



**The National Endowment for Democracy:
America's Foundation for Freedom Around the World**

Hearing Before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs
May 20, 2026

Testimony by Damon Wilson, President and CEO, National Endowment for Democracy

Chairman Mast, Ranking Member Meeks, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before this Committee. On behalf of NED's Board of Directors, staff, and thousands of democratic partners around the world, we appreciate the Committee's longstanding bipartisan support.

At a moment of intensifying strategic competition, authoritarian powers are investing aggressively to weaken democratic institutions, suppress independent voices at home, expand coercive influence abroad, and reshape the international environment in ways contrary to American interests. America's adversaries increasingly compete not only through military means, but through corruption, censorship, coercion, surveillance, propaganda, and elite capture. They understand that to shape strategic outcomes, they must invest in shaping economic and political conditions.

The National Endowment for Democracy exists to help the United States compete in that environment—not through force or in secret, but by strengthening the resilience of societies before repression, instability, corruption, and authoritarian influence become far more dangerous and costly threats against American interests.

Simply put, NED helps America compete with authoritarian rivals by helping partners build more effective democracies, foster free enterprise, protect fundamental freedoms, and advance peace and stability.

More than four decades ago, President Ronald Reagan stood before the British Parliament at Westminster and argued that the advance of freedom was not inevitable. Democracies, he said, must actively strengthen the "infrastructure of democracy"—the institutions, civic organizations, free media, labor movements, and democratic actors that allow free societies to endure.

Congress responded in 1983 by authorizing funding for the National Endowment for Democracy through the NED Act. Led by bipartisan lawmakers, including former Chairman of this Committee Dante Fascell, Congress recognized that supporting freedom abroad was not only morally right, but strategically essential to advancing America's interests and leadership around the world.

NED's founders understood that the United States needed a uniquely independent institution, one that could both reflect the values and compassion of the American people and serve U.S. long-term interests, while operating outside the day-to-day machinery of government and partisan politics. Congress mandated NED as a private, nonprofit foundation—not a government agency—because democratic movements and civic actors often cannot safely or credibly work through official

channels. The combination of public mandate, bipartisan character, and nongovernmental structure allows NED to build trusted long-term relationships between Americans and those abroad pursuing democratic aspirations locally, operate flexibly in sensitive environments, and sustain engagement across changes in administration or diplomatic priorities.

That independence coupled with a mandate to advance U.S. interests is not incidental to NED's effectiveness—it is central to the model Congress conceived. The NED Act also requires a high degree of transparency and accountability. NED remains fully accountable through congressional appropriations, audits, reporting requirements, and consultations with the State Department.

NED does not conduct foreign policy. Rather, NED pursues its singular mission, directed by Congress, of supporting freedom and democracy around the world in support of long-term U.S. interests. This work complements diplomacy and other tools of American soft power by strengthening the civic and institutional foundations that help make this country's long-term partnerships more stable, peaceful, and sustainable. For more than forty years, that bipartisan model has endured because it serves enduring American interests.

NED's work reflects the core insight of America's Founding Fathers: freedom lives in every human heart. NED does not seek to export an American political model or impose democracy. Rather, NED supports citizens who take the initiative to solve their own problems and pursue peaceful democratic development within their own societies and on their own terms.

People everywhere yearn to forge their own destiny, and NED supports them. When they succeed, it benefits America. When democracies and markets flourish, America gains through trade, diplomacy, and by having more reliable, stronger allies and partners.

Supporting Freedom Abroad Makes America Safer, Stronger, and More Prosperous

NED and its Core institutes—the National Democratic Institute, the International Republican Institute, the Center for International Private Enterprise, and the Solidarity Center—support the foundational freedoms that define democratic life: freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of association, free elections, independent labor organizing, and the right of citizens to participate peacefully in civic life.

Where these freedoms exist, societies tend to be more stable, accountable, and prosperous. Where they are suppressed, corruption deepens, extremism spreads, organized crime flourishes, and authoritarian powers gain leverage. These conditions often generate instability, refugee flows, terrorism, conflict, and economic coercion that ultimately threaten and undermine U.S. interests.

