

Washington, D.C. - By Martin Frost

Former Member, US House of Representatives

From 1990 to 1995, I chaired a special House task force to assist the parliaments of Eastern and Central Europe as they faced the challenge of converting from communism to democracy.

It was one of the most interesting things I have ever done and it gives me great pleasure to see that the current Congress has passed legislation resuming this very important work.

The new effort is called the House Democracy Assistance Commission ([search](#)) and is made up of 16 members who were appointed by Speaker Dennis Hastert and Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi on May 18. The commission will focus on countries from five regions — Africa, the Pacific, Europe, the Middle East including Central Asia, and the Western Hemisphere.

The new commission is chaired by Rep. David Dreier, R-Calif., with the ranking Democratic member being Rep. David Price of North Carolina.

While not perfect, our Congress is an excellent example of how a democratic parliament can function, and Hastert and Pelosi are to be commended for making the effort to provide real help to fledgling democracies around the world.

This all started when the Berlin Wall fell in late 1989. I was a member of the first congressional delegation to Berlin in December of 1989 and was overwhelmed by the historic significance of what was happening in Eastern and Central Europe. Then-Speaker Tom Foley appointed me to head a special House task force to help the countries of the region convert to democracy, and we put together a very successful effort over the next five years. This effort was completely bipartisan and had the full support of both the first Bush administration and the Clinton administration.

Work was done in Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Bulgaria, and Albania. We provided computer hardware and software, assistance with parliamentary libraries and parliamentary research institutes as well as training sessions for new members of parliament and parliamentary staff.

Congress was uniquely situated to provide this help because of our special relationship with the Congressional Research Service of the Library of Congress that provided much of the technical expertise. This effort created enormous goodwill for the United States and I believe contributed to the willingness of these new democracies to support U.S. foreign policy initiatives during recent years.

The new commission initially is considering projects in the former Soviet republic of Georgia, Macedonia, Kenya, Indonesia, and East Timor. The new commission will assist a variety of emerging democracies and not just ones that had previously been under communist rule.

Work on projects like this does very little to help members of Congress get re-elected. In most cases, their constituents could care less if they are assisting fledgling democracies around the world. But this work does a great deal for our nation and for promotion of our system of government. Functioning democracies usually are not threats to us militarily and in most cases will be allies for us in the war against terrorism.

Much of the actual work will be done by congressional staff and individuals on loan from the Congressional Research Service; however, the role of members of Congress who serve on the commission is of some consequence. Members of Congress will be asked to travel to emerging democracies to meet in-country with parliamentary leaders. This means a great deal to members of foreign parliaments because it demonstrates that elected leaders in the United States care about what happens in their country. Also, commission members will spend time meeting with foreign parliamentary leaders and staff when they travel to Washington for training.

In addition to Reps. Dreier and Price, members of the new Democracy Assistance Commission are Reps. John Boozman, R-Ariz., Lois Capps, D-Calif., Tom Cole, R-Okla., Artur David, D-Ala., Jeff Fortenberry, R-Neb., Paul Gilmore, R-Ohio, Rush Holt, D-N.J., Mark Kirk, R-Ill., William Kolbe, R-Ariz., Candice Miller, R-Mich., Silvestre Reyes, D-Texas, Adman Schiff, D-Calif., Allyson Schwartz, D-Pa., and Joe Wilson, R-S.C.

Next time you see one of these members of Congress, thank them for spending some of their time doing something to promote democracy, even if it doesn't mean a thing in their next campaign for re-election.

Martin Frost served in Congress from 1979 to 2005, representing a diverse district in the Dallas-Ft. Worth area. He served two terms as chairman of the House Democratic Caucus, the third-ranking leadership position for House Democrats, and two terms as chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee. Frost serves as a regular contributor to FOX News Channel. He holds a Bachelor of Journalism degree from the University of Missouri and a law degree from the Georgetown Law Center.