

Re-Interpreting the ‘War on Terror’: Toward Global Stability or Democratic Consolidation?

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Abstract

This paper examines the “War on Terror” in the context of its implications for global stability and democratic consolidation. The United States (US) initiated the war in response to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, launching it solely to combat terrorism, dismantle extremist networks, and prevent the spread of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). However, its outcomes for geopolitical stability and the expansion of democracy need a more nuanced analysis. The research begins with discussions on how terrorism interfaces with democracy in contemporary times. It explores whether the sole interest of the US in pioneering a Global War on Terror (GWOT) was for counter-terrorism toward global stability or whether it was a corresponding strategy to further export liberal democracy to other geostrategic regions of the globe. The research used a historical approach to engage perspectives from the Democratic Peace Theory. The discussion illustrated the dynamics and consequences of the war(s) in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Middle East. Relying on both primary and secondary sources for its analysis, the research offers insight into the US’s silenced but obvious interests in the war. On the whole, the study highlights the paradox of the war. It establishes that though the War on Terror seemed to have markedly advanced democratic ideals to previously uncharted regions, it has equally complicated the proliferation of terrorism, which continues to impede the democratisation process in different parts of the world. In this light, the study advocates for considering other variants of democracy against a sole US liberal democracy.

Keywords: Terrorism, Democracy, US Foreign Policy, International Politics, Global Stability.

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Introduction

...the world has come together to fight a new and different war, the first, and we hope the only one, of the 21st century. A war against all those who seek to export terror, and a war against those governments that support or shelter them. (President George W. Bush, October 11, 2001).

Since the end of the twentieth century, few developments have had as profound and far-reaching implications for international relations, stability, and governance as the War on Terror. It was a global campaign initiated by the United States (US) in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks (commonly referred to as 9/11), with the mission to combat and possibly extinguish terrorism, dislodge fundamentalist networks, and roll back nuclear proliferation. The War on Terror thus became an unprecedented multilateral global counter-terrorism coalition. Few doubt that the “new war”, as Bush describes it, has occasioned a new wave of forceful military interventions and regime subversion in international politics (Borneman, 2003). This trend is due to the US’s concessionary approach, which undermined international law and violated human rights. Military interventions by Bush administration in Afghanistan and Iraq, with their attendant humanitarian crises, remain fresh in recorded media and scholarly documentation; more so, the evidenced human rights abuses that accompanied the invasions in the Middle East and Guantanamo Bay (ODIHR, 2015; Morris C. , 2019).

Meanwhile, the narrative and articulated objective of the global counter-terrorism campaign focus on international security and eliminating threats to global peace; its implications for global stability and the promotion of democratic governance have stimulated considerable debate amidst commentators and scholars. However, the origin of liberal democracy, just like the Global War on Terror (GWOT), has been credited to the US; whether it is true or not has remained a debate among scholars of history and politics (Momrak, 2004). Notwithstanding, democracy – a political ideal that presents open choices to citizens, where individual values can be transformed through discussions in decision-making process (Huntington, 1991; Sen, 2003, p. 28) – from the closing decades of the twentieth century, seems to have assumed as the most admired framework of governance across the world. Its tenets have been broadcasted and strengthened by the US, especially since the end of WWII, and have undoubtedly spread to all continents with identifiable impact (Dalacoura, 2005, p. 963). In other words, the post-Cold War era witnessed a proliferation of democratic creed; several nations in Africa, the Caribbean, Asia, and the Middle East began to welcome and adopt its ideals (Leftwich, 1993; Mandela, 1995; Blanton, 2000; Elkind, 2011). Amid this global democratic consolidation was the emergence of terrorism, which became more profound than ever, proving almost intractable despite collaborative international efforts.

This paper, therefore, re-examines the “War on Terror” through the lens of two contending agendas: the pursuit of global stability and the campaign for democratic consolidation. The paper aims to address questions such as whether there are any connections between terrorism and democracy. If such a connection exists, what

theoretical framework substantiates it? Does the US have a different obvious but undisclosed interest in the War on Terror beyond global stability through counter-terrorism and non-proliferation of nuclear weapons? How effectively have global stability and democratic expansion fared through militarised strategy? Given a handful of studies on democratic governance and expansion, this article expands the scope by delving into the role of terrorism and how the heightened war against it affects international security and democratic consolidation. It is important to highlight that there has been little discussion about whether the US's primary motivation for initiating a global war on terror was solely focused on counter-terrorism for achieving global peace and stability, or if it also served as a strategy to promote democratic models in other strategically significant regions worldwide. This is the concern of this article.