For more than forty years, NED and its Core institutes have worked in some of the world's most difficult environments to make Americans safer, stronger, and more prosperous by helping local partners strengthen accountable institutions, expose corruption, expand economic opportunity, and resist authoritarian coercion. NED's programs unleash the power of people to make their governments work for them. We partner with those who do the work of democracy, in community groups, political parties, parliaments, and public officials.

Supporting freedom abroad is not abstract idealism, nor is it the imposition of values inconsistent with local traditions and aspirations. It is a strategic investment in peace, stability, and the conditions that reduce the likelihood of far costlier crises later.

Stable societies grounded in accountability, pluralism, free expression, religious liberty, and rule of law are less likely to descend into violence, produce mass displacement, harbor extremism, or become vulnerable to authoritarian coercion. By helping societies give their citizens a stake in the future and strengthen democratic institutions before crises erupt, NED helps advance U.S. interests by reducing the likelihood of conflict, fostering economic opportunities, and helping democratic openings succeed when they arise.

In that sense, NED represents one of the most cost-effective investments the United States makes in peace, stability, and national security. NED's work advances U.S. interests by:

- **Strengthening national security** by helping societies resist authoritarian coercion, expose corruption, and counter political instability.
- **Enhancing economic resilience** by supporting rule of law, and free markets that create predictable and transparent environments for trade, investment, and supply chains.
- **Serving as preventative defense** by helping societies build democratic resilience before crises escalate into conflict, humanitarian emergencies, or state collapse.

Where freedom works, we see less mass migration, less violence, and fewer threats facing the American military from extremists and adversaries.

A Lean, Cost-Effective Model

NED provides the United States with a uniquely cost-effective instrument for competing against authoritarian influence before crises escalate. In Fiscal Year 2025, NED provided approximately \$271 million in grants supporting more than 1,550 projects across more than 90 countries. The overwhelming majority of these grants are locally focused. Approximately 86 percent of NED's direct grants are less than \$150,000. These grants support freedom entrepreneurs working to strengthen accountability in freer societies and resist authoritarian pressure in repressive environments.

NED also offers an exceptionally cost-effective model. With low administrative expenses, smart use of new technologies, and a lean structure, 85 cents of every dollar entrusted to NED goes directly to grantmaking that supports frontline partners. Of the remainder, seven percent is allocated to administrative expenses and operations, seven percent to grantmaking oversight, and one percent to research and development. This ensures that the vast majority of resources are directed to maximize the impact of those on the ground.

Furthermore, since January 2025, NED has undertaken significant operational transformations to sharpen our focus and improve administrative efficiency while maintaining strong stewardship of taxpayer resources. This business transformation initiative included a review of staff and management structure, workflow processes, and use of technology across all functions, resulting in a reduction of staffing by 35 percent and savings of over \$9 million.

NED's Investment Strategy and Priorities

NED invests in people, networks, and ideas that emerge from within societies—backing those with the vision, courage, and strategy to create lasting democratic change. This strategy begins by identifying high-potential democratic actors and providing early, flexible support that allows

promising ideas and locally rooted initiatives to drive democratic progress. NED increases the likelihood of success of any one investment by fostering an ecosystem linking civic groups from across the political spectrum, independent media, professional associations, workers, legal defenders, technology innovators, faith communities, and reform-minded political leaders into reinforcing networks. NED also connects grantees to a global community of innovation and learning, enabling them to compete more effectively against increasingly coordinated authoritarian systems.

NED concentrates its resources where investments can be most catalytic—aligning strategy with the most urgent threats to freedom, the most consequential arenas of strategic competition, and the most promising opportunities for democratic renewal. This investment strategy aims to:

- Weaken authoritarian power at its source and strengthen democratic resilience across regions of strategic importance;
- Ensure democratic actors can navigate and shape a technological landscape increasingly weaponized by authoritarian regimes; and
- Strengthen democratic trajectories and free markets in countries and regions where outcomes will shape global freedom.

