

INSIGHTS

Our columnists' take on news events

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U.S. must think 'democracy' in the Mideast

Democracy promotion has never been the United States' strong suit in the Middle East. When the Bush administration made democratization its formal policy in 2002, pundits labeled it "naïve" and "unrealistic" given the Middle East's purported authoritarian political culture rooted in "Islam," "tribalism," and an "Arab democracy deficit."

Guest Column



Eric Davis

Events seemed to prove the critics right. In 2003, the Bush administration's promised rapid transition to democracy in Iraq failed to materialize. In 2005, the Muslim Brotherhood won 88 seats in Egypt's parliamentary elections. Hamas then won the 2006 Palestinian elections. Democracy promotion fell by the wayside, and the United States returned to its historical pat-

tern of supporting autocratic regimes.

But as recent events have revealed, support for democracy runs deep in the Middle East, especially among the region's youths — 100 million strong between the ages of 14 and 29. To measure this support, all we need do is turn on our televisions.

The United States is at a crossroads. Will the Obama administration actively help the region's new activists bring about a peaceful transition to democracy, or will it allow the type of thugs who attacked peaceful protesters in Cairo's Tahrir Square to trample its flowering? Will the United States allow a historically transformative period to pass it by?

During my 40 years of research in the region, Middle

Easterners have constantly complained to me that the United States practices democracy at home but supports authoritarianism in their countries. Now this long-term discontent challenges many of the regimes in the region, and the chickens are coming home to roost.

Support for authoritarianism has not produced long-term regional stability, but political upheaval and hostility toward the United States instead. Once our main ally, the Shah of Iran was toppled in 1979 by an upheaval that created the most dangerous regime in the Middle East. Tunisian leader Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, whose role was to protect U.S. interests from al-Qaeda in North Africa, was forced to flee his country last month. Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, a guarantor of the 1979 Arab-Israeli peace treaty — but who suppressed dissent, imprisoned critics, and countenanced widespread torture — will soon be gone as well. Large protests have placed other autocratic allies, notably King Abdullah of Jordan, who recently dissolved his government, and the perennial Yemeni president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, who has vowed not to seek another term, on shaky political grounds.

Despite the current mass demonstrations, many Western analysts continue to decry democratic change. Radical Islamists will take power, scuttle the Arab-Israeli peace treaty, and promote regional instability, they warn. But the main driver behind the calls for democracy is not the older generation of Islamists, but rather youths — often well-educated — who lack jobs, the ability to voice discontent, and any hope for the



Middle Easterners complain that the United States practices democracy at home but props up authoritarianism in their countries. In Egypt and elsewhere, the anger is spilling into the streets.

future. They are less concerned with religion than with employment, raising a family, and leading a stable life. In the age of the Internet and social media, these youths can compare the freedoms they lack with those their counterparts enjoy elsewhere in the world.

As my research with Iraqi youths over the last two years makes clear, most abhor religious radicalism because they know it results in intolerance, violence, and new forms of political and cultural repression. Those youths who do turn to religion increasingly are searching for a tolerant Islam that promotes personal freedom and is compatible with democratic practices. Above all, youths in Iraq and elsewhere realize that they can achieve a better life only by

riding their countries of the rapacious ruling elites who have institutionalized corruption and nepotism and are unconcerned with the problems of the citizenry at large.

Although the United States does not control events, it maintains enormous political and economic influence in the Middle East. Strong support for democracy will enhance its moral standing as well. The United States needs to curtail military and financial assistance that it and its global partners give to authoritarian regimes, criticize allies that engage in political repression, mobilize international aid for local civil society organizations, and consistently voice support for the new democracy movements. Such sustained pressure would at the very least temper the behav-

ior of Middle East autocrats, especially those who seek closer ties with the United States. These policies could also win the gratitude of the large youth demographic, from which will emerge the next generation of leaders. Surely making democracy promotion the centerpiece of U.S. policy in the Middle East is not too much to ask of a country that still claims leadership of the free world.

Eric Davis, professor of political science at Rutgers University, is author of the forthcoming "Taking Democracy Seriously in the Middle East," Cambridge University Press. His blog, "The New Middle East," can be read at <http://new-middle-east.blogspot.com/>. His e-mail address is davis@polisci.rutgers.edu.