Terrorism and Democracy: The Nexus

In his 1989 discourse, Fukuyama discussed the emergence and proliferation of liberal democracy all across the globe, stressing the legitimacy it earned as the most ideal system of government and one preferred over *rival ideologies*. This is not because it was without flaws or setbacks across the spectrum of the previously totalitarian polities that embraced it, but rather because it has remained the political (and economic) aspiration of many peoples and cultures across the globe (Fukuyama, 1992, p. xiii). According to McGrew, the core of democracy is self-governance. It follows, therefore, that democracy as an ideology was not to have a peaceful triumph, as terrorism is adopted as a means towards the achievement of a different ideology, one that seems more religio-political than economic. Terrorism is an attempt to truncate the globalisation of Western ideals and influence, especially democracy. Given Hegelian Anglo-Saxon's perspective of liberal democracy as the desire, quest or struggle for recognition of man, of individual rights towards material acquisition and thus satisfaction, democracy by that surely earned itself innumerable enemies (Fukuyama, 1992, p. xviii).

As it may, terror has been sponsored often by aggrieved individuals or organisations and deployed in situations where the aggrieved perceive they have not got the required attention. Arguably, democracy is essentially Western and capitalist, while terrorism appears targeted at Westernised capitalist and democratic governments, either directly or by proxy. For democracy, the history has been long and documented, from the 5th and 4th centuries, when the ancient Greeks perfected their democratic innovation, and evolving through the two thousand years separating classical Greece from the 18th century American and French revolutions (Morris I. , 2010). Even in the west, the triumph of democracy over authoritarianism did not start when the Berlin Wall collapsed but decades before then. Portugal, Greece, Spain, and Turkey, previously under authoritarian regimes, embraced democratic rule in 1974, 1974, 1977 and 1983, respectively (Fukuyama, 1992, pp. 14-15). In non-Western societies (post-colonial Africa), democracy was massively reembraced in the late 1980s and 1990s after the authoritarian African regimes were jilted by the foreign powers which had courted them

as the Cold War raged (Taylor & Williams, 2004). The 1980s was also Latin America's democratisation decade.

Terrorism has evolved in an stimulating way, even if we don't trace it back to ancient times. Mostly linked to groups that are not part of the government and are considered illegitimate (Agnew, 2009, p. 58). Islamic fundamentalism founded on militant theology, with Arab origin, advocates a return to basic Islamic tenets and if need be, through a jihad in opposition to western modernity. It steadily embraced politics and violent protests, especially in the 70s and 80s, but in all, it essentially focused on Muslim societies and was based in the Middle East. The internationalisation of Islamic militancy emerged following the Afghan-Soviet war and was marked by the rise of Osama Bin Laden, a prominent Mujahideen militant who later founded al-Qaeda. It was a classic case of the US occupations and of using rebel forces against a mutual enemy as the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) worked with the Mujahideen in Afghanistan against the Soviets (Murden, 2001, pp. 466-467).

Osama Bin Laden and al-Qaeda's emergence marked a major shift in terrorism, and they executed their master plan in the 9/11 attack on US and, by extension, the West. It constitutes the deadliest attack on US soil in history, resulting in 2,977 deaths. Beyond the toll, destruction, and pain, the incident caused US to polarise the world, leaving no neutral option. This was exemplified by the US statesman's 'either you are with us or you are with the terrorists' speech (National Archives and Records Administration, 2008, p. 69). Terrorism is a tool of influence in contemporary history based on the following assumptions: First, terrorism is war; second, warfare is not exclusive to state actors; and third, the success of a terrorist act is predicated on the element of surprise. Hence, should surprise be a war strategy where 'force is used in an unexpected way at an unexpected time against a target ...to achieve what more conventional methods of warfare cannot', then terrorism fits perfectly into the strategic surprise mode of prosecuting war (Mintz & DeRouen, 2010, p. 125). This unconventional warfare has been devastating with more civilian casualties than military and has been brandished against democracy.

