Center for Strategic and International Studies

CSIS-TCU Schieffer Series

“Democracy Promotion and America’s Global Leadership”

Introduction and Moderator:
H. Andrew Schwartz,
Chief Communications Officer,
CSIS

Featuring:
Daniel Twining,
President,
International Republican Institute

Derek Mitchell,
President,
National Democratic Institute

Moderator:
Susan Glasser.
Staff Writer,
The New Yorker

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H. ANDREW SCHWARTZ: Good evening and welcome to the Center for Strategic and International Studies. I know that we don’t see Bob Schieffer here. I just want to tell you, Bob is OK, but he asked me to pass on the following. Yesterday Bob underwent a successful medical procedure to reopen a blocked artery. All went as expected. He feels great today. And he has, again, found reason to be amazed and appreciative of the advances in medical science and its practitioners and expects to be back at full speed very shortly. So Bob sends his regrets tonight. But we’re very fortunate that the wonderful Susan Glasser has agreed to step in for Bob. Susan was going to be a panelist, as you know, but we figured who better to lead us here than Susan. So, thank you to Susan for doing this. This is – you’re a real trooper for doing this.

I’m Andrew Schwartz, in case you didn’t know. I’m the chief communications officer at CSIS, and with Bob have been hosting the Schieffer Series for the past several years – more than several years. We’re very grateful to the Stavros Niarchos Foundation for the support of this series. And we’re extremely grateful to the Schieffer School of Journalist at TCU, Bob’s alma mater, for working with us. And go Frogs, that’s right. And we’re so happy to have all of you here tonight for this terrific and timely discussion. With that, I refer the panel to Susan. Thank you.

SUSAN GLASSER: Thank you. (Applause.) Well, thank you. (Off mic.) OK. All right. Is this – there you go. All right. Mic’s on.

Well, I will do my very best. I don’t have a Bob Schieffer impression to offer you. They assure me that he is doing well, so that’s good news. But I have to say, I’m delighted to be here tonight, either in a moderating or a participating capacity, mostly because I’m really looking forward to hearing what our two guests this evening have to say. I can’t think of a more timely conversation in many ways.

And so, you know, I won’t belabor it with long introductions, but to my right here is Dan Twining, who is the president of the IRI, the International Republican Institute. We can talk a lot more about what that means. He – also, I’ve known him, at least his work, for a long time. He is a contributor to Foreign Policy starting from when I was the editor. So I’m delighted to get a chance to talk with him in person. And to my left is Ambassador Derek Mitchell, who is the new – as of one month ago – president of the National Democratic Institute, NDI. And we can talk a little bit about the history of these organizations.

But I – again, I can’t think of a more timely conversation in many ways to be having. I was just thinking, well, what should I write about this week? And I thought, well, how about Trump’s foreign policy, and what is the role of democracy and human rights anymore? And, you know, it’s a conversation, in some ways, we’ve been having, far predating certainly Donald Trump, but I think it’s one that has been made more acute over the last couple of years as we all wrestle with the question of what is an America first foreign policy, what is the role of the United States in the world, you know. Are we – have we lost the animating spirit that created these two institutions? Both of them were founded in 1983 – I believe that’s right – in the first Reagan administration.

There is a certain sense that, you know, this mission has outlived the Cold War that created these institutions. They are both operating, as you will hear, all over the world, but really a sense that, at a time where we’re all wondering, well, what is the future direction of American foreign policy in the post-9/11 era. That’s the question that each of you – that you are wrestling with – can help up answer a little bit, the question of what is the American role in the world going to be.
So I’m really delighted to be with both of you this evening. I thought I would start out, given the day’s headlines, with a quote from your speaker at your annual dinner this year, the IRI annual dinner, who was one Nikki Haley, at the time and still ambassador to the United Nations, at least for a couple more months.

She said – and she was talking about the United Nations, but it certainly applies more generally, you know, that all countries, in her view, are not the same. When you try to pretend that there is no difference between the good guys and the bad guys, that’s always a win for the bad guys.

I was thinking about that as we listened to her boss, President Trump, at the U.N. General Assembly just a couple of weeks ago, turn to the rest of the world and say America is no longer in the lecturing-you business, you know, and we are not going to be telling you what kind of government you should have, what kind of religion you should have. You know, we are – we want you to respect our sovereignty and we’ll respect yours – a very different set of messages, and right there are the two poles of the debate.

Dan, how much does that affect, you know, your and all of our ability to project any kind of American vision for democracy in the world right now?

MR. TWINING: Thank you, Susan. I’m delighted to be here with Derek and all of you, and we have a lot to talk about – (laughter) – so I’m not going to do it all in the first segment.

Look, in 1983, the National Endowment for Democracy was established, including the core institutes of IRI and NDI, the party institutes, and Reagan, in 1982, had given a speech in Westminster, England, at the height of a very dark period in the Cold War when the rivalry with the Soviet Union was very intense and aggressive – on the Soviet side at least – and Reagan said, look, the way we are going to win this battle is not with guns and bombs; it is through a contest of wills and ideals. We think the democratic system is a superior model to Soviet totalitarianism, and we have faith that helping people to be free everywhere will show that that is true. We have something that people want that the Soviet Union does not.

Now fast-forward to today. This is still true, right? Around the world, everywhere I go in the world, people want less corrupt governments, they want to have a voice and a choice. They want to have a future for their children. They don’t want to have policemen come and knock on their door in the night for something they put out on social media or said in a meeting.

We are working in something like 90 countries around the world because there is a demand for an ideal that America embodies. People do not want the American model, right, so this is not actually about American politics, or who is president, or anything else – which party is in charge. What people want are the rudiments that we have, the foundation stones.