As documented in the annual planning document NED submits to Congress detailing its priorities and spending plans, NED will continue to divide its grantmaking support between the Core institutes and the direct grantmaking program. NED resources will ensure the viability, strategic focus, and comparative advantage of the four Core institutes as they focus their programming on key regional hubs. NED support constitutes an average of 81 percent of their overall funding.

NED will maintain a global direct grants program focused on the most repressive societies, exporters of autocracy, and countries vulnerable to authoritarian influence or erosion of rule of law, while also supporting opportunities for democratic development in freer societies, especially in countries with an outsized impact on their region. In addition, NED will maintain contingency funds that enable rapid, flexible responses to crises and unanticipated opportunities.

Our investment priorities reflect both the scale of authoritarian challenge and the urgency of democratic opportunity. We invest most heavily in Asia. Our China-related programs (in the Mainland, Tibet, Uyghur region, Hong Kong, and China's global influence) will remain our largest investment. Our most significant increases in grantmaking are in Latin America and the Caribbean, where we are committing more resources to Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua. Iran is our fastest growing country program.

We will sustain long-term commitments in the world's most repressive environments, including Russia, Burma, and North Korea. We will invest in transitions in Syria, Bangladesh, and Nepal, and support opportunities for democratic growth in the Philippines, Armenia, Nigeria, and Colombia. Across the portfolio, NED prioritizes support for elections, political participation of women and youth, investments that generate additional revenue, innovation in the media, religious freedom, free speech, and use of AI and other emerging technologies to advance freedom. We are also sustaining robust investments in Ukraine and countering transnational repression.

Countering the Chinese Communist Party's Global Reach

NED's work related to China provides one of the clearest examples of how democracy support reinforces U.S. national security and economic interests. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP)

exports surveillance technologies and censorship systems and uses coercive economic practices, elite capture, and transnational repression to shape political environments beyond China's borders.

NED-supported researchers helped expose more than 100 Chinese overseas "police stations" operating across 53 countries. These entities, run through United Front-linked organizations, were used to monitor, intimidate, and pressure dissidents living abroad. They extended Beijing's repression across international borders while undermining the sovereignty of democratic states. Public exposure of these networks increased awareness of the CCP's foreign interference operations and contributed directly to growing efforts to counter transnational repression.

NED partners have also played a critical role in documenting mass detention, forced labor, and cultural and religious repression targeting Uyghurs, Tibetans, Christians, and other ethnic and religious minorities inside China. NED-supported researchers and civic groups collected evidence, preserved testimony, and informed policymakers about extensive reeducation camps in Xinjiang, coercive labor transfer programs, and colonial boarding schools in Tibet. Their work increased international awareness and supported accountability efforts aimed at countering forced labor and supply chain exploitation linked to the CCP.

NED has supported lawyers, legal scholars, journalists, and civic actors working peacefully to defend due process and rule of law inside China. Their work has documented arbitrary detention, promoted legal protections, and sustained pressure for administrative reforms, including efforts to reduce prolonged pre-trial detention. This work is often quiet and incremental, but it represents one of the few ways the United States can help sustain independent civic space, preserve truthful information, and support the long-term idea of rule of law inside a highly closed authoritarian system.

Supporting Democratic Resilience in Strategic Regions

Even amid intensifying repression, citizens around the world continue to stand up for freedom.

In Iran, the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement and subsequent mass protests in December 2025 and January 2026 revealed the depth of public demand for dignity, accountability, and basic rights. The regime's response has included violent suppression, mass arrests, and sweeping communications blackouts isolating citizens from one another and the outside world. In this environment, NED's support helps independent civic actors document abuses, maintain secure communications, and coordinate across fragmented networks. These efforts help transform moments of protest into sustained civic capacity capable of supporting a more accountable and democratic future.

