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'Project Democracy': Reagan tries to export the US way of governing

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Can the United States export both bullets and ideas?

As Congress chews over President Reagan's \$110 million proposal for increased arms aid to El Salvador, America is brooding over a far larger question: how best to spread the values of democracy among developing nations.

Even as it plumps for increased military aid, the Reagan administration is weighing in with an information campaign — a two-year, \$85 million plan described by officials of the United States Information Agency (USIA) as "an ambitious, long-term, positive program . . . to advocate the principles of democracy."

Known as "Project Democracy," it gathers together some 44 separate proposals for seminars, institutes, publications, and fellowships, largely carried out by private foundations. The latest in a string of cold-war efforts to export democracy dating at least from the Truman era, it includes:

- A \$15 million grant to the Asia Foundation.
- \$1.7 million for assisting Liberia's transition to democracy.
- \$10.7 million to support "Centers for the Study of the US Abroad."
- A \$5.5 million proposal to make American textbooks available abroad.
- A \$1.1 million regional newspaper to serve rural populations in Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador.
- Symposiums to help build "positive attitudes toward democracy" among third-world military leaders.

In explaining Project Democracy, a senior administration official close to its development said that it set "a remarkable new tone in our foreign policy" because it involved "going up front with the advocacy of democratic values."

The latest effort, he said, began with the President's address last June to the British Parliament, in which Mr. Reagan called for a major "competition of ideas and values" with the Soviet Union and its allies.

The President's address to Parliament last summer, says this official, was "in many ways the most important presidential speech since World War II" — because it turned away from "the policy of containment" of the Soviet Union and toward a pro-

gram aimed at "building respect for a sub-structure of democratic values."

But so far the project has faced tough sledding on Capitol Hill. Both Secretary of State George P. Shultz and USIA director Charles Z. Wick faced hard questioning from a congressional subcommittee over its workability and over potential Central Intelligence Agency involvement. CIA director William Casey attended a planning meeting for the initiative in August, although administration officials insist the CIA is no longer involved. But "I think it's fair to say that there's widespread skepticism," a USIA spokesman admits.

The proposal has also met resistance from the academic community. "If the United States wants to propagate democracy, it should do it by example," says Prof. Stanley Hoffman of Harvard's Center for International Affairs. Peter Magrath, president of the University of Minnesota, calls the project "propaganda and hard-sell," and notes that, as a means for promoting democracy, "hard-sell doesn't work."

Jeswald Salacuse, dean of the law school at Southern Methodist University, calls it "a mixed bag of things put under one label." "I don't see that there's any coherent philosophy behind it," he adds. And Hampshire College president Adele Simmons worries that the proposal's tone smacks of "cultural imperialism" and "suggests that our way is better than their way."

Most scholarly criticism, however, arises out of a concern that Project Democracy will drain funds from the Fulbright programs for academic exchange — which, in the eyes of many scholars, have a proven record at showcasing the values of democracy by example instead of indoctrination.

Sen. Claiborne Pell (D) of Rhode Island, author of the "Pell amendment" passed by Congress last year to double the funding for exchange programs between 1982 and 1986, insists that such exchanges must remain "USIA's top priority." The administration's 1984 budget proposes \$84.3 million for exchange programs — significantly less than the \$135 million which, says an aide to Senator Pell, is needed to meet the 1986 goal of doubling the exchanges.

USIA officials see Project Democracy as a continuation of the Reagan administration's "Project Truth" — a counter-propaganda effort of the USIA aimed at combating Soviet "disinformation" by providing positive views of democracy abroad.

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