I would like to make a link to the founding fathers because it’s easy to say, gosh, it’s a messy world out there. You guys were set up in the Cold War; is this still relevant? Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, George Washington were obsessed with the threat to America’s little, tiny democracy, the 13 colonies. They were obsessed with the threat to American democracy in a world of authoritarian powers; that a free society, the only democratic republic in the world, could not exist in a world that was hostile to democratic principles and republican – small r – principles. And George Washington’s speech against foreign entanglements was not, I would argue, a plea for isolationism and head-in-the-sandism; it was, in fact, an acute concern that foreign authoritarian influence – foreign meddling in
America’s democracy – would end the American democratic experiment. And so I think that’s a timeless insight. I mean, I think there are a lot of other timeless insights in this work but we know for a fact – and I will conclude here – we know that America is safer when the world is more free.

We know that democracies do not go out and fight each other. They do not spawn the kind of extremism that we saw on 9/11. They do not produce the uncontrolled mass migration that we’ve seen out of countries like Syria and Venezuela that have so destabilized their regions and beyond. So there is a very compelling national interest test, I would argue, to the work that we do.

MS. GLASSER: Well, I want to bring Derek into this. I must say, though, that is a very, it seems to me, uncontroversial statement of principles except that it isn’t necessarily at the moment shared by the leadership of the country. So we could talk about that.

MR. TWINING: IRI and NDI have been in business for 35 years. I mean, presidents have come and gone.

MS. GLASSER: Right. That’s right.

MR. TWINING: Right. Our work – our budgets, our staff, our resources, our reach has grown during those 35 years and it’s not actually been tied to a given administration or a given leader.

MS. GLASSER: Well, that’s a really important point and, in fact, I want to bring you in on this, Derek. I know you’re new to NDI. But, you know, the interesting thing, right, is that both these organizations have often worked together, have grown in tandem. Do you see any effect from the, you know, sort of growing partisanship of American foreign policy? Or are you still – you know, is there still a coherent relatively nonpartisan vision of this work that you two are able to produce?

MR. MITCHELL: I absolutely think there’s a nonpartisan vision – a bipartisan vision and nonpartisan vision here and it’s represented by us being on the stage together and in fact it’s one – we made an agreement, because we’re all friends, that this will be one small bipartisan cell of cooperation that we can create in Washington or around the country, because this is something that transcends politics, and I would agree with Dan that it has for some time.

We’re seeing it even now, this administration notwithstanding and, I would say, senior leadership of this administration notwithstanding. If you look on Capitol Hill, you see a very strong bipartisan support on both sides. So regardless of who’s in the majority, who’s in the minority, they are passing budgets regardless of what any particular administration says, including this one, who wanted to slash democracy work greatly. It got to the Hill and both sides said, well, thank you for your interest in national security; we’re going to put all this money back in and even add some money to it because it is important for American interests and it’s something that both parties agree on.

Let me just extend as well on what Dan said. I think what he said as a foundation is extremely important about where we came from, what we’re about, and its roots in American history. Let me also, though, say this is not simply an American thing. We’re an American established organization. But you had mentioned America or, I think, President Trump talking about lecturing – we’re not going to lecture others. We agree with that. We are not lecturing others. What we do is sharing experiences of democratic practice around the world. And, in fact, I just came back from the Middle East and North Africa in Tunisia and the people that represent NDI in the countries in
that region come from Canada, the Netherlands, Romania, Bulgaria. They are leading our operation because they are representing democratic values globally.

So, yes, it’s headquartered in the United States but the work that we do is done in partnership with people all over the world of every nationality because they see that this is something that affirms their voice, affirms their sovereignty – that what we do is not about American foreign policy imposing ourselves onto a process to try to make it reflect America. We’re allowing – we feel that we’re confident enough if people have a voice, if people have ability to shape their own future and determine their own futures, it’ll be a much more stable society internally and that will affirm American interest, even if some individual decisions that they make are not in American interest sometimes. We just have to accept that, and our foreign policy will deal with those decisions. But our institutions are not – certainly, not NDI – about a particular outcome. It’s about working with anyone that affirms a commitment to American democratic institution(s), democratic process, and we want to help spread that through sharing of experiences – a vast number of experiences worldwide.

MS. GLASSER: So let’s turn our gaze outward for a second to, you know, putting aside what is or isn’t happening in terms of American foreign policy. There’s a lot of people here and around the world who are concerned that there is a broader crisis of democracy taking place, I think.

MR. MITCHELL: Yeah.

MS. GLASSER: Freedom House has said that, you know, every year for the last almost dozen years you’ve, in fact, seen a regression in the number of countries that are rated as free. And, you know, this is certainly not what many of us expected at the end of the Cold War. Maybe it wasn’t the end of history, but certainly there seemed to be a march toward democracy. Now we are talking about the rise of a new authoritarianism. We’re talking about threats even inside Eastern and Central Europe, to democracy inside the EU itself. Do both of you perceive that there is actually a sort of broader democratic crisis occurring? Do you see that these phenomenon – do you connect them, or do you see them as individual problem spots?

MR. TWINING: So I don’t see a democratic crisis. I see authoritarians fighting back and a lot of authoritarian learning. Look at digital tools. Look at how a country like China is using digital technologies invented to help sustain what we thought would be a more open world to surveil its citizens and repress dissent in its society, and to export that model. So authoritarians are fighting back. There’s a lot of authoritarian learning.

Democracies are uniquely vulnerable to foreign interference because we have an open system, right? And you’ve seen it not just in the United States. You’ve seen it in Latin America. You’ve seen it all across Europe. You’ve seen it further afield. Democracies need to think much smarter, I think, about how to protect ourselves.

The mission we all have is not simply to help more people, more countries be democratic; it is to help democracies succeed. There is also a problem of democratic performance. Democracy in many countries is underperforming, right? We can maybe go into that more, but it’s underperforming in many countries. You’ve also seen strongmen hollow out democratic institutions in countries like Turkey and Hungary and elsewhere.

