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The ideal

By Richard W. Rahn

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Is it possible, within our children's lifetimes, to have a world where war and state sponsored terrorism is very remote? The answer is not only yes, but we are much closer to that ideal than most people think.

A truly peaceful world can only be and will be a world where virtually everyone lives under a regime reasonably close to being a free market capitalist democracy. Utopian, you say? I say not. Look at the evidence. First, we know democratic nations virtually never wage war on each other, particularly if their people have a middle income or higher standard of living.

President Bush has been ridiculed and criticized by many on the left and the right for saying he wants to help bring democracy to the Middle East and the rest of the world. Many libertarians as well as statisticians say it is none of our business how others are governed, and even if it were our business, there is not much we can do about it. In fact, we can and must promote democratic capitalism because there is no other choice if we want to retain both our liberty and our fortunes. In a world where relatively small numbers of people will be able to acquire and utilize weapons of mass destruction, isolationism and noninvolvement are not solutions, only recipes for disaster.

Is it possible for the whole world to become democratic? According to Freedom House, in 1900 there were only 25 countries accounting for 19.2 percent of the world's population that could even be considered limited democracies. By the year 2000 the number of restricted and true democracies had grown to 126 countries, accounting for 70.8 percent of the world's population. Almost all of the previously fascist and most of the communist countries have become or are rapidly becoming free market, democratic states.

Virtually every country in North and South America, with the exception of Cuba, has at least become semi-free market and semi-democratic. It is true there are a few countries like Venezuela that are retrogressing, but the situation is far better in the Americas than a few years ago. The only totally nondemocratic state left in Europe is Belarus.

Most of the countries of Southeast Asia are now functioning, free-market democracies.

The remaining holdouts are most of the countries in the Middle East, many countries in central Asia, and roughly half of Africa. China is the biggest nondemocratic country, but

as it increasingly moves toward being a capitalist middle-income society, pressures build to make it increasingly democratic. There are no nations with a high per capita income, other than a couple of oil-rich nations, that have not become democracies.

As countries become richer, their populations demand more democracy and freedom. South Korea and Taiwan are two examples of successful economic states that became democratic, and an optimist can see China moving in the same direction. As India increasingly becomes a high-growth country by shedding its socialism, its next door rival, Pakistan, will also be forced to reform or lose the competitive race.

Compared to capitalism, all the other "isms," like socialism and communism, are economic failures, and ultimately the successful model should prevail with a little encouragement. Many nations once poor are rapidly becoming middle-income societies, as they move toward protecting private property and free markets. Poverty is rapidly diminishing worldwide.

Winston Churchill once said, "Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others." And he was right. Totalitarian, authoritarian and theocratic systems are increasingly doomed to fail in a world where governments no longer can monopolize information.

The challenge for any American government (and our allies around the globe) is to spur the remaining minority of low-income, nondemocracies to make the necessary changes before they or bands of their own citizens engage in some sort of suicidal behavior that may kill tens of thousands or millions.

Our debate should not be about whether we export democracy, civil liberties, the protection of private property, free markets, free trade, and nonoppressive tax and regulatory regimes to the rest of the world, but how we do so. Unfortunately, we do not have the luxury of time to obtain change in countries like North Korea and Iran, as well as places like Saudi Arabia, which, while not being overtly hostile, are unstable time bombs.

Those who claim to be practical by saying we either cannot do or should not do anything to accelerate change in the nondemocratic states are putting us more at risk. They are fleeing from making the tough choices about how we accelerate change before many of us are dead.

George Bush is not being idealistic when he says the rest of the world must become democratic (and more free market capitalist). He is being realistic as there is no other choice.

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