

# The United States: Power and Democracy

Norman Balabanian

From an early age, Americans have been taught that their country is a democracy and that it champions democracy everywhere in the world. As to the former, the trappings exist; there are great shows of balloting and counting but the substance is deeply flawed, as partially evident from the most recent elections. Can it be called a democracy (without a wink and a nod) if the ‘winner’ of the presidency is preferred by less than a quarter of the eligible voters? Even by fewer votes than one of the other candidates?

The first US census was conducted in 1790, yielding 2,780K non-slaves and 580K slaves. Native Americans were excluded from the census. (Nor is it known how the substantial number of indentured servants was counted; their status and treatment were those of slaves for the years needed to work off their indentures.) Since women were disenfranchised, those allowed the franchise were drawn from the 20% of the population (not including Native Americans) who were white males. Only those white males aged over 21 could vote and – in some states – only those who owned property! Democracy? Hardly!

As for the US championing democracy and self-determination elsewhere, the record is clear: it has not been true. What *is* true is that the US, for economic and imperialist reasons, felt free to invade its neighboring countries in Central America and the Caribbean, starting early in its infancy. (The US Marines first invaded the Dominican Republic in 1800.) Just within the third of a century preceding the election of Franklin Roosevelt in 1932, the US marines invaded:

- Colombia: 4 times
- Cuba: 4 times
- Dominican Republic: 4 times
- Haiti: 2 times
- Honduras: 7 times
- Mexico: 3 times
- Nicaragua: 5 times (once occupied for decades)
- Panama 2 times

(The first invasion of Nicaragua was in 1854; the US Navy burned down the town of San Juan del Norte to avenge an insult to Cornelius Vanderbilt.)

Perhaps Smedley Butler (Major General, US Marines) gave the most cogent description of this practice at his retirement in 1932. He said:

*“I helped make Mexico ... safe for American oil interests in 1914. I helped make Haiti and Cuba decent places for the National City Bank boys to collect revenue in. I helped purify Nicaragua for the international banking house of Brown Brothers in 1909-12. I brought light to the Dominican Republic for American sugar interests in 1916. I helped make Honduras right for American sugar interests in 1916. I helped make Honduras ‘right’ for American fruit companies in 1903.*

Aside from avenging insults to wealthy aristocrats, what other motivations has the US had to invade and occupy other countries for decades? A brief answer is: to make the world safe for capitalism. To this end, the US has subverted democracy and the rule of law; this should be of undying concern to all Americans.

Immediately after WWII, American policy took a turn for the worse. One of the greatest calamities to befall democracy was the National Security Act of 1947 that created both the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the National Security Council (NSC). Both are highly secret agencies whose missions and behaviors are incompatible with democracy. Indeed, both operate to subvert American democracy – and any other democracies judged by these agencies, in secret and without any other checks on their operations, to be threats to ‘American’ interests. Even its budgets are secret!

How can a democracy operate if the knowledge citizens need in order to make informed decisions is unavailable to them by law? Some of these secrets are revealed from time to time, but decades after the fact, when the issues are no longer salient. A few cases:

- Only in 1999 were the 4-decades long CIA operations against Cuba fully (?) declassified, including the failed Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961 and numerous attempts to assassinate Fidel Castro in subsequent years. The unprecedented 39-year US

unilateral embargo against Cuba has been denounced by ever-increasing majorities in the UN General Assembly for each of the last 10 years. The vote against the US in 2000 was 158 (including all NATO members but the US) to 3 (US, Israel, and the Marianas, population 65,000, a wholly owned subsidiary of the US), with just 4 abstentions; that is, 96% of the nations of the world denounced the US embargo. A 'healthy respect for the opinion of mankind', indeed!

- Immediately after the 1954 end of the Geneva Conference ending French rule in Indo China that called for a single election throughout all of Vietnam two years later, the US NSC held a meeting on August 3, 1954. (In secret and unreported at the time, of course!) It decided that the US would not permit such an election and the US government would secretly do all it could to prevent national leader Ho Chi Minh from achieving the independence and unity of his country. (Ho had been trying, even as long ago as 1919 at the Versailles conference following WWI, to get independence for Indochina.) This secret – and many other odious details of US intervention in Vietnam – was revealed in 1971 by the unauthorized publication of the Pentagon Papers, an internal Defense Department-study. (The patriot responsible was Daniel Ellsberg, a previous employee of the Defense Department). President Nixon sought to prevent this publication, but the Supreme Court rejected such “prior restraint” on speech (by only 6-3; what if 2 justices had switched their vote?). The reason the US would not permit democratic elections was the certainty that the overwhelming winner would be the national leader, Ho Chi Minh.

The ultimate results of this subversion of democracy by the US was the destruction of 3 countries: Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, leaving about 4 million dead, and ensuring that these countries would not attain their previous levels of development for decades to come. US land mines strewn about the Vietnamese countryside continue to kill and maim thousands every year. (The

US still refuses to sign the International Treaty to Ban Land Mines, although most countries of the world have already done so, while others wait for US action first.)

- If the highest US officials feel it necessary to overthrow certain governments, the fact that those governments have been democratically elected has never been an impediment. Some examples of CIA-led overthrows of democratically elected governments include those of:
  1. Mohammed Mossadegh of Iran in 1953.
  2. Jacobo Arbenz of Guatemala in 1954.
  3. Joao Goulart of Brazil in 1964.
  4. Salvador Allende of Chile in 1973. (Massive release of declassified documents just this year.)

Conversely, democratic elections have never been a prerequisite for the US to prop up a country's regime, provided it did not interfere with US corporations' control of that country's economy. Examples are:

1. The 49-year reign of the Somozas in Nicaragua, ended in 1979 by a popular uprising. Somoza the elder had been installed following a US invasion of Nicaragua to which Smedley Butler refers.
2. The 31-year reign of Rafael Trujillo in Santo Domingo, 1930-61, when he was assassinated, possibly with CIA complicity. (Although the US first invaded Hispaniola in 1800, the most destructive invasion took place in 1916 under the saintly Woodrow Wilson. “Wilson invaded to block constitutional government and to ensure complete US economic and military control”. It took 6 years to subdue the Dominicans and to install a government to US liking. Then Trujillo took over in a coup in 1930. Clearly, the US did not object since it could not have taken place otherwise. In 1962, the year following Trujillo's demise, Juan Bosch was democratically elected President. He fought corruption and defended civil liberties; he ended police repression and took steps to educate workers and peasants for democratic participation. The

Kennedy liberals went apoplectic and did everything to undermine him -- he lasted almost 2 years. His constitutional government was ousted in a coup to which the US government did not object, and he went into exile. A year later, supporters of the Dominican constitution attempted to restore the constitutionally elected government of Juan Bosch to power. They were on the verge of succeeding when – on April 15, 1965 – Lyndon Johnson sent in an invading force of 23,000 US Marines to prevent the functioning of democracy. (It should be noted that the US did not object when the constitutionally elected government of Bosch was overthrown by force the year before.) Joaquin Balaguer, who was then installed as President, remained such for 30 more years – until the end of the 1990’s– nominally elected and re-elected well into his 90’s.

3. The over-3-decades long dictatorship of the Duvaliers in Haiti (Papa Doc and Baby Doc) from the 1950’s to 1986. This followed a decades-long occupation by the US Marines that prepared Haiti for the Duvaliers.

Democracy might come to the United States if the control now exercised by wealth is removed from the polity. “Reform”, as in “Campaign Finance Reform” won’t hack it; something more radically democratic is needed.

Veterans for Peace  
2000 Peace Concert  
Gainesville, Florida