For four decades, NED-supported partners in Ukraine helped strengthen independent media, civic institutions, and anti-corruption reform efforts. Today, NED-backed citizen-organized voluntary initiatives are central to Ukrainian resilience in the face of sustained Russian assault.

In Venezuela, NED partners have helped sustain a network of organizations documenting human rights abuses, supporting election monitoring, informing citizens of their rights, and preserving civic space despite years of repression. Following the capture and extradition of Nicolás Maduro in early 2026, NED's longstanding investments are helping Venezuelans seize a historic opportunity for peaceful democratic transition and institutional restoration.

In Bangladesh, after more than a decade of authoritarian rule and political violence, NED-supported partners and the Core institutes helped advance electoral reforms, monitor election integrity, and promote voter education during a critical opening following the collapse of the government in 2024.

In Armenia, NED-supported business associations and citizen groups help advance democratic reforms, anti-corruption efforts, and economic openness at a pivotal moment for the South Caucasus. Their work contributes to stronger foundations for peace, economic integration, and expanding strategic cooperation with the United States in sectors such as energy and technology.

Protecting Economic Security and Critical Supply Chains

NED's work also advances American economic and strategic interests in concrete ways. Authoritarian powers use corruption and opaque commercial arrangements to gain influence over strategic industries, infrastructure, and critical mineral supply chains. NED-supported civic organizations and investigative groups help expose corruption, strengthen transparency, and promote fair competition in sectors directly relevant to U.S. economic security.

In Bolivia, civic organizations exposed opaque agreements on lithium mining that would have transferred control of strategic resources to authoritarian state-linked actors. Public scrutiny helped halt these deals and strengthened transparency around resources increasingly vital to global energy and technology supply chains.

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, local transparency groups monitor mining agreements tied to cobalt and other critical minerals while exposing corruption and exploitative labor practices. Their work strengthens accountability in sectors vulnerable to coercive control by authoritarian actors.

A NED-supported North Korean watchdog organization working alongside Russian investigative partners in exile exposed how the two regimes used forced labor schemes to evade sanctions, support Russia's war on Ukraine, and generate revenue for Pyongyang's nuclear weapons program. Their investigation mapped more than 100 North Korean-linked entities operating in Russia, uncovered financial flows tied to senior Russian leadership, and documented how workers were falsely classified as "students" to circumvent UN restrictions while subjected to abusive labor conditions. These findings provided governments and companies with actionable evidence to strengthen sanctions enforcement and improve supply chain oversight.

In Libya, NED-supported investigative organizations exposed a massive fuel smuggling network tied to corrupt patronage systems involving Russian military actors and Sudan's Rapid Support Forces. Their reporting identified senior officials behind the scheme and documented how corruption in Libya's energy sector was fueling regional instability. The investigation contributed to arrests and actions by Libya's Central Bank to disrupt the smuggling infrastructure, demonstrating how transparency and accountability efforts can directly counter malign authoritarian influence in strategically important energy markets.

These efforts strengthen transparency and free enterprise, reduce coercive dependence, and support more stable and accountable economic environments aligned with long-term U.S. interests.

Advancing Religious Freedom and Free Expression

Religious freedom and free expression are among the first targets of authoritarian regimes because they represent independent sources of moral authority, truth, civic organization, and identity beyond state control. The defense of religious liberty and free speech remains central both to NED's mission and to America's democratic tradition.

In China, NED-supported researchers and advocates have helped bring global attention to the persecution of Christian, Buddhist, and Muslim communities, including mass detention, imprisonment of religious leaders, restrictions on worship, and repression of underground churches. Their work has documented sweeping efforts to erase cultural and religious identity through surveillance, indoctrination, forced labor, and coercive assimilation campaigns targeting Uyghurs and Tibetans.

In Nigeria, NED partners document attacks against religious communities, strengthen interfaith community resilience, advocate for accountability under the rule of law, and pursue litigation to defend freedom of religion and belief.

In Cuba and Nicaragua, NED partners have built networks to monitor and document violations against religious communities and clergy who speak independently of the state. Their reporting has helped expose how authoritarian governments use intimidation, censorship, and harassment to silence faith leaders advocating for human dignity and civic freedoms.