So the work of democracy is never done. There is always going to be a contest between authoritarian forms and more democratic models. We’ve seen some recent successes in Armenia, in
the Maldives, in Malaysia. I would argue that for every setback you can point to a case where there’s been a step forward for human freedom.

MS. GLASSER: Do you agree with that view? I mean, a lot of people are talking about the crisis in democracy right now? I like to have somebody whose glass is metaphorically half-full in the conversation, but –

MR. MITCHELL: Well, I want to make sure – I agree with Dan, but there’s no place for complacency. I mean, certainly you can say, well, these things – waves go out, waves come in, and this’ll work itself out. You know, if the arc of – the moral arc of the universe bends towards justice, it needs to help – get some help in bending. And that’s what I think many of us can do in the democratic world, is help bend that in the right direction because there are populists that are preying on fear.

I mean, the fact is democracies have to deliver. Any political system has to deliver for its people. And at the end of the Cold War there was this triumphant moment. Everyone figured, OK, moving towards democracy, it’s an inexorable tide out for democracy. But you can change a government, you can even change processes, but mindsets change much more slowly. Old guards are still there. Old systems are still there. Old ways of doing things are still there, and change doesn’t happen that quickly with oligarchs and old interests remaining.

So people expected to see better results and they’re not seeing it from their government. So, when they don’t see it, they want change. And so you see in Brazil folks saying I don’t like this guy at all, he may be a nutcase, but I want change. (Laughs.) I just want to see something different. And that populism, that preying on fear, that insecurity that people have, that sense of identity – lost identity because of multiculturalism or return to nationalism – a pernicious nationalism, these are things that you certainly see trends in the world that have to be addressed, I think, frontally, and demonstrate why going that route, that divisive route, will actually make you less secure, less safe, less stable than going a different, more democratic and open route.

But folks who have not seen democracy deliver will then raise questions. Why do we continue voting in the same old, same old? We’re going to go for something extreme because why not? And once you do that, those guys can chip away at the institutions, which you’ve seen in Hungary and you’re seeing in Poland and you’re seeing in the Philippines. And Venezuela is a perfect example, of course, of a place that went far leftist and is just destroyed, refugees and all the rest.

So it is a dangerous time. There’s no doubt about it. And we have to be quite careful and creative on how we address it.

MS. GLASSER: But just to – just to drill down on that, you see all these things happening. For many people that adds up to a narrative of a moment when democracy is in reverse or in decline in areas where it was previously advancing. And I guess the question is, well, A, what is the role of a U.S.-led institution in countering that? You called it the authoritarians are fighting back. You know, what is – what do each of you see as the role of your institution in countering that? Are you focused on the stronger authoritarians – on Russia and China, for example? Or do you focus more on the places where there’s still, you know, a live tension or a fight that’s ongoing between the forces of democracy and democratization and those of reaction?

MR. TWINING: I mean, we’re – you know, I think the way – we’re not really keeping score maybe in the way that would fit easily into an answer to your question. In some places we’re helping
collectively to empower young people to have a voice in politics. In some places, we’re helping to advance women’s role in political life. In some places we are working on strategies to prevent violent extremism, by helping citizens connect with governments. In some places, we are working on citizen security so that desperate people aren’t fleeing societies where law and order has collapsed. In some places, we are helping them build political resilience against foreign authoritarian influence, so that countries can be truly sovereign to make their own choices, right? And the work is not ever going to be done. So I don’t think there’s a – there’s not a score card of kind of autocracies and democracies and we’re keeping score, because it’s a little messy everywhere.

MS. GLASSER: Well, that’s the truth, isn’t it? Let me ask quickly, just to follow up on that, when you look at, you know, the resurgent nationalism and also authoritarian powers looking beyond, you know, their borders – especially Russia and China right now – what do you see as the role of U.S.-led institutions in, you know, fostering democracy inside their borders? Are we back to an era of supporting dissidents in those countries? Increasingly it appears there are the kind of crackdowns that we would find very familiar from the Cold War era inside both Russia and China today. And then also, related to that, you know, you’ve seen in particular from Vladimir Putin both particular animus toward your organizations, but also a sense that American democracy promotion is just a false flag. It’s not different than Russian intervention in our election.

MR. TWINING: It’s nothing like – (laughter) –

MS. GLASSER: Just to be clear.

MR. TWINING: American support for democrats in the world. I mean, Derek can speak very eloquently to this. Maybe I could just start by saying what we are trying to do really is work with local partners in countries where we are invited in to level the playing field so that there is real political competition. And so that people feel empowered to have a voice and a role in selecting their leaders and what kind of country they will live in. So we are working to promote pluralism. We are working to encourage inclusivity. I would argue that the Kremlin – by the way, our work – we’re NGOs, right? This work is not being done by a government. The Kremlin’s operations are rather different. They are – they are state-directed intelligence service-led operations to polarize, to subvert, to divide, to internally weaken, to confound democratic outcomes. And there’s nothing similar about those two cases.

MS. GLASSER: And you – by the way, just to be clear for the audience, both of your organizations used to be operating in Moscow and are no longer. Is that correct?

MR. MITCHELL: Yes.

MR. TWINNING: Correct.

MS. GLASSER: Yeah, when I was there, you know, we worked closely with, you know, your representatives on the ground, but –

MR. MITCHELL: Yeah. I mean, we couldn’t be in a hundred countries in the past 35 years if we didn’t build up good faith and trust with these countries, with these governments, and have a reputation. I mean, it’s a difference between transparent assistance and shadowy subversion. It’s about – fundamentally about good faith or bad faith, and whether you want to unite or assist or divide a country. And we’re interested in process, not outcomes. I mean, the outcome is not – has nothing to
do with what we do. We’re simply about building capacity of people to have a transparent process of debate and discussion, institutionalization and inclusion of women, of youth, of anybody to be involved in the political process during a democratic transition.

