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**U.S. leadership vital for freedom's future**  
**By Lawrence J. Haas**

When, in 1944, Winston Churchill suggested that the Allies consider the Vatican's views when planning the future of a heavily Catholic Poland, Stalin famously replied, "The Pope? How many divisions has he got?"

The Pope had no divisions, of course. But, as Stalin's successors would learn, he had millions of supporters whom he could spur to action. When, in 1979, John Paul II told his fellow Poles during a trip to his native land, "Do not be afraid," he gave important moral support to the democratic stirrings that would eventually bring down the Soviet empire.

In the 1980s – in what became a pivotal moment in world history – John Paul II worked closely with President Reagan in what was, according to Reagan's former National Security Advisor, Richard Allen, "one of the great secret alliances of all time." The leader of the Free World and the leader of the Catholic World supported dissident movements behind the Iron Curtain, focusing on Poland as the place from which change could spread across, and unravel, the Soviet bloc.

The historical lesson is important because, as Freedom House reminds us in its new report, *Freedom in the World 2013*, we stand at another pivotal moment – with both important recent gains for freedom in the Greater Middle East and a determined response by autocrats in that region as well as in Russia, China, and elsewhere to stamp out any democratic stirrings within their borders.

As recent history demonstrates, democratic movements need the moral, financial, technical, and other support from the United States and allies.

"[G]ains for freedom usually take place with the active participation of democracies like the United States and those in Europe," Freedom House's president, David J. Kramer, said as his organization released its report yesterday. "And where they have opted out of the struggle, the result is usually a defeat for freedom."

In its annual report, Freedom House categorizes countries as "free" ("where there is open political competition..."), "partly free" ("in which there is limited respect for political rights and civil liberties..."), and "not free" ("where basic political rights are absent and basic civil liberties are widely and systematically denied").

In 2012, 90 countries (with 43 percent of the world's population) were free, 58 (with 23 percent) were partly free, and 47 (with 34 percent) were not free. Of these 195 countries, 117 were electoral democracies.

The figures highlight the dramatic march of freedom and democracy over the last two centuries, and particularly since World War II. But, they also spotlight the perilous times in which we live.

After decades of steadily growing freedom around the world, progress has stalled. This year's report marks the seventh straight year in which Freedom House documented more countries moving backward than making progress.

Yes, across the Greater Middle East, Libya registered impressive gains, Tunisia cemented its gains of 2011, and Egypt made modest progress. But, fearing for their own futures, autocrats in nearby Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Omar, Syria, and the United Arab Emirates cracked down hard and sometimes violently.

Yes, 2012 brought gains in Sub-Saharan Africa (Lesotho, Sierra Leone, and Senegal), Central and Eastern Europe (Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Georgia), and the Asia-Pacific (Burma, Bhutan, Indian Kashmir, Mongolia, and Tonga). But, the year brought setbacks of equal magnitude elsewhere in those regions.

Of particular note, the autocrats in Moscow, Beijing, and elsewhere watched the Arab Spring protests and reacted in kind, taking harsh measures to reinforce their power and contain their people. Vladimir Putin pushed new laws through the Duma to crack down on political demonstrations, NGOs, and the internet, while China's Communist Party chose a new leadership team whose members built their careers on hardline policies.

This ebb and flow between freedom and authoritarianism is nothing new. Samuel P. Huntington outlined it well in *The Third Wave*, documenting the "waves" of democracy and "reverse waves" of authoritarianism that have marked the last two centuries.

Nor, at critical moments like these, is it new for freedom's proponents to look to Washington for support.

Over the years, the United States has led efforts to pressure autocrats and support dissidents, with Presidents using their "bully pulpits," dispensing financial aid, and even deploying America's military. America rescued Europe with the Marshall Plan and, working with its allies, won the Cold War, ended genocide in the Balkans, provided famine relief in Africa, and prevented a slaughter in Libya.

The need is no less great today, but the question is whether the United States will play its traditional role.

Bemoaning President Obama's mixed record to date as well as growing isolationist tendencies within Republican circles, Freedom House wrote, "The retreat of the leading democracies is taking place, ironically, at a time of unprecedented popular resistance to oppression around the world. The dissidents who labored for human rights during the Cold War – isolated and often anonymous – have been replaced by movements that command the support of sizable constituencies."

The dissidents are struggling, the autocrats are digging in, and freedom's future is on the line. No nation is more important to the outcome than the United States. Here's hoping that, in a second term, Obama steps up.

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