

Transcript

Hi, my name's Tom Carothers. I'm a researcher at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, which is an independent think tank based in Washington with offices in different parts of the world. At Carnegie, I direct the Democracy, Conflict, and Governance Program, which is a team of researchers working on the state of democracy and on international democracy support around the world.

I got engaged in the domain of democracy assistance and democracy policy more generally in the mid-1980s, at the start of my career, when I was working at the State Department in the legal office, and I was assigned over to a new office at USAID in the Latin America Bureau called the Office of Democratic Development and Administration of Justice. It was a new endeavor for USAID, to work on democracy assistance. It wasn't something the agency had done for a long time. In the 1960s, there had been some such assistance, but it had gone away.

It came back in the mid-1980s as part of two big things. One, specifically in Latin America, the United States was trying to fight what it saw as leftist subversion in Central America, and it was doing so by supporting a number of governments, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Costa Rica, some of which were only somewhat democratic. They were controlled by military sectors that were quite powerful in some cases. In order to make this assistance by the United States politically palatable at home, where there was a lot of debate about this assistance, the United States was trying to push these countries to become more democratic, so it could say to skeptical Americans and skeptical congressional Democrats. Now, these are democratic governments that we're helping, they're not military-led governments. So suddenly, there was this urge to support democracy in Central America, and in fact, Latin America more widely.

But the other big thing that was going on, of course, was the late Cold War, it was the Reagan administration, and President Reagan and his team's interest in the United States being a supporter of democracy in the world, and there had been the creation of the National Endowment for Democracy in the early 1980s, and the organizations associated with that, like the National Democratic Institute, the International Republican Institute, and so forth.

And so there was a growing body of activity coming from the United States, and soon from other countries, to support democracy in the world. So anyway, so I got assigned to this office, and we sort of plunged in. It was a new office, there were just a few people, but Congress was appropriating money for this and authorizing it, and suddenly, we needed to go out and do programs. Go to El Salvador, go to Haiti in one case, go to Guatemala, go to Honduras, help them become more democratic.

And I rapidly discovered what I thought at the time, a dualism that really caught me up. Which was, on the one hand, this seemed like very important work. I was really struck that the idea that the United States could help, say, El Salvador become more democratic was important and was

kind of profound. I mean, it was like, how is that going to work? So, on the one hand, I felt this is a very big venture that the United States is trying to engage in in the world. But then secondly, I felt like, we don't really know what we're doing. People are saying, here, get on a plane and go to El Salvador and work with, I don't know, the Salvadoran judiciary and make them more judicious. It's like, okay, I guess we can do that, but do we actually know how to do that?

And so, I was caught between this, it's very important, versus, do we actually know what we're doing? And I saw that the pressures within the government, or in any aid organization, are to just move forward, whereas I was, by nature, something of an observer, and sometimes kind of a skeptical observer, I would say. And I was... found myself wondering a lot about what we were doing and questioning to myself, in some cases to my bosses, who were sometimes open to that and sometimes not, saying, are we taking the right approach? Do we know what we're doing, and so forth.

And it began to build up over a couple of years, and I thought, "this is a big topic. Somebody ought to write about this." So I looked around, I used to go to the State Department library in my lunch hours for literature on this, and I discovered there was almost no writing about it other than a really fundamental book that had been written in the early 1970s called *Liberal America and the Third World* by Robert Packenham, a scholar who ended up at Stanford for a number of years. And I loved that book, and it was a book that really examined what the U.S. had done in the 1960s in this domain. And that book was kind of an inspiration to me. I thought, somebody needs to write a book like this about today.

So I got a fellowship from the Council on Foreign Relations, an International Affairs Fellowship, and I left the State Department. They wouldn't give me unpaid leave, so I had to leave [USAID] to do it, and I sat down to write a book, and the book really just aimed to do two things.

One was to try to identify what the United States was really doing with this idea of democracy policy, beyond just democracy assistance, but more broadly, diplomatically, in economic terms, supporting democracy in Latin America. How was it doing that? First, to just give the reader an idea of 'what is this whole new domain?' Because I realized, as I talked to people, most people didn't know very much about what the U.S. was trying to do.

And then secondly, I was particularly interested in the assistance programs that were going towards democracy assistance, and so I had a fairly long chapter there that analyzed the rise of democracy assistance in particular, not just diplomatic policy and economic policy and so forth.