And people can judge by the – by the work that we do whether it’s worthwhile or not worthwhile. But we’re up here talking about it. We have – you know, we’re talking about it on websites. We’re very transparent inside the country. We talk to governments. We talk to civil society. It is nothing like a Russian effort that is all about finding ways to divide and confound the process. So I think there are some folks who – I mean, certainly the Russians want to confuse on this point.

I find sometimes people in Washington want to make what looks like a very eloquent, you know, point that, oh, yeah, we’re doing the same thing as the Russians, and I find that to be a kind of lazy kind of – what’s the word?

MR. GLASSER: Whataboutism.

MR. MITCHELL: Whataboutism, yeah. Or, you know, a lazy – well, anyway, I can’t think of the word.

MR. TWINING: Can I just make one – a quick point on this?

MS. GLASSER: Yeah.

MR. TWINING: H.R. McMaster, when he was national security adviser, had a very nice line of phrase where he said, look, America’s objective is to help countries preserve their own sovereignty, preserve and protect their own sovereignty. We want to live in a world where countries are free to make their own choices. And I think if you look at Russian subversion in Ukraine or assaults on electoral politics across Europe and in the United States, protecting those countries’ sovereignty, again, is the antithesis of what the Kremlin model is about.

MR. MITCHELL: And imposing democracy is an oxymoron. I mean, right? (Laughter.) I mean, you can’t impose – I mean, the Iraq War, unfortunately, I think poisoned the well for many people, that that was democracy promotion. I was – I worked for NDI 20 years ago. I just came back a month ago. And I – as I watched that from afar, I thought, oh, goodness, how can NDI and IRI do its work now? Because it’s now being wrapped up in something aggressive and, you know, violent. And that’s not what NDI and IRI are about, and that’s not what democracy support work, really its foundation, is. It’s about working with others and try to support them in their own goals for themselves.

MS. GLASSER: I want to ask quickly about a case study that you have been involved with over the last few years that has sort of seemed to go kind of dramatically in the wrong direction.

MR. MITCHELL: Tunisia? (Laughter.)

MS. GLASSER: Well, not Tunisia.

MR. MITCHELL: I know what you’re going to – (laughter) –
MS. GLASSER: You know what I’m going to ask about. Ambassador Mitchell was our first ambassador to Myanmar under President Obama, when we reopened relations with them. And it appeared at the time to be a great example of democratization and a country that was moving away from military-led rule, and even – I believe controversially somewhat inside the Obama administration even led to a presidential visit.

MR. MITCHELL: Two.

MS. GLASSER: Two visits, that’s right, with the leaders. We now have, obviously, this unfolding tragedy with the Rohingya. What can you tell us that’s relevant to your new role, you know, in understanding how democracies work or don’t work from your experience with being ambassador to Myanmar?

MR. MITCHELL: Well, there’s a democracy part and there’s a Rohingya issue – the Rohingya issue. And I hate to set aside ethnic cleansing as if that doesn’t matter. But if we’re talking about democracy as democracy in Myanmar, I think one thing that’s absolutely critical to understand – it’s true about any country and it’s what I started with – is expectations management; that no single moment makes a democracy. That we – we knew that the election – the opening of the society, the opening of civil society, of freer media, and then an election in which Aung San Suu Kyi was the hope of the country – became, in effect, the leader – that was not the end of anything. That was not fundamental change. The constitution was the same. The structure of the society was the same. The role of the military was the same. The civil war that raged was the same. Nothing really changed except ownership of those problems in a very nascent process that was just beginning inside the country.

So I think people were looking maybe for a great moment and say – and then declare it a victory or declare it a success. I don’t think the Obama administration was thinking that way, but others on the outside as they observed what was going on I think got ahead of everything.

This is going to come slowly. I mean, these countries are very complex. Every country is very complex, with complex dynamics. And I think we all – and this goes to what happened in the 1990s. And people, as you say, had expectations, expected things to just go smoothly. I think our expectations need to be managed, that these things are going to go out and back and out and back, and it’s never done, as Dan said. Even in the United States, 240 years, it’s never done. And when you have countries that are very diverse, with histories – very complex histories, they’re going to have to deal with those fundamental systemwide structures. And unless we understand those complexities, we’re going to get out ahead of ourselves and declare victory too soon.

MS. GLASSER: So you think that’s what’s happened in the case of Myanmar?

MR. MITCHELL: I think it’s always been a very difficult case in Myanmar. I think it was a necessary but not sufficient moment to have the elections they did. They have a long road ahead, but I think they truly want change. Now, I’m not dealing with the Rohingya issue, but just wanting change to open the society. And it’s going to be a struggle.

MS. GLASSER: So that’s interesting. So you actually are drawing a distinction and saying that you don’t believe that what’s happening there represents the end of this trajectory toward democratization?
Mr. Mitchell: No, I don’t. I don’t think it’s ever ended. I think the people want to have a free voice. People want to have development. They want a government that delivers for them. They don’t want to go back to a military dictatorship. And they are better off than they were eight years ago, overall. The best line was someone in 2013 or 2014 in Mandalay who said: Nothing here has changed. But we don’t want to go back to the way it used to be. (Laughter.) And that encapsulates that fundamentally nothing had really changed, but yet a lot had changed. The atmosphere had changed. There was now more ability to express oneself and more opportunities for people. And it’s just going to happen much slower than we would like it to.

Ms. Glasser: So, Dan, I – the benefit of having both of you is you’re both longtime Asia hands and Asianists. So I’m curious if you also have thoughts on Myanmar. And then also wanted to ask you about what’s happening with North and South Korea over the last year. Obviously we’re still seeing that diplomacy play out. We don’t know the outcome. But I am struck by the fact that you have in South Korea one of the world’s greatest examples of rapid, you know, political and economic transformation going, and in particular democratization in recent years.