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INTHEKNOW

Evolution still largely untaught

A survey suggests many American teachers leave it out of lesson plans.

By Faye Flam
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Despite seeming victories over creationism in major court battles — most recently in Dover, Pa. — American students are still losing out when it comes to getting a solid biology education.

A new report on a 2007 national survey of high school biology teachers found that most still didn't teach evolution adequately. And today, evolution is more than just a chapter in the biology field; it's the backbone of the whole discipline.

"Nothing counts in biology except evolution," said Haig Kazazian, former chair of genetics at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine and now a professor at Johns Hopkins University. There's a famous statement that captures evolution's central role, he said: that nothing in biology makes sense except in light of evolution. (It has been attributed to Russian biologist Theodosius Dobzhansky.)

The federal case that was decided in Dover five years ago didn't mandate the teaching of evolution; it ruled only against teaching a form of creationism known as intelligent design in science classes. Teaching standards in Pennsylvania and other states require classes to cover evolution, but that doesn't mean teachers follow them.

"We were very surprised that the state standards had virtually no impact," said Pennsylvania State University political scientist Eric Plutzer, one of the pair of researchers who conducted the survey of more than 900 teachers.

"We've seen highly publicized debates in Ohio, Kansas, Texas. ... There's an awful lot of political capital and expertise that has gone into these standards, but, by and large, teachers completely ig-



Tennessee Judge John T. Raulston holds a copy of the decision in the 1925 case of "The State of Tennessee v. John Thomas Scopes," in which Scopes was tried for teaching evolution to high school pupils.

nore them," he said.

According to their report, published last month in the journal *Science*, 13 percent of high school biology teachers still teach creationism and about 60 percent of teachers are so anxious about teaching evolution that they avoid the topic.

That 60 percent may be doing more harm to science literacy than the 13 percent of creationist teachers, study co-author Michael Berkman said.

Many Americans, if not the majority, believe in creationism, Plutzer added.

"This goes back to the question of who should be allowed to decide what's taught in public schools," he said. "It's a question that goes back to William Jennings Bryan before the Scopes trial."

Plutzer said many people feel evolution is antithetical to their values. "They claim it makes it harder to raise their children if they're being exposed to a humanistic worldview in their science classes."

In some cases, parents and school administrators put pressure on teachers not to follow the standards. In other cases, the teachers hold cre-

ationist beliefs.

The scientific community should take this study seriously, said Steven Newton, director of programs and policy at the National Center for Science Education.

What's new here is the attention drawn to the 60 percent of the teachers who "muddle in the middle," teaching little of anything.

What's the solution? Teach teachers evolution, Plutzer said. Many of those 60 percent in the middle are cautious about evolution, but they might be bolder if they had a better grounding in the science.

Newton, who has been a teacher, said he understood the pressure teachers might face. When parents are offended by evolution, he said, "administrators don't back up teachers." He agreed the time to intervene is during teacher training, before the teachers have already established their lectures and course materials.

The benefits of learning evolution go beyond shaping the next generation of biologists and medical researchers, Plutzer said.

"Evolution is a window into the scientific method. ... Dar-

win really had only a few tools at his disposal, but he was brilliant in understanding ecology and comparative anatomy."

For many students, biology is the only science class they take in high school or beyond, and learning about evolution could equip them with critical-thinking skills.

And that's important for good citizenship in an age when so many policies involve assessments of evidence, he said, whether it's global climate change or product safety or the claim that vaccines cause autism.

Beyond that, maybe education should involve more than just the inculcation of useful skills, Newton said. "Evolution is a big and poetic thing. ... We're depriving students of one of the great ideas of science."

Contact staff writer Faye Flam at 215-854-4977 or fflam@phillynews.com.

INTHEKNOWPOLL

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Today's Question:

How should biology be taught in high school?

- A. Humans are the product of millions of years of evolution and are related to all other living things through a common origin.
- B. Humans and all other living things were created by God.
- C. Both A and B. That way they can "teach the controversy."
- D. None of the above. High school students should learn to dissect frogs, and that's it.