In Burma, NED-supported organizations have documented attacks on Christian and Muslim communities, including killings, forced displacement, destruction of churches and mosques, and forced conscription, helping raise international awareness of abuses committed amid ongoing conflict and repression.

Faith communities frequently serve as trusted institutions capable of building broad coalitions and advancing democratic development. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Catholic and Protestant networks supported by NED helped organize the country's largest-ever domestic election observation effort, demonstrating how religious institutions can strengthen democratic participation and public trust.

Independent media and free expression are equally essential. Authoritarian regimes understand that controlling information is central to maintaining power. NED-supported journalists, civic groups, and digital innovators help citizens access independent reporting, counter censorship, expose corruption, and preserve space for peaceful civic participation.

In Cuba, independent journalists, community media, and civic organizations supported by NED continue to break through one of the world's most entrenched information blockades. NED-supported independent media reaches more than 10 million people—roughly half inside Cuba—providing citizens access to reporting beyond state-controlled narratives despite severe censorship.

NED-supported partners work to pierce total censorship by providing North Koreans with outside information that allows citizens to think critically, understand the outside world, and challenge the regime's monopoly on truth.

Free speech and religious liberty are not only fundamental rights. They are essential safeguards against authoritarian control and critical components of stable, resilient societies aligned with long-term U.S. interests.

Commitment to Transparency and Accountability

Congressional stewardship of taxpayer resources is essential, and NED takes that responsibility seriously. NED operates within a rigorous framework of oversight, compliance, financial controls, independent audits, and congressional reporting requirements. Every grant undergoes extensive due diligence before funds are obligated, including compliance review, sanctions screening, financial risk assessment, strategic evaluation, and monitoring requirements. Where programs fail to meet standards, or where conditions change, NED can pause, suspend, or terminate support.

NED's bipartisan Board of Directors reviews and approves all recommended grants. The Endowment submits annual spending plans to Congress, provides monthly and quarterly reporting to the State Department, responds regularly to congressional inquiries and oversight requests, and remains subject to independent audits, Government Accountability Office review, and review by the State Department Office of Inspector General. NED staff report and consult regularly with Congress and the Executive Branch, including on programming and how funds are spent.

NED produces an annual report detailing its grantmaking and impact. NED publicly discloses grant listings and program descriptions, balancing transparency with the responsibility to protect partners operating under authoritarian regimes where public identification could expose individuals to imprisonment, retaliation, or violence.

Conclusion

As the United States approaches the 250th anniversary of our founding, we are reminded that America's strength has always rested not only on military and economic power, but also on confidence in the enduring appeal of freedom, self-government, religious liberty, free expression, and the rule of law. For more than four decades, Congress has recognized that supporting these principles abroad advances both America's values and interests.

America's adversaries invest every day in weakening democratic institutions, spreading corruption, suppressing independent voices, and reshaping political environments in ways harmful to U.S. interests. NED helps America compete in that arena at low cost, with local partners, and in ways that reduce the likelihood of far more dangerous and expensive crises later.

As we commemorate America 250, we are reminded that freedom is not only central to our history—it remains one of America's greatest strategic advantages. Supporting those who peacefully advance freedom abroad reflects who we are as Americans. It also advances America's security, prosperity, and leadership in a highly competitive world.

Thank you for your time, your oversight, and your longstanding bipartisan support for the National Endowment for Democracy.



NATIONAL
ENDOWMENT
FOR
DEMOCRACY

SUPPORTING FREEDOM AROUND THE WORLD

What Our Adversaries Are Saying



X post by Bruno Rodríguez, Cuba’s Foreign Minister:

“The US Government is now alarmed by the million-dollar corrupt operations of the #NED in various countries with funds from the US taxpayer. They should review how many in that country have enriched themselves by organizing destabilization and terrorism against #Cuba with the support of that organization.”