Putting aside the issue of whether or not Kim Jong-un is ever going to denuclearize, I’ve always wondered – and I feel like we could all benefit from your wisdom here – South Korea’s pursuing right now a policy of, you know, much more accommodation, looking for ways to work with the North Koreans. They’re both talking about not necessarily reunification. Is it even possible or realistic? Is there a model that you can think of to help us understand how you could have two systems that appear so different that could come to a real accommodation? I mean, you know, is it just, like, willful naivete? Can we – have we learned something from the reintegration of East and West Germany? I mean, is it crazy to think that a democracy like South Korea could somehow get back together at some point in our lifetimes with a place like North Korea?

Mr. Twinning: So I think we should stretch the imagination. I’m not an optimist about North Korea.

Ms. Glasser: (Laughs.) OK.

Mr. Twinning: But I would recall that when the National Endowment for Democracy was established, South Korea was a military dictatorship that actually pursued dissidents abroad and was rather a nasty place, right? Look at South Korea today. It’s one of the most extraordinary stories of democratic prosperity in Asia. South Korea’s a very – is a rich country, right? We talk about the Asian tigers. Most – I mean, South Korea’s, like, five times richer than China per capita. It is a real accomplishment.

And I think part of what is drawing Kim Jong-un’s interest is, without psychoanalyzing him, is that in fact North Korea needs a little of that. The North Korean economic model is failing, right? The Chinese have told the North Korean regime that it need to modernize. That’s part of it. I would argue that we will never enjoy a normal relationship or enjoy peace with a country that has millions of its own people imprisoned, whether literally or metaphorically, that suffers from a cult of personality, that is a – really the last vestige of totalitarianism in the world today.

I will also just point out that the South Korean government – actually, there are lots of really compelling North Korean defector groups. I met some at the National Endowment for Democracy a few months ago. I met them in Seoul as well on a visit. There are these wonderful North Koreans who have gotten out, and who are thinking about how to help their brethren in North Korea, and if that
country should begin to open what role they can play in helping that country. And the South Korean government actually has stopped supporting those groups in the quest for peace with the North. And I would say that really gets it backwards.

MS. GLASSER: Well, it’s – I just – I’m glad you brought that up, because I do think it’s one of the most fascinating examples of here you have, one the one hand, one of your best-case studies in the world of a move toward democracy, and yet it’s hard to imagine how that withstands, you know, this neighbor next door.

OK, I know it’s harder to know how to talk about, but let’s turn our gaze back for a second here to the United States. Senator John McCain was a long-time patron, you know, and probably the person most associated publicly with IRI. What does it mean for your institution to have lost your champion and, you know, someone who, more than anyone else, was identified with it? What do you think it means for the future of Republican foreign policy?

MR. TWINING: So Senator McCain was quite interesting because he understood the human quest for freedom because he had been denied his own freedom in prison in Vietnam. He understood it very personally, what it means to be abused by an authoritarian overlord in very personal terms.

He also was interesting because really he was a national security hawk, right? I mean, he really had – he was a military man through and through, from a family of military men, but he understood that the truest source of security was to live in a world where people were free; that no number of nuclear weapons, or fighter jets, or aircraft carriers could compensate for the democratic peace that existed, for instance – that has existed in the transatlantic space since 1989.

So I think it’s very compelling that he cared so much about these issues, and he didn’t just care about them where they were strategically significant in big, important countries like Ukraine. I can attest – I worked for him and went around the world with him too many times – I can attest that he cared about it equally in really small countries like Georgia and Fiji. I mean, when I was working for him there was a coup in Fiji, and he got so outraged and exercised about it, and for months I felt like the desk officer for Fiji. (Laughter.) And I kept saying, Senator, we’re trying to cover the world here, right?

But this is the point – is that human freedom is not indivisible, and that if you care about these issues, you have to care about them everywhere, right, which doesn’t mean you are a messianic missionary zealot, but it means that you do what you can. Senator McCain, one of the last things he did before he left us was to help enlarge our board of directors at IRI. We have an amazing group of new directors at IRI, including Senator Dan Sullivan, who is chairman; including Marco Rubio; including Lindsey Graham; including H.R. McMaster; including Mitt Romney; and just a whole list of notables. And I know he left us feeling good about the next generation of political leadership and support for this work in the Congress.

MR. MITCHELL: Can I just add to that, though, as well, and you got a sense of Senator McCain’s idealism and his passion for this, and as I say, freedom should be granted to every individual; every human should have dignity. But it also is part of our strength. I think he recognized that for America, that believing in this, and pursuing this, and standing up for these rights is also – for lack of a better term – realist. I mean, it’s a real – has real power because people around the world can feel that America stands for something; that it is something different, that it stands for something greater than itself, and that has an attractive – that’s a self-power idea – the attractive quality.
I mean, one other element I missed on the Burma side that’s analogous to what we see everywhere – or many places – is they really want us to be engaged. When I was there they were so happy that we were there for them and that we were standing by them. They felt – and that’s what I think IRI and NDI can do overseas is show that we’re with you on this journey, that this is difficult, that you have folks that are rooting for you, that are helping work with you on this very difficult path. And that sense of that people are – you know, big country, big countries are there with you can also have a sense of – it gets their back up; I mean, it gives them a little bit of support and helps them on the way. I think that’s very important.

MS. GLASSER: Well, again, I mean, it’s interesting to hear, you know, both of you essentially, you know, offering us a – certainly very bipartisan – in the past we would have said, you know, really not a very controversial vision of American engagement in the world, and why it’s both in America’s interest and overseas. But, you know, if you look at the numbers recently, you know – the latest Pew Global Attitudes survey came out just last week – there is a crisis certainly of attitude, putting aside the question of, you know, the scorecard element of democracies in the world versus autocracies – there is a crisis of confidence in the United States, even among many of its closest allies, that it still represents the things that you both think it represents and are out there representing. And I guess the question is, you know, how much you feel that. You must feel that, I’m sure, on any trip that you make overseas – you know, you are asked, well, what is America’s commitment to the world. There are survey findings in Germany, in France, showing that there is more faith in Vladimir Putin or Xi Jinping at this moment in time to do the right thing in the world than there is in the leadership of our country or in a vision of our country. That has to be concerning to both of you, again, in a very nonpartisan way. It must affect your work in some changeable way.