So that was my first book. It was called *In the Name of Democracy: [U.S. Policy Towards] Latin America in the Reagan Years*. And it was the best book that had been written in recent years, and the worst book on the topic, so it kind of stood out just because it was different. And it managed to get reviewed in the New York Times because the issue of democracy in Latin America. It was pretty hot in those years. Came out in the early 1990s. That was the start, but it was really just the start of my own kind of interest in the endeavor.

I had left the government, and I actually went to work as a private lawyer, trying to figure out what to do with myself and make a living for a little while. But I volunteered as a lawyer using my pro bono time with the National Democratic Institute, on a number of electoral observation missions, political party training with the International Foundation for Electoral Systems and some election observations. So I started getting more into this domain of democracy assistance, and I decided one day in the early 1990s: I want to be an expert on this topic. Somebody needs to be close to the community of people who are doing this, but a little bit outside it, so that, you know, this person can be observant, skeptical when needed, praising when needed, criticizing when needed, and be adjacent to it, but not part of it. And that was the role I saw for myself, and it didn't seem like anybody else was really trying to do that.

And not just U.S. assistance, but Europeans were doing a lot, too. So British, Norwegians, you know, Swedish, German, etc. There was a lot of democracy assistance going on. This was the early 1990s. This was boom times for democracy, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the opening up of Central and Eastern Europe to Western assistance of all different types. Africa was undergoing tremendous transitions. Latin America was continuing its democratization. South Asia, Southeast Asia, etc. Even the Middle East was experiencing some ferment politically.

So this was boom times for democracy. So I thought... I sort of just defined in my mind a role for myself. I want to be an expert on democracy assistance who's close to the community, not part of it, etc. Then I had to figure out how to make a living doing that, and I was fortunate. I wrote to some think tanks and said, you know, I could do a project on this, and the Carnegie Endowment took me in and hired me to do that.

And the president at the time, Morton Abramowitz, recently passed away, a tremendous guy, was himself pretty skeptical of this stuff, and he said, you know, I'm not really sure there's material for a project here, but might you give it a try?

So I did, and it turned out to be a very fruitful place to do this, because the Carnegie Endowment, like any good think tank, rewards policy-relevant work. It's not an academic institution trying to create, you know, theories about things, or worry too much about abstruse methodologies. It's interested in policy research that has direct impact. It's independent, which was crucial, because I was, you know, in some cases, criticizing institutions. I needed a place of independence where I could do that. It was not funded by the U.S. government, so that was good, because I could not worry about offending funders in that regard. So it was a good perch for doing that.

So, my next book, what I decided to do was take one country where there was a fair amount of democracy aid going on, and just zero in and just do a portrait of democracy aid in one country. Because I was... I continue to be very struck that most people out there in the policy community just didn't really understand this domain. They sort of heard about it, and they're like, I don't know, sounds good. Is that... what are you doing? What is this? And I thought, somebody needs to just write a portrait that describes what is this domain.

But not just describing. I looked at it from two different perspectives in this book. It was my second book about assisting democracy in Romania. One perspective was to try to get inside the minds of those who were doing this assistance, giving it away, or carrying out the training, or, you know, on the side of the assistance providers. What were their assumptions about what is democracy? How does democracy come about? Why have they chosen these institutions to work with? How are they trying to produce change? Etc. So I tried to get into the bedrock of their assumptions, which were often very implicit. And I found in talking to them, often nobody had sort of asked them the question, well, why did you decide to focus on this institution and that institution and not this one? Or, you know, what is really your theory of change, and so forth.

So, one perspective was from the top down, if you will, and the other, of course, was the bottom up. I decided I want to talk to a lot of people in Romania who've been on the receiving end of this assistance, and see what they think about it. How did they find it?

And so to do that, I learned Romanian, so that I could talk to people in Romanian and interview them. And I went to the country repeatedly, and interviewed several hundred people at length about this kind of assistance, and discovered nobody had asked them a lot of questions.

Like, I'd start by saying, why do you think all these Americans and British people and Germans and French are coming to your country doing this thing they call promoting democracy. It turned out they had a lot of unusual ideas about that. So they were sort of, why are people here? And then, what do you think about what they're doing? And they'd say, well, I don't really get what they're doing, or they'd say, actually, I really like it when they do this, whatever, but just listening to them is my approach has always been fairly anthropological. It's just listen really carefully to many different points of view around the question, and from that emerges insight about what's happening.

