as symptomatic of a larger problem. Certain fundamental moral and political values that should guide the making of foreign policy were missing from America’s containment doctrine. Moreover, the moral bankruptcy of foreign policy also corroded democracy at home. As early as 1969, Church warned of the decline of constitutional government within the United States. He compared the modern presidency—not just Nixon, but the powers accrued to the office—to the Roman Caesars who “subtly and insidiously . . . stole their powers away from an unsuspecting Senate.” Congress, to Church’s dismay, had left unchallenged the executive’s concentration of power in the name of national security, failing to exercise its power of oversight to ensure that this power served the people of the United States and reflected the principles of democratic government. Admonishing Congress to act, Church charged that “nothing less than the survival of constitutional government is at stake. Our democratic processes . . . are being undermined by the very methods we have chosen to defend these processes against real or fancied foreign dangers.” For Church, Congress must play a greater role in policymaking in order to restrain the power of the presidency and protect the constitutional order.

Schmitz’s work on Church reveals the linkage of foreign policy praxis to domestic governance. Church railed against what he called the “moral and
political perversion” of Vietnam and the democratic crisis of Watergate. An inflated concern for national security, Church argued, allowed Nixon to “manipulate and circumvent processes of American democracy.” Watergate was the natural culmination of a foreign policy that lacked public support and failed to reflect basic values that bound the nation together. Church asked, “If it showed commendable realism for the President to circumvent Congress’s war and treaty powers in the interest of a war policy he believed to be right, why . . . was it any less acceptable to sabotage the electoral process in order to re-elect a President whose policies they believed to be right?” To preserve democracy at home, the United States must have a foreign policy that embodied those values in its creation and execution. “The means of policymaking matter.” This was not the simple promotion of democracy abroad—as Schmitz’s work on dictatorships demonstrates, that was often a fraught and contradictory proposition. Rather, the exercise of power, regardless of national security concerns, must be democratic in its essence.

Church called for “a renewed idealism—not the soaring idealism which bred in us illusion of a divine mandate to set the world right, but rather a chastened, realistic, non-perfectionist idealism which will enable us to strike a balance between our highest aspirations and our human limitations.” Schmitz concludes that Church’s challenges to the “imperial presidency” helped to legitimize alternative views about America’s role in the world, including ascendant notions of human rights.

Motivated by the failures in Vietnam, and a sense of complicity in foreign repression by authoritarian allies in places like Chile, a critical subset of Congress targeted the United States’ own Cold War policies as the rationale for human rights diplomacy. Church joined with Representative Donald Fraser (D-MN), Senator Ted Kennedy (D-MA), and Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA), among others, to construct a U.S. human rights policy to challenge to existing Cold War paradigms of national interests. Schmitz writes that Church “helped to widen the range of legitimate discussion regarding foreign policy to include moral considerations. The efforts by Church and others did not bring about a complete transformation of American policy or create a new consensus, but they did allow for competing views to be heard and

23. Ibid, 442. See also Schmitz, The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships, 112–42.
25. Schmitz, Thank God They’re on Our Side, 308.
26. Schmitz, “Senator Frank Church, the Ford Administration, and the Challenges of Post-Vietnam Foreign Policy,” 443.
different approaches, specifically Jimmy Carter’s emphasis on human rights to be tried.”

Indeed, Carter’s human rights agenda was deeply informed by congressional initiatives. From the outset of his administration, Carter embraced the precept that reform of U.S. policy—particularly its alliances with repressive, anti-communist regimes—could have significant effect on mitigating abuses abroad and strengthening American democracy. Carter adopted congressional members’ emphasis on U.S support for right-wing dictatorships in his early human rights rhetoric, tacitly acknowledging U.S. complicity in foreign abuses to argue for a move away from short-sighted policies that axiomatically supported repressive regimes in the name of anti-communism and stability.

For Carter, human rights was part of a national self-examination about the nature of U.S. power and consequences of Cold War policy abroad and at home. To recapture public support at home and regain moral leadership abroad, he believed his administration would have to reshape its own institutions, priorities, and instruments of foreign policy. This task included cooling relations with traditional Cold War allies, hosting foreign opposition leaders and human rights advocates at the White House, limiting military and economic aid to repressive regimes, and elevating human rights to the level of assistant secretary at the State Department by appointing Patricia Derian as the “in-house” advocate for the issue.

Carter’s promotion of human rights also reflected the greater priority placed on North-South issues outside of Cold War alignments. Schmitz and I called Carter’s human rights policy initiatives a “post-Cold War foreign policy.” This was not to say that the Carter administration was...