MR. MITCHELL: Well, I don’t – that is a question we get all the time. If we talk about what we do, particularly here at home, the first question is or first statement is, why don’t you work here first – why are you going over there and helping democracy when we need it here at home. That’s kind of a half joking but maybe not half joking line.

Overseas, I’ve only made one trip – I’m going to be making a trip about every month – but my sense is they’re not necessarily thinking that. If we’re providing a service to them because they’re in need, they’re not going to care if Donald Trump says this or that or he represents this or that. They’re going to – they’re going to, you know, want to know if we can help them with what they’re facing.

At a foreign policy level, at a broader level, they may be concerned about the impact of America. But, you know, if I – when I was ambassador I would say very openly, look, we’re not lecturing you – we’re not telling you anything you don’t know. You can watch TV and see we have racial problems still – that we have ethnic and religious divisions in our country. You probably will too for as long as you exist. We’re not lecturing you.

What we’re trying to tell you is if you go down that route it’ll be worse for you – you’re weaker for that, just like we are weaker as a country for that – and learn the lessons from our experience that could benefit you. And the reason why it is in our interest to do that, first of all, it shows that we care about them, which I think then reflects back on America when we’re in a better position. Hopefully, we have other leadership that’s more interested, so we have a popularity – you know, popular interest in America. But also, you know, it creates for stable societies and we’re more than any single leadership or any single moment. This stuff, I think, is long term and it serves our interest for stability over the long term to promote these processes, these institutions, these mindsets beyond politics.
MS. GLASSER: Well, I mean, this is exactly the conversation we were having before the event, right. This is – this is your pitch as well.

MR. TWINING: It’s my pitch as well. This is why we don’t – you know, why we don’t have a one-man system – why we have all these institutions and free media and courts and a very strong Congress, and we can recommend that to all countries, right. That doesn’t just have to hold here. Look, I don’t think – if you think about America’s soft power – the magnetism of America in the world – I’m afraid it doesn’t come from our politicians. I mean, that might disappoint some people at the New Yorker but it doesn’t come from our politicians. It comes from what Tocqueville saw as the genius of our society, right – our immigrant culture, our sort of fierce civic pride, our prosperity, our optimism about the future. Americans are still very optimistic about the future of this country and I think we should be, too.

Gosh, it’s been a lot worse in the past. So I think we should sort of have some perspective here. That’s sort of – I think that’s how I would come at the question. But, really, when I travel – I mean, maybe people are just being polite, but they don’t want to talk about Donald Trump. They want to talk about their country and how we can work with them to help them achieve what they want to achieve in their country. And they’re not benchmarking against the United States. They’re thinking about South Africa or they’re thinking about Bosnia or they’re thinking about Bolivia. But I can appreciate in Washington we sit around thinking it’s all about us. It’s actually not all about us.

MR. MITCHELL: If I can say – let me add, though, I mean, maybe to Susan’s point, though. It does – America does matter. America is – the symbol of America and what America stands for and what we say does matter and has impact. You know, we’re going to lead whether it’s in a good direction or a bad direction, unfortunately, and it does help if you have leadership that are – that are modeling the type of behavior we want to see.

So it doesn’t have no impact. We don’t hear about it. They’re not going to be obsessed with us. But it definitely is a constraint on our – to some degree, I’m sure, on our work, and I got the question the other day from some German foundations who came to see me and said, how are you going to talk about a blind justice and rule of law and, you know, nonpartisan judiciaries when what just happened in the United States with our system. And I say, well, look, I mean, people will judge for themselves (how?) but they can feel that it would have an impact somehow on whether – if America is having problems with it, it makes folks a little bit less confident that they can, and I certainly have seen that in my career – that countries have said that, if you can’t get your act together it’s a little tougher for us to feel like we can do it, too. That’s not to say that we’re better than anyone else or other countries are lesser. But there is that kind of modeling and that leadership that America has stood for that does matter still to many, many people.

MS. GLASSER: Well, I want to make sure that we don’t run out of time for your questions as well as mine. So while you're getting your ideas together I am going to ask an optimistic question. We’ve been in the world of challenges to this work. Tell us something that’s surprising that works or that’s a surprising, you know, place where you see democracy taking hold right now.

MR. TWINING: So the latest one that really surprised a lot of us was the Maldives, where there had been an experiment in democracy that ended in 2013. A dictator essentially assumed power, exiled or imprisoned the supreme court, exiled or imprisoned the political opposition. It looked very grim.
In the Maldives, they had an election just several weeks ago, and I don’t think anybody expected the democratic opposition to win. But guess what? Ninety percent – 90 percent – of voters turned out and voted out the dictator, right? And that just – I think we should be encouraged. This is the kind of thing that happens out in the world.

In Malaysia, one party had run that country for 61 years and really had gerrymandered the system very effectively; controlled the commanding heights of politics and the economy. Malaysians went to the polls a couple of months ago and surprised everybody, including themselves, by voting in a democratic opposition for the first time in that country’s history.

So there’s some optimism out there, I would argue.

MS. GLASSER: You’ve only been one month in the job, so we won’t, you know, hold you to great new models for the world, but.

Yes, sir. And if you could, by the way, please identify yourselves and try to make it a question so we can get to as many people. Go ahead.

Q: Sure. My name is David. I’m going to ask a question –

MR.: Would you mind standing up?

