

Nov 04, 2016 by [Philip Seib](#)

Reagan's View of Democracy Remains Valid ^[1]

SIMI VALLEY, CALIFORNIA --- The Ronald Reagan Presidential Library is a lovely memorial on a hill, overlooking many miles of California countryside. It also hosts thoughtful discussions about Reagan's legacy, including a recent one that marked the thirtieth anniversary of his speech to the British Parliament – the “Westminster speech” – in which he proposed an assertive future for builders of democracy.

This event, cosponsored by the National Endowment for Democracy and the Pacific Council on International Policy, featured former Secretaries of State George Shultz and Madeleine Albright, and former president of Peru Alejandro Toledo. This trio and other panelists examined the status of nation-building and democracy-building three decades after Reagan's address.

Today we live in a world far different from that which Reagan surveyed in 1982, but the principles he articulated remain valid. His observation about the weaknesses of dictatorships is as applicable to today's Middle East as it was to the Cold War's Eastern Europe: “Any system is inherently unstable that has no peaceful means to legitimize its leaders. In such cases, the very repressiveness of the state ultimately drives people to resist it, if necessary, by force.”

The panelists at the Reagan Library noted that democracy can be a principal American export, but it will not be useful unless it incorporates realities of everyday life. Albright said, “People want to vote and they want to eat,” and Toledo added that “democracy without distribution of economic growth” cannot succeed.

Democracy, as it has matured in the U.S. system, is far from perfect but it has great appeal, particularly to those who live without it. As an instrument of public diplomacy – winning international support by inspiring emulation – instruction in the arts of democracy is invaluable. This is clearly the case in today's Middle East, where dictators have fallen but the “What next?” question looms large. Shultz noted that in that region, “people don't know what to do once you win.”

As a first step in such cases in which people are willing to tear off their shackles and demand a better life, said Shultz, “Let people know that somebody understands their plight.” This was something that Reagan did well. His calling the Soviet Union an “evil empire” was mocked by many in the West, but, as Shultz noted, there were those such as Soviet human rights activist Anatoly Sharansky who knew he was right and were inspired by his words.

Today, the United States sometimes seems uncertain about what it stands for and what example it wants to set, particularly for those emerging from many years of grinding repression. Reagan's Westminster speech is instructive: “We must be staunch in our

conviction that freedom is not the sole prerogative of a lucky few, but the inalienable and universal right of all human beings....The objective I propose is quite simple to state: to foster the infrastructure of democracy, the system of a free press, unions, political parties, universities, which allows a people to choose their own way to develop their own culture, to reconcile their own differences through peaceful means.”

If the United States is to make democracy the hallmark of its public diplomacy, Reagan's words, and those of the former policy makers at his library's conference, can provide a valuable foundation for those who seek to build a new political world.