How about the Democratic Peace Theory?

Given the assumption that democracies do not fight each other, it may be safe to assume that acts of terror do not emanate from one democracy to another (Mintz & DeRouen, 2010, p. 145). The Democratic Peace Theory, which is based on mutual liberal ideas, civil liberties, and freedom, posits that democracies are hesitant to go to war with one another because citizens typically have some say over their legislation and leaders are accountable to the electorate. It is also premised on the assumption that democracies usually possess more wealth than other states and so mutually avoid war to preserve their wealth (Baylis, 2001, pp. 262-263). The origin dates back to the 1832 adoption of the Monroe Doctrine, where the US, in its hemispheric overlordship, declared it would not tolerate any European monarchical hegemony on the American continent. The theory admits that there was no war between democracies throughout

the 20th century; rather, democracies cooperated to bring down authoritarian governments in WWI and WWII, the Cold War, and the subsequent global war on terror (Gat, 2006). The proposition did not specifically suggest terror, but rather it implied direct conflicts among nations, and that terrorism, as a form of warfare, thrives in authoritarian or non-democratic environments. Better still, terrorism is associated with the absence of democracy while peace is associated with democracy.

However, critics have argued that it is not more of democracy that has prevented wars between democracies but modernity, the industrial revolution, consumerism, and higher standards of living. They suggest that peace comes before democracy and not after, especially when all border disputes have been settled (Gat, 2024). Furthermore, the anarchic explanation of the international system by realists and their position on international conflict has been undermined by the prevalence of peace among liberal democracies, thereby validating the democratic peace theory (Oren, n.d.). While the democratic peace theory may have been justified, especially with time, the concern is how democracies have historically perceived or related with non-democratic spaces. Centuries of history and global developments only speak of aggression fomented by Western democracies to other entities worldwide. Such aggression is evidenced by themes of slave trade, colonialism and legalised breach of national sovereignty all around the world. In contemporary times, democratic advances have encountered resistance from terrorist activities. Democracy and terrorism are ideologically opposed, so they can't converge.

“War on Terror”: Tracking US Undisclosed Interests

In his State of the Union address on 29th January, 2002, President George W. Bush expressed a critical paradigm in the US foreign policy direction on the War on Terror. In this speech, he identified the countries of Iraq, Iran, and North Korea as the ‘axis of evil’

States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger. They could provide these arms to terrorists, giving them the means to match their hatred...attack our allies or attempt to blackmail the United States. In any of these cases, the price of indifference would be catastrophic. We will work...to deny terrorists and their state sponsors the materials...to make and deliver weapons of mass destruction... Our war on terror is well begun, but it is only begun. This campaign may not be finished on our watch, yet it must be, and it will be, waged on our watch (National Archives and Records Administration, 2008, p. 106).

Though the above excerpt has been widely used in discussions regarding Bush's rationale not only for military policy and expeditions toward the Middle East and North Korea but also to justify the US war on terror foreign policy direction. Following the harrowing events of September 11, the government and people of the US, with global

sympathy at their back, declared a 'war on terror', signalling the beginning of an all-out war against terrorism and terrorists across the globe, irrespective of their spatial location. Although terrorism did not begin in 2001, and terrorists had been targeting foreign Western facilities and presence within their space before that time, the 9/11 attack was a major blow struck directly at the centre of liberal democracy, that is, US. It follows that the US spearheads the counter-offensive of democracies to the ideology that birthed that daring landmark event.

The war commenced with a verbal onslaught when the president used the term "axis of evil" (drawing international and domestic criticism) in 2002 to describe Iraq, Iran, and North Korea. The countries were so labelled in allusion to the anti-Allied coalition of Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and Imperial Japan during WWII as threats to the US for their nuclear attacks and the use of terror. Syria, Libya, and Cuba were also added to the list of the Axis of Evil as countries aiding or harbouring terrorist groups and having WMD, such as surface-to-surface missiles and nuclear bombs, with export potential to the volatile Middle East (Gardner, 2023). The fiery rhetoric of President Trump against an updated list of rogue states – in reaffirmation of Bush's axis of evil – to include Venezuela (even though Venezuela has no terrorist or nuclear tendencies). Its peculiar case is a slide into an authoritarian government and is also in line with the Republican Party's global war on terror (Dorell, 2017). These countries were identified based on the understanding that terrorists typically find sympathetic governments and have links and relations with other countries (Mintz & DeRouen, 2010).