Q: (Comes on mic.) My name is David. I’m going to ask a question directly: Is Donald Trump himself not a threat to democracy and democratic institutions? And worse yet, isn’t he providing the space for other countries to have authoritarian leaders take hold?

MR. MITCHELL: Well, we’re not supposed to be partisan in terms of domestic politics. We’re focused overseas, as – but he certainly has shown a proclivity – and it’s not a secret; everyone’s reading about it – proclivity for dictators overseas. So that is of concern to those of us who want to see a president represent something, a more democratic kind of agenda.

But I can’t comment on the rest of that just because –

MR. TWINING: Could I be partisan just for 10 seconds?

MR. MITCHELL: Yeah.

MR. TWINING: I mean, American policy today towards Russia, China, and Iran, who are the great authoritarian revisionist powers in the world, is much tougher than it was two, three, four, five years ago – fact. So I’ll leave it there. (Laughter.)

MS. GLASSER: All right, ma’am, here in the front row.

Q: Aloha. (Olelo ?) Channel 50, 49, 53, 54, 55, all Hawaiian Islands.

Can you give me – my question is, soft power and philanthropy, can you tell me how that assists in the democratization of new and up-and-coming countries?
MR. TWINING: I missed it.

MR. MITCHELL: I’m sorry, I didn’t quite understand.

MS. GLASSER: Sorry. Say again about soft power.

Q: Soft power and philanthropy.

MS. GLASSER: And philanthropy.

Q: Can you speak on how that assists in the democratization of new countries?

MS. GLASSER: Maybe you could explain a little about where you’re funded from and –

MR. TWINING: Yeah. So our – so maybe start with the funding. Our funding comes primarily from the State Department, USAID, and the National Endowment for Democracy. Congress appropriates funds as part of the foreign-assistance bill. We compete for them amongst ourselves and against others.

You know, there’s a great – on the soft-power question, there is a great focus in this town at the moment on American hard power, right. The economy is growing very strongly. Unemployment is at its lowest in 50 years. The military budget is growing after being cut by 25 percent between 2010 and 2016.

However, if you look at a lot of the pressures on democracy around the world, it’s not coming from hard power alone. It’s not coming from kind of military action by authoritarian countries. It’s coming in non-kinetic forms. The National Endowment for Democracy talks about sharp power, which is kind of authoritarian forms of influence, right, that weaken and debilitate and polarize other countries.

So the kind of work we are doing falls very much into the soft-power category, and it’s about empowering people to be free to make their own choices. And we’re just a tiny little piece of American soft power. But, arguably, soft power cannot be done by governments. I mean, the original definition of soft power was it was something that emanated from culture, from civic institutions, right? And this is what – this is what authoritarians have less to offer. They are using forms of subversive power directed by the state, rather than soft power instruments.

Q: Hi. Elizabeth Campbell.

I want to change directions a little bit and talk about England the U.K. Brexit’s obviously a hot topic. We’ve seen lots of talks about checkers, hard Brexit, a referendum, a soft Brexit. I’m curious, what do each of you think is the best outcome that can come from the upcoming Brexit vote and negotiations?

MR. MITCHELL: Oh. I’m not exit – (laughs) – expert on Brexit. So I really can’t say. I don’t have really a thought on that. Do you, Dan?

MR. TWINING: So my wife’s a British diplomat. It’s a bit risky. (Laughter.) But I would say, you know, the reason – I mean, I was at Monticello over the weekend. So I’ve been thinking about
kind of America’s origins. I mean, the reason you want mediating institutions in a democracy is so that you are not ruling by referenda alone, right? You need mediating representative institutions so that elected officials can make the right decisions about what is best for their country. And that’s a question for British citizens, not us. But we have seen the dangers of referenda in other countries. And, you know, I think my democratic advice – my advice to democracies would be to treat warily with referendums because they, arguably, go around those mediating institutions in a representative democracy.

MS. GLASSER: You, sir.

Q: Yeah. Thank you for an inspiring debate.

I will take you back to Africa, where you will be more licensed to talk about. (Laughter.) You know, Africans, like any other parts of the world, like Daniel said, were looking up to American as a model for democracy. But over the last decade that we see more African leaders going to China than coming to America. Does that say that American democracy has lost its luster in Africa? That’s one question. And another quick question that I would like to ask you, is in the Horn of Africa, a volatile region, there is a little country, unrecognized, which is a model for democracy in that area. And I think you know what I am talking about, because IRI is present there. So can you just comment about that also? Thank you very much.

MR. TWINING: Do you want to take the China, and I’ll take—

MR. MITCHELL: I can start with the China one. I think that China offers is a lot of money. So folks – (laughs) – and they’re investing a lot in Africa. And they have been there in increasing numbers, an increasing amount of commerce and investment for some time now in a way that the United States and the West – well, not the West. The EU has been involved, but the West has been less engaged there. So I think if China’s willing to offer resources to build up the infrastructure, to invest, to buy up oil and other resources, then yes, I think these countries will run to Beijing and see what kind of deals they can make that are in their interests.

The question, though, comes if they – if these deals are somehow opaque or corrupt, if the deals that are made are also – you know, put these countries into a huge debt trap, which we’re seeing much more of in Africa and elsewhere, through their Belt and Road Initiative. And then saddling these countries with enormous burdens that they can’t repay, and it’s repaid in sovereignty, in essence. And you’re seeing that in various places. Here’s an example of sovereignty being traded for engagement.

So I think countries need to be careful on that. But I don’t think we should be concerned about countries going to China. I think we need to be competing on that marketplace of ideas. And in the way we do work, if we can provide an alternative to infrastructure development that is more transparent and more in the interest of these countries, then we should be doing that rather than complaining if countries are rushing to China.