Afghanistan’s Taliban Government:

Press releases celebrating the defunding of Amu TV, a NED grantee: “The end of an illusion: the cessation of US aid and the fate of affiliated dependent media and institutions!” Another, titled “Stopping Dollars is an Alarm for Evildoers and Hostile Media!” congratulated its supporters.



Dmitry Medvedev, Deputy Chairman of Russia’s Security Council, on Telegraph (January 2025):

“The National Endowment for Democracy (NED, an organization recognized as undesirable in Russia) has played an exceptionally destructive role in containing China’s development by manipulating the Taiwan and Hong Kong issues.”



Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-affiliated Media:

- “America Cut the Opposition’s Allowance / The Business of Overthrowers Has Slumped,” *Tasnim News Agency*
- “Trump Shattered the Overthrowers’ Illusion,” *Tasnim News Agency*
- “Iran’s Opposition Exposed Again,” *Mehr News Agency*



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR DEMOCRACY
UNMASKED



Produced by Xinhua Global Service

起底 NED

NED



法海
观潮

(4/26) CCTV: [Looking at the sea and watching the tide | Doxxing NED](#)

Mention of NED in the article: The National Endowment for Democracy, known as the "Second CIA", released its annual report for fiscal year 2025. Asia has become a key layout chessboard, spending \$53 million, of which \$13 million is specifically for China! Dressed in the cloak of "democracy", how many dirty deeds are hidden behind it? Follow the trend-watching detective, tear off the mask of American hypocrisy, and find out!

2025
Annual Report
NED

官员：老大 2025财年年报

0:00 / 5:20

倍速 超清

(4/26) CCTV: [Looking at the sea and watching the tide | Doxing NED](#)

Video segment: NED presents its 2025 annual report to the U.S. government showing results and asking for more funding.

NED



他们口中的NED



(4/26) CCTV: [Looking at the sea and watching the tide | Doxing NED](#)

Video segment: Under the guise of democracy, NED's background is ideological penetration, subversion, and destruction.

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR DEMOCRACY
2025 ANNUAL REPORT



NED
NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR DEMOCRACY
1201 Pennsylvania Ave. NW Suite 3100

项目的运转受美国国务院指导

汉字
观潮

1:25 / 5:20

倍速 超清

(4/26) CCTV: [Looking at the sea and watching the tide | Doxing NED](#)

Video segment: Receiving 90% of its funding from the U.S. Congress, the NED annual report serves as the weathervane for understanding the American policy community goals.



(4/22) China Xinhua News: [Opinion: Behind the mask of "democracy"](#)

Mention of NED in the article: It's an open secret that the National Endowment for Democracy, bankrolled by the U.S. Congress, has a plan to manipulate governments worldwide and sway elections with greenbacks. Its role is to cloak imperial power in the language of idealism.



(4/21) China Xinhua News: [Post on X](#)

Caption: Uncle Sam's "Special" Delivery. FYI: The National Endowment for Democracy ([#NED](#)), which takes direction from the U.S. government, has long operated as a "second [#CIA](#)," using non-governmental organizations as channels for the subversion and infiltration of, as well as political intervention in, other countries to serve U.S. strategic interests.



(4/21) People's Daily Online: [Trojan Horse](#)

Mention of NED in the article: Under the pretense of promoting democracy, the U.S.-funded National Endowment for Democracy is nothing but a Trojan horse that sows discord and disorder wherever it goes.