So I tried to bring those two things together, the perspective of the assistance community and the perspective of the receiving end into a book, and it was, I thought, a reasonable portrait of that. And I think many Romanians and then other Central and Eastern Europeans liked it, because they felt like finally someone's at least asking us. I had some things in the book that kind of unsettled the assistance providers, like, in the book, I talk about a rule of law program going on where this particular rule of law assistance provider kept bringing American professors to Romania to give lectures on American constitutional law, American administrative law, and so forth. And it wasn't going down very well. The Romanians were, you know, we actually go to these lectures, the professor seems like a nice guy, he's never been to Romania before, he's actually never been to Central and Eastern Europe. He's telling us this is the way the Constitution should work, we don't actually have a similar constitution. And I had a quote in the book from a Romanian judge, saying something like, please stop, please stop the provider from giving us more assistance. I was just trying to highlight that it isn't always, you know, the idea of assistance is kind of a mixed bag, sometimes, for people on the receiving end.

And, so I tried to illuminate the realities of it, and that, I think, was useful, and I saw a good response to it in the assistance community, although it was a complex response. I also saw

some unhappiness about it, because one thing I discovered as I continue this story about developing this body of work is that the assistance community has a divided soul with respect to an outsider coming and studying what they're doing, and I encountered this again and again and again throughout my career.

On the one hand, they really want to do good work, and so if you come and say, I've studied it, and I think I have some ideas about how to make it better, they're interested. They're like, oh, really? How, you know, should we do something different than that? So, on the one hand, they're serious people who want to do good, and so if you have some insights, hopefully from your work, you know, come talk to our board of directors, come talk to our staff, you know, tell us what you've discovered.

But the other half of this all is, don't criticize us, funding is very precarious. You're, as, you know, one senior person at one of the institutes said to me, you're giving ammunition to our critics in Congress. We'll pick out the parts of your book that are critical and say, 'this isn't good, see, this guy says it's not good.' And I said, yeah, but, you know, it's pretty friendly criticism. It's, you know, it's not scorching in most cases, and that's gotta be okay.

And they also, not just sensitive about criticism because of how it might hurt their organizations, but also because they're pretty sure of themselves. I would encounter the phrase again and again among assistance providers of, we're doing, quote, "God's work."

Well, I don't know. I didn't, you know, I wasn't much of a believer in this idea that this was God's work. This was a, you know, a set of policy initiatives by a government with particular interests doing this for particular reasons. But the idea of God's work was, it's kind of unquestionable. We're here to promote free and fair elections. How could you be against that? We're training political party people. That's good. Why are you questioning this? Why are you raising these hard questions?

So this divided soul, we'd like to make it better, tell us what you've learned, versus, no, don't criticize, don't threaten us, and besides, we're doing God's work, was something I have lived with, you know, very vividly, and a number of, you know, presentations to these organizations that are pretty heated over the years, and people saying, you know, we do know, you know, we have thought about that, you're wrong about this, but that's good, you know, there should be a healthy debate over these things, I felt like.

So I took the book on Romania, and I decided, okay, that was kind of a test, one country. Let me build on that. And so then I thought, I'll write a big book about the field. This was the late 1990s at this point. The field had been developing. It was now worldwide, there were all kinds of donors involved in this, all kinds of assistance organizations, and I thought, somebody needs to get their arms around this growing tree.

So, I decided to write a book, and I took four case studies in different parts of the world, in Africa, in Zambia, and Morocco, and Guatemala, Nepal, and tried to go deeply into all four case

studies, as well as a lot of analysis of democracy aid and other places, and put together a systematic analysis of the whole field in which I said, here are the set of assumptions about, you know, what democracy is and how democracy comes about. Here's the assistance response, here are the different areas of it, here's how it's carried out, here's how it's evaluated, etc.

So I tried to write a book that would just define the whole field. And, it was called *Aiding Democracy Abroad, The Learning Curve*. And I chose the second half of that title, The Learning Curve, for kind of purposely, slightly ambiguous. You could say on the one hand, that's good, learning. On the other hand, you say, wait a minute, learning curve. We know what we're doing. What do you mean, learning curve? And I said, no, we're on a learning curve, I put it. I tried to strike a balance between being critical and supportive.

And, so that book was a step forward, I think, for myself, in that I really got deeply into the field from a lot of different perspectives, and spent a lot of time talking to people in a lot of different places. Hundreds and hundreds of people in these different countries, using different languages I speak, and trying to really immerse myself. I also paired up with a number of researchers who specialized in those regions, and went with them to the countries. I worked with local people who helped me in the countries, with my contacts, or with research, accompanying me to interviews in some cases. It was a, you know, it was a fairly big effort.

