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**Idealism falls on deaf ears at Yale**

**BY DAVID BROOKS**

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Description automatically generatedA** century ago, there were a handful of democracies in the world. Now, there are at least 140 nations that hold some form of multi-party elections. Since 1980, 33 new democracies have come into being. You have to be pretty unrealistic to think that this great democratic tide can't sweep through the Arab world as well. And you have to be pretty cynical to think that those of us who enjoy democracy shouldn't do all we can to champion it everywhere.

None of these new democracies is perfect. As the residents of West Palm Beach, Fla. will tell you, neither is ours. But these places are "normal." This was a word I heard constantly when I covered the Soviet Union. People there wanted to live normally. They didn't want to sacrifice their lives to some ridiculous notion of global proletarian dictatorship. They wanted to be able to look out for their families, develop their skills, and shape their destinies. In normal places young people have opportunities, so they don't go in for eschatological causes that have them flying airplanes into skyscrapers.

In normal countries your political opinions have consequences. You have to choose the people who will run your schools and police your streets. Thus, your opinions are not a luxury item, the way they now are under Middle Eastern tyrannies. You can't go off believing in wacko conspiracy theories or following rabid mullahs, because your opinions, and your votes, have real world consequences. Normal countries tend not to menace other normal countries, but tyrannies—especially those like the one found in Iraq—do.

The United States doesn't establish democracies in other lands. But the United States does set the security framework that allows local heroes, such as Lech Walesa and Vaclav Havel, to build their own form of democracy in their own nations. The United States can defeat tyrannies, and topple the regimes that stand in the way of democracy, and at least give local people the opportunity to build their own constitutions. Whether they succeed is up to them.

And why shouldn't that be America's mission over the next few decades? As History Professor Paul Kennedy has observed, never before has one nation occupied such a dominant military and economic place in the world. What higher goal can there be than completing the democratic tide?

I'm sorry to sound too hectoring and idealistic, but idealism seems in short supply these days, even at Yale. I've been amazed at how many people think we can retreat into the gated community of our affluent campuses and not take action to defeat tyranny abroad. There seems to be a pervasive micromania afoot: We have to think small because grand visions never work, and if we try to champion democracy in Iraq we will only screw it up. This micromania tips over into cynicism, so you hear pseudo-sophisticates say the interest in Iraqi regime change is all about oil—a concept so detached from the realities of the world petroleum markets that it doesn't bear a minute's scrutiny.

It's interesting how idealism migrates across the ideological spectrum. Now some on the left lobby against action in Iraq, effectively working to preserve a regime that has its intellectual roots in fascism and has learned its genocidal techniques there too. Meanwhile, others on the left, such as Christopher Hitchens and Salman Rushdie, join the people on the right (who they don't particularly like) arguing that we can't just sit by and allow Saddam to chase his dreams of permanent warfare, regional dominance, domestic slaughter, and global intimidation.

I don't expect that most people at Yale are going to support the efforts of President George W. Bush, DC '68, to change the Iraqi regime. All I ask is that if there is a war, you rethink your position. Then the principled position will be: Now that we're here, let's do it right. Because at that point the people who truly want to champion democracy in Iraq, rather than just kill Saddam, will need all the help they can get.

*David Brooks, a senior editor of The Weekly Standard, is teaching a course on opinion journalism at Yale University.*