27. Ibid, 440. For more on the work of Congress on human rights in the years before the Jimmy Carter administration, see Sarah Snyder, From Selma to Moscow: How Human Rights Activism Transformed U.S. Foreign Policy (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018); Keys, Reclaiming American Virtue.


29. For more on Patricia Derian’s efforts within the State Department, see Schmidli, The Fate of Freedom Elsewhere; and Kathryn Sikkink, Mixed Signals: U.S. Human Rights Policy and Latin America (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

indifferent to East-West relations or abandoned the decades’-long competition with the Soviet Union. Rather, the primary human rights instruments formulated by Congress in the mid-1970s and implemented in bi-lateral relations by the Carter administration—particularly linkage of foreign aid and military assistance to human rights performance—overwhelmingly targeted the U.S. government’s alignments with and support for repressive Cold War allies. This emphasis reflected a broader reassessment by the Carter administration that placed greater emphasis on local and regional factors, diminishing the centrality of the Soviet Union in its strategic thinking.31 This interpretation of Carter’s human rights policy as a rejection of Cold War paradigms has not gone without debate, but it is one both Schmitz and I still support in its essence.32

Human rights—for Church, Carter, and others—was about American exceptionalism in that it reflected the notion that the United States had certain democratic principles and values inherent to its identity that should be reflected in its foreign interactions. In this, the human rights policy of the 1970s also defied and challenged traditional constructs of exceptionalism in its self-critical application. Schmitz’s work shows this self-critical tendency in his exploration of the Church Committee and the questioning of right-wing dictatorships that emerged in the 1970s—the United States had betrayed its values and its interests in Chile, in CIA covert operations, in Vietnam, and elsewhere. These experiences led many to believe that democracy, and democratic mechanisms of governance, could not stop at the water’s edge without corrupting the United States’ own political system. In this, human rights became part of a larger examination of whether democratic oversight could be consistent with the requisite secrecy necessary for national security—or, to put it differently, whether the secrecy of national security could be reconciled with popular governance.


The questions that Schmitz asks in his research about the place of democracy in foreign policy and the relationship between U.S. values and interests are ones of perennial importance, which speak to our shifting contemporary debates and answer them in different, complex ways. When he and I first started working on human rights together in the fall of 1999, my senior year at Whitman College, it was the time of Serbia and Bosnia, with Rwanda not far behind us. I wondered why so many contemporary commentators were so quick to dismiss human rights as a foreign policy objective. Conventional wisdom was that the country had tried and rejected it as ineffective, weak, and naïve. This assessment sent me looking to the past to find out why a foreign policy that promoted and protected human rights was such a laughable idea. What I found did not reflect contemporary depictions. In conjunction with Schmitz’s work on right-wing dictatorships, this research raised a lot of new important questions for me about the notion of human rights in foreign policy in the 1970s and beyond, which became the basis for our article in Diplomatic History.33 This piece ultimately returned to the debates at the core of American foreign policy about the interrelationship of the United States’ foundational democratic principles and its projection of power in the world.

I think one of the most powerful things about Schmitz’s work is that it speaks to us as citizens: as citizens of the United States represented and responsible for the exercise of U.S. power in the world, or as citizens of the world who have experienced and shaped U.S. power without having a democratic voice in its application beyond the United States’ borders. Students often react strongly to Schmitz’s work, which I assign regularly in my classes. This history exposes our students to stories that we are less apt to tell ourselves as a nation about the consequences of U.S. power. Some students feel like it is a history that they have always wanted to know; others are clearly uncomfortable with its criticism of U.S. policy and leaders. The point is to engage and motivate the students, not to disillusion them or even dictate what they should take away from these histories. If anything is obvious from Schmitz’s body of work, it is that there are few easy answers, and there are always trade-offs and imperfect choices.

Schmitz’s own commitment to democratic values and his belief that the public must be informed, engaged, and present in the foreign policy of this country is evident in his work. Frank Church is not just a Senator from

Idaho—he is a model of democratic control of foreign policy and government power more broadly. Church represents one way that all U.S. citizens can question their government’s stated intentions and policies and grapple with the hard choices and consequences of U.S. policies, competing interests, and national values. Schmitz’s scholarship evidences his belief that patriotism cannot be blind faith, it must be self-reflective—and, at times, self-critical—if it hopes to realize the promise it holds. When I graduated from Whitman, he gave me a card from the American Civil Liberties Union quoting Congresswoman Barbara Jordan (D-TX), which read, “What Americans want is very simple. They want an America as good as its promise.” I continue to believe that serious works of history, like Schmitz’s, helps get us closer to that promise.

Vanessa Walker is the Morgan Assistant Professor of Diplomatic History at Amherst College.