And that, I think, helped create a body of analysis for the field, which was, you know, I used to think of it as, like, a big snow field. A lot of snow had fallen, and that's sort of the world out there, and all these people had decided to sort of cross the field of democratization, and were sort of marching through the snow, and there were no paths in the snow. Nobody really knew where... how you were supposed to do this and where it was going. I was trying to, I guess, I don't know, stamp out a path, you know, and sort of say, looks like we're going this way for these reasons, and maybe it's taking you there, because probably, you know, this sounds simplistic, but a fundamental insight that drove me throughout the 1990s was this sense of when people went from established Western democracies outside of their countries to other places and arrived there and said, we're here to promote democracy, they had one central methodology, which is, they would arrive in that country and sort of look at what they saw, what they assumed to be the key institutions of democracy. Parties, electoral commissions, parliaments, and so forth. Judiciaries, in some cases civic organizations, free press, etc, or press.

And they would look at the institutions and say, hmm, you're not like the institution in our country. In our country, the judiciary has kind of, you know, nice offices, and the judges use this software to do things, and they make decisions according to this basis, and yours doesn't look like that. And so, in your Parliament, it's different. You don't have committees like we do, and this, and they would look at the institutions and see how they were different, and think, we need to make your institutions look like our institutions, or at least, quote, "better."

And so, there was what I called institutional modeling, or reproduction of endpoints, in which you don't really think about the theory of change, you just think about, that's where we want to be. And your theory of change is simply training. "Gee, the judges in this country are quite corrupt,

and they keep taking money. So we'll have some seminars on, you know, judicial corruption and why it's a bad thing." Or "the parliamentarians here are spending not enough time debating, and so we'll have some seminars on how do you really debate a law and consider it," so forth.

It sounds simplistic, but a lot of it was. It was sort of, we will train them to be like us. I know that sounds... they would probably... some people in the assistance community would resist that a bit and say, come on, it wasn't that simple, but at the core was the idea of "we are this way, you are that way, we are going to make you more [like us]."

The problem with that, of course, first is the assumption of we're there, and we have something that needs to be reproduced elsewhere, and that has got to be more and more questionable over the years as democracies in the West began to fray.

But more... very importantly, the theory of change was very troubled. Because the problem was that training wouldn't solve the underlying problems. I remember, you know, working with some... going to visit some journalist training programs in Africa during the late 1990s, and I was talking with very journalists, and I said, you know, these are interesting programs. They come and they teach us how to do investigative reporting. And they bring in some really valiant investigative reporters from France, or the United States, or wherever, and teach us about it. Well, we actually kind of know how to do investigative reporting. But the problem is, when we do it, our bosses call us and say, you are offending some important people, stop doing that.

So we kind of know what to do, but we can't do it because the ownership structure of the media is deeply embedded with the business community, which is embedded with the government, which is, you know, not very tolerant of opposition. And so you can keep training us, but we're not the problem. The problem is somewhere up there.

But democracy aid would tend to reach a certain level of a problem. Similarly with a judge, I remember a judge in Guatemala coming out of a seminar on how to be a good judge. And he says, well, to me, kind of sarcastically, In Spanish at the time, he says, "I never knew that taking money is a bad thing. I guess I should stop doing that."

And it's like, he knows that. He doesn't need training to tell them it, but there's a reason he's taking the money. First of all, his salary is abysmal because they don't fund the judiciary properly. Secondly, he's under a lot of pressure that if he makes a controversial decision, some scary or important person calls him and says, bad decision, you're going to regret it. So his problem, again, wasn't his particular level, even though, of course, it can be developed, like, true with any judge, but the structures of power.

And so the problem was that the theory of change, of training, didn't really get at how do you change the structures of power, which comes more from the agency of pro-democratic actors in society who challenge entrenched structures of power.

Now, democracy providers, you know, began to realize that over the years, as they saw their programs often kind of bouncing off problems, like political party assistance, for 20, 30, 40 years has trained people in political parties to be different, but political parties continue to be very poorly respected in most parts of the world, and very troubled organizations. You can train, train, train. Something else is not right, whether it's the legal structures of the parties, the economic incentives of parties, broader political interests in the country, and so forth.

So that has been an underlying theme of my work throughout, is how do you get beyond the superficial to the profound? And I think the assistance committee is very interested in that, because they are serious people, but it's very hard for democracy assistance to do that, because doing that brings you into confrontation with structures of power that don't want you to do that.