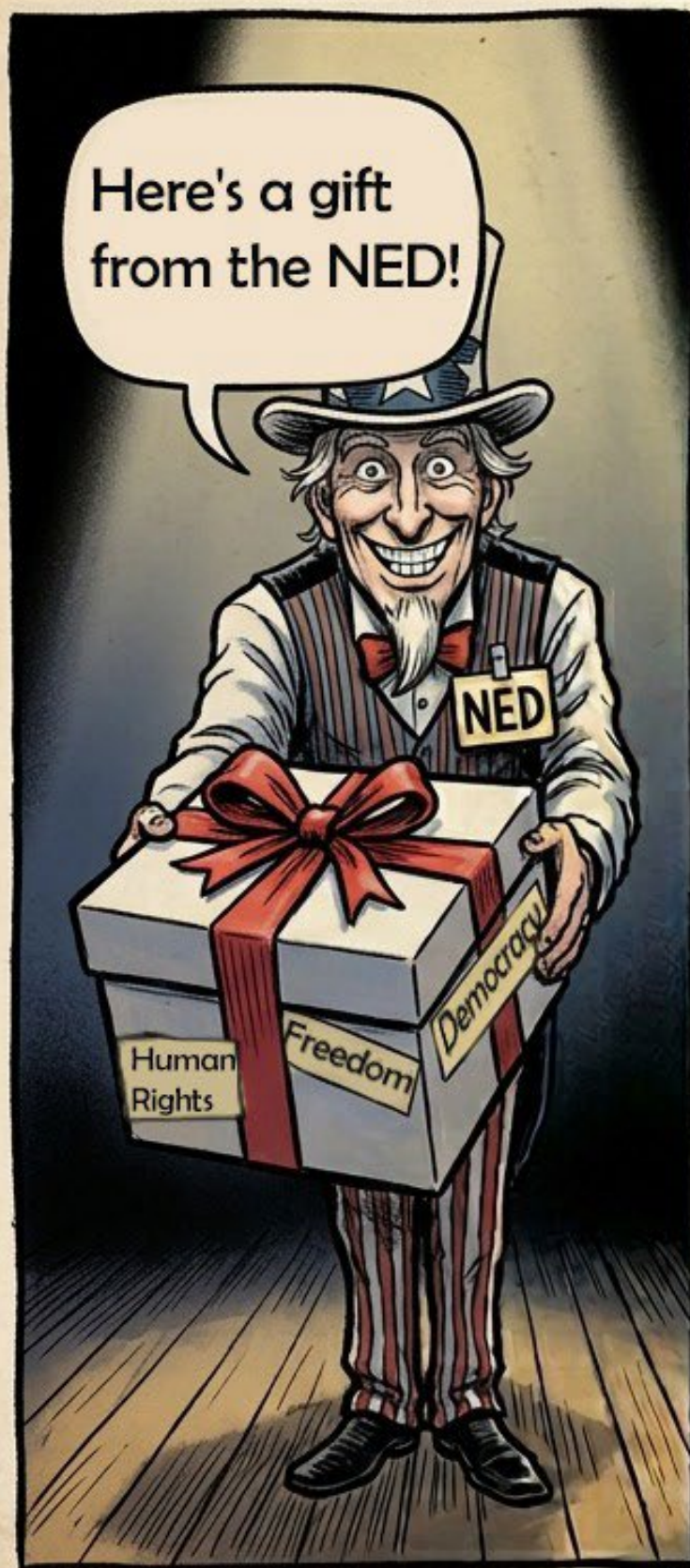
AI-GENERATED



Where Taxpayers' Dollars Go

(4/21) People's Daily Online: [Where Taxpayers' Dollars Go](#)

Mention of NED in the article: Money leaves the U.S. Treasury and flows through the intricate pipelines of the National Endowment for Democracy, resulting in turmoil, discord, subversion and instability rather than peace and development.



(4/20) China Xinhua News: [Post on X](#)

Caption: The Best "Wishes" from NED. FYI: The National Endowment for Democracy ([#NED](#)), which takes direction from the U.S. government, has long operated as a "second [#CIA](#)," using non-governmental organizations as channels for the subversion and infiltration of, as well as political intervention in, other countries to serve U.S. strategic interests.



(4/20) CCTV: [Post on X](#)

Caption: With the release of its 2025 annual report, the NED self-exposed its operation of 1,900+ "democracy projects" worldwide. Operating as a "white glove" for American hegemony, the organization uses the rhetoric of democracy as a front for systematic infiltration. Its massive expenditures are not for "progress," but are deliberate hegemonic schemes designed to export instability and subvert sovereignty.