The war was targeted to install democratic institution in the focal countries, as democracy is often associated with peace (Hoover, Sabaratnam, & Schouenborg, 2011, p. 2). The belief that a democratic zone equaled a peace zone and the proven success of that belief has sharpened the US foreign policy in the post-9/11 period, especially in the Arab World and Middle East, and prompted the US to topple the regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq with the view to make the country a template in the region for others to follow (Oren, n.d.). To put it another way, Iraq would serve as a beacon of democracy in the Middle East. The 'either you are with us or against us' US foreign policy mandate synonymous with the war on terrorism came with far-reaching consequences on international relations, migration, global peace, and even democratic consolidation. By the November 2001 Military Order, the US under Bush gave itself the right to detain and prosecute any person, wherever, and for as long as deemed fit if suspected of any terrorist activity or affiliation against the US. The 2003 invasion of Iraq on a supposed threat of an accumulation of WMD against the US was quite spectacular and justified by the War on Terror (Agnew, 2009, p. 7), as was the invasion of Afghanistan, the longest known war in US history (Berman & Thompson, 2018).

As for the US, a war on terror was a war to plant democracies all over the world notwithstanding historical and cultural diversities. It had been projected quite early that the war in the Middle East and an end to tame Islamic culture will be long and unclear (Murden, 2001, pp. 466-467). The war objectives and developments obviously point towards propagating *western* liberal democracy. Moreover, the west had usually

determined the actions of non-western actors based on Western ideals without recourse to peculiarities and diversities. However, cultural differences always come into play. In some non-Western Muslim communities, the Shaheed (holy martyr) and suicide terrorism are seen as aspirations, while Westerners find them unimaginable. The continuous expansion of the global empire of the West, casting its shadow of influence on all, has empirically resulted in the backlash of terror. Although Huntington's clash of civilisation theory has been criticised by some scholars citing enough wars within the Arab world in itself (Mintz & DeRouen, 2010, p. 145), western democracy remains at loggerheads with rival ideologies, and no triumph is absolute or permanent according to Fukuyama's 1989 discourse.

War on Terror or the US Expansionism?

The most enduring theory of international relations disagrees with the idea of democratic globalisation; Realists have derided the promotion of democracy abroad, especially by the Bush and succeeding Clinton administrations in the US, labelling it "international social work" not befitting of the world's sole superpower. It is reminiscent of the Wilsonian world proposed in the aftermath of WWI, which had no political feasibility. The events of the new democratic dispensations in Iraq and Afghanistan stand to verify this position. Notably, none of the 9/11 terrorists were citizens of the countries Bush labelled the Axis of Evil. 15 of the 19 attackers were of Saudi origin (a US ally in the Middle East), two were UAE nationals, one was Egyptian, and one was Lebanese, with all residing in the US before the incident (CIA, 2002).

Likewise, the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 revealed no WMD as suspected. But with current nuclear technology, North Korea tested its first nuclear weapon in 2006. The country has tested about six nuclear bombs, claiming it as a necessary deterrent against any proposed American attack (Dorell, 2017). Arguably, a democratic world is a better world by the simple argument that dialogue becomes easy between democratic governments as opposed to autocracies. However, the irony of the war on terror lies in the perception that democracy uses weapons of war to propagate its peace. One can readily justify the situation by the 'if you want peace, prepare for war' mantra; however, war seldom brings peace but carnage, destruction and instability. The war on terror has also featured an outright violation of the principle of sovereignty of nations, but one the West has justified as worthy.

