Americans believe in democracy. In the case of Algeria, however, they are in a state of total intellectual confusion about what democracy really means and how to ensure it. The result is a misguided policy in a situation where the stakes are very high.

THE MIDDLE EAST'S TRAGEDY

It is no accident, as a Marxist would say, that much of the Third World is experiencing a wave of democratization in the wake of the Soviet Union's collapse. The connection is clear: the demise of the Marxist Left and radical politics in much of the world has made possible what I like to call normal politics -- politics that is not a matter of life and death. Normal politics is not possible when a major contender for power espouses a totalitarian ideology that believes in the unity of everything and the impossibility of separating out politics from culture and all else. If totalitarians take over -- even through elections -- democracy is out, for democracy in the truest sense means not just majoritarianism but constitutionalism: limits on government power, independent intermediate institutions, pluralism. Otherwise, in the memorable phrase, it's "one man, one vote, one time."  

In contrast, normal politics permits the alternation of parties; you can lose one political competition and know you'll still be around to compete the next time. It presupposes the absence of a radical challenge to the existing order; it requires pluralism, a sense of the ground rules, and a basic consensus on what the limits are to governmental power.

And so, with the collapse of the totalitarian Left, we see democracy blossom in Africa, in Latin America, and in parts of Asia. This is an extraordinarily positive development that vindicates what we in the West believe in. Of course, we should support it; we cannot be neutral between democracy and undemocratic forms of government.
The tragedy of the Middle East is that just at the moment when a forty-year-old struggle against the radical Left backed by the Soviet Union has been won -- the defeat of Gamal Abdel Nasser and his heirs -- the vacuum is being filled in the Middle East by a totally different form of radicalism -- that of revolutionary political Islam. Many of the same problems apply in this as in the earlier case. Operating as it does from the basic tenet of the unity of mosque and state, the mass mobilization of society, and cultural hegemony, political Islam has obvious totalitarian implications. If we truly understand what our own Western democracy really means, we will have no illusions about the implications of Islamists' coming into power. If the totalitarians take over, it's not democratization. Period.

EVOLUTION OF U.S. POLICY IN ALGERIA

The foreign-policy implications are also dramatic. A couple of years ago, there was a very disturbing article in The Washington Post, which quoted State Department officials as saying that they wanted to "avoid being labeled the Great Satan in this one," as they had been in Iran. The article went on to say that the U.S. government was positioning itself for the possibility of an Islamist victory in Algeria.2 This mischievous article somewhat distorted things; friends in the department tell me a lot of it was the journalist's imagination, but he did have legitimate quotes in it.

This American approach had a number of elements. In mid-1994, French policy was far tougher than American policy in opposing the fundamentalist trend--a result, perhaps, of the huge stakes involved for France in its former colony. But the Americans seemed to like staying out of the line of fire, and they seemed especially to be letting the French be exposed and out in front; Washington could position itself in a way that could perhaps win the good will of these Islamic forces. "Dialogue" became the American mantra: Washington wanted the Algerian government to talk to its Islamist opposition. If the Americans were not setting themselves up as mediators, they were at least maneuvering into a neutral position between regime and opposition.

This was a wrong-headed analysis of the problem and a wrong-headed strategy. We all, of course, prefer a political outcome to a military one; no one wants the Algerian scene reduced to violence. But U.S. interests will inevitably be severely damaged if the Islamists win in Algeria; this country cannot "stay out of the line of fire." Were Algeria to fall under Islamist control, it would have far-reaching political and psychological effects in the region and enormous strategic consequences for the United States. It is not a question of dominoes; the metaphor I like is a water table, in which the pressure would rise in every society in the region that has an Islamist opposition -- in Egypt, in Tunisia, in the Arabian Peninsula -- places we have a big stake in. The sense of the inevitability of the Islamist tide would grow, as would their aura of invincibility. The most wrong-headed element of this supposed State Department view is the idea that it can win the good will of the Islamists through neutrality -- for Islamist radicals everywhere target precisely the pro-Western elements. The more pro-Western a country is, the more pro-Western the elites in its society, the more they are hated and condemned by the Islamist opposition.

All this brings to mind the Suez Crisis in 1956, when the United States backed Abdel Nasser against its own British, French, and Israeli allies in the hope that by doing so it would win the good will of the forces Abdel Nasser represented in the Middle East. In fact, American support guaranteed Abdel Nasser's victory, and that resulted in a wave of leftist revolutions in the Arab world; in country after country, radicals imitating Abdel Nasser overthrew pro-Western regimes. The strategic
beneficiary of the crisis turned out to be the Soviets, who in fact had had nothing to do with the events at Suez. Ten years afterwards, President Dwight Eisenhower changed his view, telling a number of people that his policy at Suez had been the biggest foreign-policy blunder of his administration.\(^3\)

THE CURRENT SITUATION

Over the last couple of years, American policy toward Algeria has in some ways become more balanced. It supports the government of Algeria economically, for example by backing it in the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, and in debt rescheduling. During the campaign leading up to the Algerian presidential election in November 1995, the U.S. government kept quiet -- which was wise because if it had spoken out, given the administration's predilections, it would probably have cast doubt on the legitimacy of the process.

It was also good that Assistant Secretary Robert Pelletreau visited Algiers in March 1996, the first high-level visit by an American official in some years. Until then, Washington had shunned Algerian officialdom as if it were a pariah on the order of Cuba or Libya. That this is no longer the case is a major step forward.

