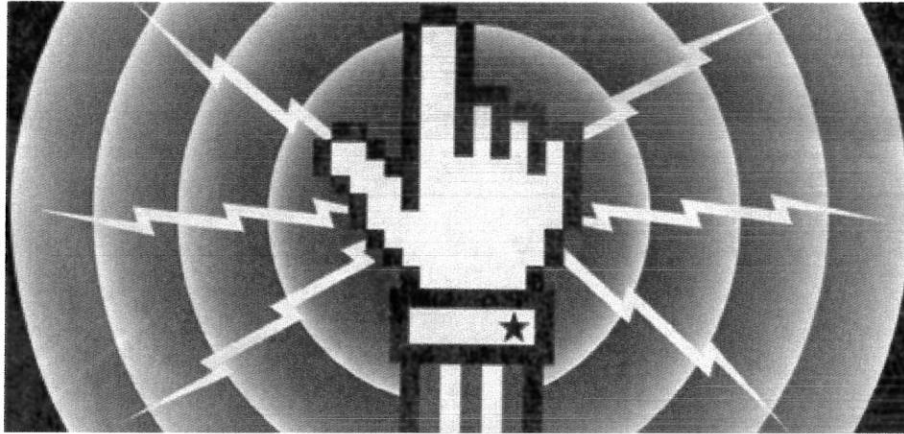


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Democracy Needs Many Voices

By DAVID HOFFMAN

ARCATA, Calif. — In a historic speech in Prague in 1990, as Communism in Eastern Europe was crumbling, Secretary of State James Baker called for international support for independent broadcasting in the emerging states of the collapsing Soviet Union. Since then, the need for independent news outlets of all kinds has become even more urgent — in fledgling democracies and old regimes alike.

That is why President George W. Bush and policymakers at the State Department and Pentagon should put American support for uncensored news outlets — and unfettered access to the Internet — at the top of their foreign policy agenda.

Nothing raises more fear in a repressive regime than challenges to the control of information. And nothing is more important to the development of a civil, democratic society. Free elections may be a first step in establishing the rule of law, but there can be no multiparty elections without a multiplicity of news outlets. Yet press freedom, especially in broadcasting, remains threatened in many former Soviet and East Bloc countries, while in China the democratizing power of the Internet is stalled.

In Russia, the recent government prosecution of Vladimir Gusinsky — whose influential television network has criticized the war in Chechnya and President Vladimir

Putin's handling of the Kursk submarine tragedy — is an ominous sign of what may be in store for the hundreds of smaller independent TV stations now in Russia, many of which have benefited from American aid.

In the Czech Republic, meanwhile, about 100,000 protesters recently took to the streets of Prague to support the striking jour-

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nalists who have barricaded themselves in the newsroom of state-owned Czech Television since late December. The "rebels," as the journalists have been dubbed, are demanding that public television be an impartial broadcaster of news, not a tool of the party in power.

Not so long ago, state television was just such a tool in the hands of Slobodan Milosevic, the former Yugoslav president indicted for war crimes by the international tribunal in The Hague. When anti-Milosevic protesters filled Belgrade's downtown, they stormed not only the parliament but also the state television center, to protest the

network's virulent anti-Western and anti-Muslim propaganda. The independence of Serbian television in the months and years ahead will be a crucial measure of Serbian democracy.

China's rhetoric about democratization will also be tested by citizens' access to mass media — especially the Internet. With 17 million Internet users, China faces a dilemma: Its Communist leaders have suppressed Internet content in a few highly publicized instances — for example, when the Falun Gong religious sect demonstrated that the Internet can be a remarkable organizing tool. But these leaders also know that if they are to modernize their economy, they must open the country to the power of online information and communication. As Secretary of State Colin Powell noted in his confirmation testimony, "The rise of democracy and the power of the information revolution combine to leverage each other."

Given the long history of Republican advocacy of First Amendment rights abroad, the Bush administration should insist that any partnership for prosperity be built on the condition that news media operate independently, that citizens have access to information and that the right of freedom of expression is guaranteed.

David Hoffman is president of Internews, a non-profit organization that supports independent news media.