I don’t know that it’s necessarily anti-democratic for them to go to China. Many of them are already not very democratic, those who go to China. Those who are more democratic, we’ll see how much of an influence China’s engagement with them has. And that’s something, frankly, I think we need to be focused much more on, because China is doing more on the ideational side, ideological side, in competing with democracy, on pushing a strongman model that is very pernicious and very dangerous for this moment.
MR. TWINING: And the country you were talking about is Somaliland, yeah, where voters voted – this is most extraordinary – voters voted using biometrics to – you know, I mean, I show up with my Virginia driver’s license, but Somaliland citizens are more advanced. And it’s great. In a new democracy, people really care about first-time freedoms, like casting a free ballot and having it counted fairly. And it’s very inspiring to see.

MS. GLASSER: OK, lots of hands here. I know we’re not going to get to everyone, so forgive me in advance for that.

You, sir. You. Fine. You go and then you go. (Laughter.) That’s fine.

Q: Stanley Roth, no affiliation.

When I think of challenges to democracy, I think of backlash against globalization, I think of the backlash against immigration and I think of some of the negative aspects – I recognize there are positive – but the fragmentary nature of social media and how it makes a great tool for demagogues. Could you comment on those three factors and what you could do about them?

MR. MITCHELL: Yeah. Well, as stated, I mean, I put it in terms of identity, which is also an immigration question, it could be a demographic question. The issue of technology we did talk a bit about.

Dan and I next week are going to go to Silicon Valley because I absolutely see this as a danger to democracy. And I saw this when I was in Myanmar, as we know now, the Facebook influence in Myanmar. I saw that in real time and was very concerned about that and couldn’t quite get the attention necessary.

We have something at – we have an office in Silicon Valley, NDI does, one person is there sitting there and we’re going to go out and we’re going to meet with a bunch of folks. And we have a program called Design 4 Democracy with the idea that we need to work with these companies, many of whom are not in good order right now because of their lack of responsibility for what they have unleashed. But they need to design these technologies and take responsibility so it affirms people’s voice, it affirms democratic values and doesn’t divide, doesn’t atomize, doesn’t alienate, doesn’t polarize, all the things that we’re seeing happen in our country and everywhere else.

And I think – I’ve felt for some time that these social media technologies are anti-social media and that they are pernicious to democracy, they’re actually dividing people and not bringing them together. It’s not just about breaking down authoritarians and allowing individual voices, there has to be a community that forms, there has to be people talking face to face in order for real democracy to occur. You can’t just do it over the airwaves.

So, absolutely, and, of course, the use of it by Russians to twist what truth is, to twist what people see, what they read, what they believe, the influence of artificial intelligence, of virtual reality, we don’t even know what’s true or what’s untrue, I don’t know that we’re prepared for this as human being. And this will – if you can’t trust information, then democracy falls away. You have to have good information that you make decisions on; otherwise, democracy fails. So this is an extremely important topic.
We have programs in Ukraine. We have programs all over the place looking at this.

MR. TWINING: So he covered digital very well. On migration and immigration, you know, I think the pressure that you have seen in Europe and the United States is not coming from legal immigration, it’s coming from vast refugee flows out of conflict zones, right, particularly Syria and the Middle East, particularly Venezuela and parts of Central America here. And until we get to grips with the fact that we need to help these countries govern themselves decently, it’s not a normal human condition to want to put your children and spouse in a boat and cross the Mediterranean and go to a country where you have no future and no connections. The normal human proclivity is to stay home and live in peace, but for too many people that is actually impossible. I mean, it’s also true for the Rohingya, right?

So until we collectively grapple with the source of these conflicts, we are not going to move the needle on the pressures around migration that have helped to drive populist politics and other – and some forms of political extremism.

On globalization, Stanley, just one thought. There’s a Brookings study that came out about 10 days ago arguing that for the first time in human history about 50 percent of the world is middle class, broadly defined. It’s never happened before ever. And guess what? The origin story of the rise of democracy in Great Britain and then on the continent of Europe is the emergency of a middle class that wanted more from its government, that wanted its rights respected, that wanted its property to be secured, that did not want to live under aristocratic privilege or monarchical absolutism. And so, actually, I’m still optimistic. The politics of globalization are complicated, but the economic uplift that has happened just in the last 25 years has – I think has – not only has changed the world, but actually will change politics in good ways.

MS. GLASSER: So we are, unfortunately, I think, almost out of time. I did promise you the question, so if you could make it a very brief last question that will have to do. Thank you so much. I love that everybody’s hands are up. We’re going to keep them here. They can, you know – (laughs).

Q: Peter Humphrey, intel analyst, former diplomat.

In a profound Wilsonian embarrassment, the United States worships at the altar of territorial integrity at the expense of Basques and Catalans and Uighurs and Tibetans and Sri Lankan Tamils and I could name 12 others. Do either of your organizations take a principled stand with respect to the human right of self-determination?

MR. TWINING: My quick answer on that is that if you live in a democracy, you can exercise your rights as a Catalan in a Spanish democracy. You actually do have rights that you can exercise. It’s different, obviously, if you are not living in a democracy, where you do not have a peaceful way to exercise political rights.

MR. MITCHELL: Yeah, I don’t think we take a position on sovereignty questions of Tibetans or Uighurs as such, but we do – absolutely would take a – take a position on their right to have a voice, to have a say in their own affairs, to not be dominated, to not be oppressed, and all the things that are going on in these territories. So we don’t have particular programs on that, but we certainly believe in that right of every human being having dignity, having the right to determine their futures and have a voice in their own affairs.
MS. GLASSER: Well, I want to thank you. On behalf of all of us, I want to thank Ambassador Mitchell, I want to thank Dan Twining, for a shockingly upbeat conversation – (laughter) – about the state of democracy around the world and here in the (the States?).

MR. TWINING: Realistic. Realistic. (Laughter.)

MS. GLASSER: So thank you both. I’m really very grateful. (Applause.) Thank you.

MR. MITCHELL: Thank you. (Applause.)

(END)