The war on terror has thus faced criticisms in both its nomenclature as well as its methods and scope. The Obama administration took a departure from Bush's path due to what it perceived as an endless undefined war. The war had become propaganda about the inherent good nature of US and a barbarous pervasion of Arab terrorists reminiscent of the Cold War (Jackson, 2005). According to critics, the war on terror legitimised human rights abuse, breaches of sovereignty, and violations of the Geneva Convention (Khan & Rahman, 2008). Some have gone as far as substantiating their alternative accounts of 9/11 events and the anthrax attack that quickly followed as a war against perceived enemies, legitimised and founded on deceptions and ridden by

violence. The war featured military operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, the Philippines, and Libya, as well as in major developing regions abroad also featured stringent measures such as floating prisons, the Guantanamo Bay detention camp, extraordinary rendition and the establishment of black sites (McQueen, 2015).

The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom publication mentioned that the war on terror is used to justify human rights violations, like the treatment of prisoners in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo, the transport of prisoners between countries and continents, and intervention in other countries' internal affairs. It is also established that the US opinion in the immediate post-9/11 was tactically swayed against Iraq and its WMD in support of the war on terrorism. The image was yet to be projected of the Middle East and the entire Arab world as a neighbourhood that favours radicalism, extremism, and terrorism (Stephens, 2010, p. 124). The war on terror, backed by democracy, has been prosecuted in such a manner that suggests the liberty we prize in President Bush's words was an imperial one, and nations would be mandated or compelled if they would not willingly accept it (Hoover, Sabaratnam, & Schouenborg, 2011, p. 3). The irony of an imperially imposed liberal democracy is profound. This disposition belies the view that a multipolar world may not be an entirely democratic one, the need to embrace differences in and a coexistence of political principles (Mouffe, 2011). While liberal democracy codifies western ideals of individualism and human rights coupled with rule by the people, it may not be the only legitimate and humane way to exist or administer.

Furthermore, the US-led western democracies and their Arab allies did not eliminate terrorists as Bush boasted. Rather, there was a proliferation of the activities of terrorist organisations by the same direct foreign militarism that had existed anew since 2001. The war on terror further cultivated an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty, providing the ideal conditions for the proliferation of terrorism. These conditions made the terrorist organisations relevant in these areas, earning them the support of the citizenry in response for protection. Instead of liberty and peace, democratic advancement and its war on terror left in its wake an inestimable human casualty and far-reaching socio-political impact (Khouri, 2016). The Libya and Iraq cases provide the needed instances, as the removal of Hussein and Ghaddafi has left these territories in more deplorable conditions than they were under the so-called despotic terror sponsors. Rather than being obliterated, al-Qaeda regurgitated a more radical Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant—ISIL (also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria—ISIS). In Africa, Boko Haram and al-Shabab emerged, and the terrorist threat in Europe became high (Berman & Thompson, 2018).

Rethinking the War on Terror

One may safely deduce from the engagement hitherto that there might not have been a need for a war in the first place if American liberal democracy had been truly liberal. From all indications and relevant developments, the war on terror was targeted at the Middle East and essentially aimed to expand and consolidate democracy. Opinion

soon began to clamour that US should pay more attention to terrorism within its borders, owing to mass shootings and unequivocal acts of terror across US cities. This led to the establishment of the Patriot Act and the Department of Homeland Security. This internal terrorist trend in most instances feeds on the historical ideology of white supremacy, which has fuelled both anti-immigration and anti-Semitic sentiments. There has thus been a call for changes in the prosecution of the war (Amr, 2019).

Islamic fundamentalism and terrorist organisations have over the years shifted base from Palestine and Lebanon to Afghanistan and now to Iraq and Syria. It is inferred that the more peaceful a community is, the less it is susceptible to violent jihadist mentalities. Osama Bin Laden, of Saudi origin, had his base of operations in Afghanistan under a Taliban regime. In the case of North Africa, the consolidation of ISIL in Libya presents a very stark example of the prosperity of violent extremist groups in an ungoverned or hostile space, thereby creating a very fertile ground for proliferation and infringement on the edges of even relatively peaceful ones. This is done by locating areas where the people feel oppressed, marginalised or poor and appealing to their sentiments with the intent of gaining a foothold in such places. This scenario is the case with Boko Haram (Wilayat West Africa) in Northeast Nigeria. So, if al-Qaeda and ISIL have been ostensibly pushed back in the Levant and Boko Haram activities relatively reduced in Nigeria, and yet the fertile grounds on which extremism thrives remain, the global war on terror is far from won or finished (Jenkins, 2016).

