

Oxford Union votes not to fight for democracy abroad

May 28, 2023, By Bintia Dennog [[SEE THE DEBATE VIDEO](#): 11-MINUTE SEGMENT OF ZUNES]

Following Saturday's debate, the Oxford Union has voted against fighting for democracy, individual liberty, and the rule of law abroad, as part of a special debate motion with the Harvard Political Union. The motion failed with 72 votes in favour and 150 votes against.

The motion addressed concerns of a decline of democracy around the world, rising authoritarianism and the question of interventionism.

Speaking in favour of the motion was John Bolton, the former US ambassador to the UN from 2005 to 2006 and National Security Advisor under Trump; the Afghan politician, writer, and activist, Fawzia Koofi; the Estonian politician and previous Minister for Foreign Affairs and Minister of Defence, Urmas Reinsalu; and Harvard student Maya Bodnick.

In the opposition, the former US Ambassador to Croatia Peter Galbraith and the international relations scholar and professor Stephen Zunes argued alongside Union President Matthew Dick and Oxford student Sultan Khokhar.

Maya Bodnick first introduced the opposition speakers. She said she was flattered to be invited by the President given that she is "not a porn star or a transphobe", prompting laughter and applause from the crowd.

She went on to argue that Ukraine is currently "ground zero for the West's defence of democracy". If the US and European states are too fearful to stand up to Russian and Chinese aggression, these authoritarian regimes "will be emboldened to offer more terror, just as Hitler was in World War Two."

Opening for the opposition, Matthew Dick argued that military intervention will never achieve its ideals. He reminded the audience that justifications for intervention, such as liberation, were likewise used by Putin. Moral triumphalism of the United States, he further argued, impedes democracy.

Dick also urged the audience to not be fooled by the proposition: a vote for them is not a stand against Putin's Russia nor is it a stand for democracy. "Democracy is in essence a voluntary act of free will," he declared, "if democracy can only survive by forcibly submitting opposition for its free will, then it's already been killed." He added: "Its blood is in the hands of the proposition and not the foreign regimes they rail against."

Fawzia Koofi pointed out that there is a fine line between colonised foreign policy and values. She urged the audience to protect the principles of democracy and uphold human rights. "I believe, if the world had not failed in Afghanistan, the Ukraine situation would not have been where it is now," Koofi claimed.

Professor Stephen Zunes however further cautioned against intervention. "Before we start talking about fighting dictatorships, we should stop propping up dictators", he advised, highlighting the fact that 57% of the world's dictatorships receive arms from the US. Instead, he appealed to the success of nonviolent methods.

Urmas Reinsalu revisited the Russian invasion: "Putin belongs on a tribunal as a war criminal", he contended, lamenting the G7 leaders' "pact" against this. He further advocated for intervention on humanitarian, security, and moral grounds.

Next on the opposition was Sultan Khokhar, jumping in as a replacement for Pakistani politician Fawad Chaudhry, who was prevented from attending as he is currently in custody. Sultan denounced violent

intervention as “inherently dubious, shady, and questionable at best” or “racist, supremacist, and morally bankrupt at worst”.

“Operation get rich off oil, I mean, uh, freedom” has no mandate from the population, making it illegitimate, Sultan claimed. He referenced a study of 93% of Iraqis wanting the US-led coalition forces to leave.

After four emphatic floor speeches, it was John Bolton’s turn to address the Union and he was met with a hefty round of applause. “This resolution does not advocate war”, he begins, before, moments later, declaring “if you want peace, prepare for war.”

Bolton spoke at length about the virus of isolationism, stipulating that America is founded on protecting the values of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. “The only land we ever asked for was the land to bury our dead”, he insisted.

Speaking on Venezuela, Bolton stated: “It’s tragic that we and our other coalition partners couldn’t even get enough assistance to free the people of Venezuela who are being depressed politically, and crushed economically.”

“We will ultimately bring the Castro brothers dictatorship... back under the control of the people”, Bolton mentioned, referencing Cuba. “And let’s not forget Israel, the only functioning democracy in the Middle East, threatened by a nuclear holocaust”, he continued. “We will stand with Israel.”

Closing the debate, Peter Galbraith argued that we must use the effectiveness test when determining whether to fight for democracy. “Yes, there are times we should fight and we have fought successfully,” he proclaimed, but “the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq demonstrate why it is not feasible to fight for democracy outside the West.” He criticised the Reagan administration’s embracing of Pinochet, under which Bolton served at the time.

Galbraith further argued that both an independent judiciary and political parties accepting election results are essential features of a successful democracy – neither of which the US possesses. He claimed that the Supreme Court has “become more partisan, more extreme right wing, more an instrument of the Republican Party” since 2000. This is referencing George W Bush’s electoral victory in Florida, where a divisive landmark Supreme Court ruling stopped the recount of votes. If the count hadn’t been stopped, Bush’s opponent Al Gore could potentially have won.

Bolton interrupted the speech: “Would you have understood the wrong result if the court said stop the recount earlier because it violates the constitution?” In response, Galbraith argued that it had been “an entirely partisan exercise.” This caused the chamber to applaud in agreement.

Galbraith went on to criticise how the majority of Republicans in Congress voted to overturn Biden’s win, despite the election being “indisputably free and fair”. American Democracy in 2020, he believes, was not saved by the courts or Congress, but instead by the incompetence of Donald Trump and the likes of people such as Rudy Giuliani.

Galbraith concluded: “Rather than looking for authoritarian dragons to slay far from home, America should be fighting to save our democracy at home.”