And so 20 years into it, you know, 15, 20 years into it, in the mid-2000s, there began to be this growing pushback against democracy assistance. It started in Russia, but also Ethiopia and Venezuela in the mid-2000s, of kicking out assistance programs, making NGOs unable to accept foreign funding, because we want these foreigners funding our NGOs, and so forth.

And power holders in many places began saying, we don't want you in our country doing this. We have other plans for this country, and they don't include your program. And the assistance community was designed to be a friendly partner for democratic reformers, but the world started going in a direction in which there were fewer and fewer democratic reformers and a lot more backsliding leaders who were working against this assistance. And so, an assistance domain designed to be a partner in positive momentum, has had over the last 20 years, with significant difficulty, had to convert itself to be something that challenges power much more and is often conflictive with incoming governments and so forth.

So I've tried in the latter years to work on that issue. I had built out my work from *Aiding Democracy Abroad*. I'd followed up with some specific parts of the puzzle. I'd done a book on political party assistance, looking at party assistance. I did a book on promoting the rule of law, which I thought was a very important domain. I did a book on civil society assistance, I did some regional books, I did one on the Middle East, so I sort of developed it as far as it could go by the mid-2000s, around 2004, [2005, 2006].

And then in this latter phase, in the last 20 years, I worked much more on the problem of backsliding and how democracy aid, you know, runs into, structures of power and what it does about them. And I've also tried to link up the field of democracy aid with the field of development aid, because I was always puzzled over the years how within, like, an organization like USAID, you'd have a democracy office, then over here you'd have socioeconomic development, and the two just often didn't meet.

And it took 20 years from the mid-1980s to the early 2000s for people to start saying, wait a minute, we really need to integrate political aid with socioeconomic aid much more. So that led

to a book I published in the early 2010s: *Development Aid Confronts Politics: The Almost Revolution*.

Another ambivalent title, like *The Learning Curve*, *The Almost Revolution*, meaning connecting development aid with politics will be a very important advance. If it's done, it's potentially a revolution, but it's almost because it's having trouble taking hold.

So in short, I've tried to sort of keep expanding, keep building, move with the times as you see what the challenges are. You're both sort of leading and following at the same time in this kind of analytic work. And of course, I built a team over the years and expanded for the first 10 or 15 years. It's pretty much just me working on these issues at Carnegie, but gradually began to build a team. I've had some tremendous colleagues, like Rachel Kleinfeld, Richard Youngs in Europe, who's done fantastic work on European democracy support, Saskia Brechenmacher, who started with me as a research assistant, has become a real powerhouse researcher in her own right on gender issues and so forth, and some others, Steven Feldstein and Frances Brown, Oliver Stuenkel, some really great colleagues working with me, and we've tried to build this into an endeavor.

I've been a little surprised, and I guess I'd say disappointed over the years, that the academic community of comparative political specialists has not really taken up this topic as much as I thought they would. There's some work, some good academics who work on this, but I came to see over the years that the academic community is just somewhat apart from the world of policies. They often don't really know much about the programs. They're often not that interested in learning more about them. And they're often caught up in their own theoretical constructs or methodological debates in a way that they're not... I sort of started with simple questions, like, what are you doing, and does it seem to be having the effects that you hope it does, and what other effects is it having, and why? Pretty simple questions, whereas academics would come and start with a framework and a theory and say, is this more structure? Is this agency? Is this this? Is this this? And I felt they weren't taking the subject in a more naturalistic, anthropological way, but instead projecting upon it some of their own frameworks, which I have felt over the years is not always that fruitful.

So, there's some good work, particularly Stanford. The CDDRL [Center on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law] at Stanford has done some terrific work, and various individual researchers at different universities. But it has remained a kind of a niche area, despite the expanse of work on democracy support around the world. Incredible range of interesting questions in this area that I think still remain to be explored.

So the field is going through a hard time right now, both because of the situation in the world, which is daunting for democracy supporters, also because of the situation in the United States, as well as some other Western democracies, where democratic norms and institutions are being shaken by leaders who question them and call them into doubt in different ways, and are backing away, in the case of the United States, from a commitment to democracy support.

So the field is in a troubled time. But I don't think it's going away. This is a profound area of human endeavor, and as long as there are people who are suffering politically, who are repressed, who are, you know, politically marginalized, excluded, and so forth, they will be struggling for a greater voice, and I think they will find allies and partners elsewhere, so we just have to continue to keep trying to understand how to make that a fruitful match.

Thanks for listening, I hope it's been interesting. I've enjoyed the chance to reflect a bit on a 30 or 40 [year] run of work in this field, and I hope it's been useful to you.