The ongoing war was revisited and re-coined Overseas Contingency Operations under the Obama administration even as Al-Qaeda and its progenies continued to attract followers. Since 2001, the global frequency of terrorism has increased. Since 2001, the US has plotted close to 80 or 90 terrorist acts, with most of them intercepted and foiled (Jenkins, 2016). It means there has been a proliferation of terrorists beyond their initial base, making them difficult to track and giving counter-terrorism a multi-sided war to fight. By 2017, after fifteen years under the governments of Bush, Obama, and Trump, the US war on terror, defined by military intervention and reshaping the politics of the Middle East, had further destabilised the region and not protected the US from terrorism. Trump has characteristically admitted, citing the Libya case, the strategy of nation-building and promotion of democracy has failed. Intervention has so far created more problems than solved, brewing more anti-US sentiments and engendering the conditions that breed terrorism.

The intervention for regime change is based on the idea that weak states are a haven for terrorists. The transition to democracy as was experienced in Afghanistan and Iraq intensified calls for democracy as a cornerstone of the war on terror, a solution to Islamic extremism and enduring security for US. This was an expensive commitment, as the US invested substantial taxpayers' money on training and equipping the Afghan and Iraqi military and police, as well as their government officials. Yet, there remain terrorist threats and general apprehension in the US homeland. Over two decades after, Americans don't feel necessarily safer than on 9/11, and more Americans have died from terrorist attacks than before. As a result of 2020 protests in Minnesota over the

killing of an unarmed African American by the police, the then Trump administration sought to designate anti-fascist (Antifa) protesters as domestic terrorists. Terrorism, according to the ACLU, is an inherently political label, easily abused and misused (Al-jazeera, 2020).

While the idea of democracy is ordinarily good, democratisation processes may have inherent problems. The transition from autocracy to democracy in a country with weak political institutions does not usually end well (the end here being the end goal of democracy, which is peace). Instead, these countries often end up in some civil war or upheaval, creating opportunities for terrorism to thrive. The idea of deploying military intervention to oust a regime and the massive presence of US military are paradoxical to liberal values of democratic peace and provide grievances terrorists could manipulate (Goepner, 2016).

Conclusion

In the discourse on terrorism and democracy, there has been a consistent oscillation between the pursuit of global stability and the consolidation of democracy. This oscillation has been between those who believe that the primary purpose of a war on terror is to protect international security, and those who, on the other hand, believe that democratic globalisation lies at the heart of the ideation and execution of the war on terror. This paper, though not an effort to obscure the former, demonstrates the latter. Focusing on its evolution, particularly from the end of the Cold War, and of terrorism since about the same period, it establishes that terrorist activities are not limited to US but targeted at all Western democracies in perceived retaliation to years of Western oppression and interference in Muslim lands. It concludes with insights from the Democratic Peace Theory, that the *raison d'être* for the prosecution of the war, which is democratic peace, has so far not been attainable.

The US government's declaration, 'Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists,' speaks volumes in the context of the war. It implied a global hegemon's decision that would not condone opposition or even neutrality, a stance the US is historically known for. Meanwhile, US military presence was a huge complication for peace in countries that had been at war for 20 years before 9/11. It brings up the question: Is this war about propagating democracy to provide liberty and rights for oppressed peoples of the Middle East, or is it about ensuring that the US has no enemies anywhere in the world? Besides, to what extent could one view the terrorists as fundamentalists against insurgents seeking the liberation of their lands from powerful foreign presences and resolute enough to actualise that by any means possible?

The paradox of the war on terror finds similar expression in the Roman persecution of the Christian sect, an act which resulted in the proliferation of the religion all over the world as the members of the sect fled from Rome. The war on terror has helped push democratic ideals to previously uncharted territories while it has inadvertently helped advance terrorism beyond its regular region. While democracies in those new nations have been problematic, certain nations of the world have also

experienced democratic backsliding in recent years. It is time to debate on the possibility, existence, and acceptance of variants of democracy began against a sole US liberal democracy in policy and academic fora. This would ease much tension in the world while republicanism and representative governments thrive.

Disclosure Statement

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