But now the pressure has resumed. The Clinton administration continues to push Algiers to engage in dialogue with the Islamist opposition. Recent statements by Ambassador Pelletreau, including his congressional testimony and a speech he gave to the Council on Foreign Relations in the spring of 1996,\(^4\) sketch out a policy called "positive conditionality," meaning that American approval is still withheld, subject to Algiers' performance on its promises to continue the electoral process.

Washington continues to press for reconciliation, political inclusion, dialogue, and going ahead with the announced calendar of elections. I'm not against keeping promises, but the language used is very invidious. "We are withholding our approval," it seems to say, "our acceptance of this government as legitimate."

Why such relentless, continuing pressure on a government that has had the most democratic election for a head of state in the history of the Arab Middle East? Again, the U.S. government seems to be setting itself up as a neutral, as an arbiter of the procedure, a force that's on nobody's side. It is still in an important sense dealing with this government at arm's length. The pressures continue, without regard to their possible political consequences.

This policy has two drawbacks. First, in my view, the Algerian government ought to be seen as somewhat vindicated by not just the results but the procedure of last year's election. It seems to have done something right: a very firm crackdown on terrorists, which gave it the confidence to hold a genuine election. To the surprise of many, the election was quite honest, competitive, and contained a real range of candidates, and the turnout was excellent. The Algerian government ought to be considered at least as legitimate as any other government in the Arab world. It deserves some credit for its political judgment, as opposed to the pre-election qualms in Washington. It also deserves some credit for having the political judgment to carry out such a strategy taking considerable risks with the wrong kind of outcome, which would have earned them universal condemnation and subtracted even further from the perception of their legitimacy. They obviously have a political strategy and they seem to know what their doing.

The second problem is more profound. Algeria was for many decades a one-party state; it is now remarkably pluralist. This was shown in the presidential election and in the political activity that accompanied it. Pluralism is shown in the way the
government is now conducting its own "national dialogue" with a wide spectrum of political elements. It is shown in the economic liberalization and in the evolution of the new constitutional structures under discussion. A multiplicity of parties and political entities exist, which is closer to the Western model than almost anything else in the area. It puts Algeria ahead of most other countries in the Third World and light years ahead of almost everybody else in the Arab world.

Algiers's reward for all this is ... to be treated like South Vietnam. I realize that the usual analogy is to Iran in the late 1970s, and it is not a bad analogy. The shah of Iran was hardly a model of human-rights behavior, and American policy contributed to his fall and to the coming to power of a regime that is even more grotesque in terms of human rights. Still, the model of South Vietnam is worth pondering.

South Vietnam had pluralist politics, including a free press and contested elections at every level of government -- to the point that parliament was dominated by opposition parties. In the end, it was overrun by the North Vietnamese regular army. "Idealists" in America were holding South Vietnam to an impossible standard, even as it faced a relentless threat from a force that observed no democratic constraints at all.

**CONSEQUENCES**

U.S. policy in Algeria today essentially continues to be based on the premise that the government's legitimacy remains in question. By such a policy of "conditional" approval, Washington contributes to destabilization. Instead of treating the presidential election last November as a legitimation of this government, Washington implicitly or explicitly endorses the opposition's view that this government is not yet legitimate. The criterion it holds out for its legitimacy seems to be an accommodation with the Islamists; only when they are satisfied will, apparently, Washington be satisfied.

Now, it is one thing for the administration quietly to give advice to Algiers that it ought to have a political strategy to broaden its base and thereby marginalize the Islamist extremists. That's eminently reasonable; but the Algerian government already has a political strategy, and events on their face suggest that it is not doing so badly. It is quite another thing for us continually to second-guess the political strategy that the Algerian government has adopted and constantly to cast doubt on its moral adequacy. In so doing, Washington does the opposition's work for it and thereby makes it harder for the Algerian government's own political strategy to work.

Perhaps Algiers will again ignore American advice, as it did last year, when its presidential election succeeded despite all the hand-wringing in Washington. The saving grace of American policy may once again lie in its ineffectuality. If not, our policy is suicidal.

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1 See, for example, Edward Djerejian, "The U.S. and the Middle East in a Changing World; Address at Meridian House International," June 2, 1992, in U.S. Department of State Dispatch, June 8, 1992. The phrase antedates Djerejian, however.


3 Eisenhower said this in 1967 to Richard Nixon and to Israel's Ambassador Avraham Harman. See sources in Peter W. Rodman, More Precious than Peace: The Cold War

4 Congressional testimony on Apr. 16 and June 12, 1996; and a talk to the Council on Foreign Relations on May 8, 1996.
A political expert believes that certain Western powers seek to destabilize the protest-hit Algeria in order to pursue their own goals. “The West, the United States and possibly France, would be interested in destabilizing Algeria from the standpoint that it is a resource rich country,” Azikiwe warned. PressTV-Algerians want all old-regime figures to leave. Algerians protest in the capital, Algiers, to demand the departure of all figures associated with the regime of ousted president Abdelaziz Bouteflika. A policy brief presents a concise summary of information that can help readers understand, and likely make decisions about, government policies. Policy briefs may give objective summaries of relevant research, suggest possible policy options, or go even further and argue for particular courses of action. How do policy briefs differ from other kinds of writing assignments? If you’re reading this handout because you’re having your first encounter with such an assignment, don’t worry—many of your existing skills and strategies, like using evidence, being concise, and organizing your information effectively, will help you succeed at this form of writing. However, policy briefs are distinctive in several ways. Audience.