From the Chairman

It is difficult to look back on 2011 without concluding that it offered more reasons to be optimistic than fearful.

With the exception of 1989, no single year has presented as much vindication of NED’s mission or as much promise for our vision.

The pro-democracy revolts of the Arab Spring not only broke the region’s authoritarian stronghold, but also generated fresh momentum for democratic change that could be felt as far away as China and Cuba. As the year ended, long repressed but newly engaged forces in Russia and Burma were pressing for democratic reform.

Just two weeks into 2011, protests sparked by the self-immolation of Tunisian street vendor Muhammad Bouazazi ousted the authoritarian regime of Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali after 23 years of repressive rule.

Within weeks, the contagious effect of Tunisia’s Jasmine revolution saw the swelling of pro-democracy protests across the Arab world. Another impromptu blending of Web-based youth activism, labor solidarity and citizen mobilization forced Egypt’s President Mubarak to cede power after pro-democracy forces called a general strike and began to march on the state TV’s headquarters.

As protests spread to Yemen, Bahrain, Morocco and Syria, a common refrain was heard across the region — a demand for human dignity.

The revolts repudiated the myth that Arab citizens were somehow immune to the democratic spirit — that they did not want or need the right to vote, freedom of assembly and association, an end to authoritarian dynasties, and the other constitutional rights and safeguards we all too often take for granted.

The Arab Spring also demonstrated the importance of the social and economic dimensions of empowerment. As surveys show, the ferment was primarily caused by socioeconomic grievances, by the popular demand for opportunity — the chance to get a job, an education, to walk the streets without fear of police brutality and to live life without encountering the persistent venality of a bribe-driven political culture. NED and our core institutes have over recent years highlighted the need for a social agenda in giving poor and marginalized citizens a stake in democracy, while stressing the importance of ensuring that “democracy delivers,” by addressing needs as well as rights.

While the region’s revolts ended the authoritarian monopoly in Arab states, they present profound challenges to Arab democrats, to the West’s democracies as well as to NED and the wider democracy assistance community. Can new democratically-elected governments cope with the economic crises many will inherit? Will they respect the rights of women and minorities? Can they develop governing structures that are both effective and free of corruption?

As we have seen over the years, so many promising breakthroughs are squandered by weak transitions. And yet, as NED’s 2012 Strategy Document points out, if Tunisia can become a successful Arab democracy, “it will represent an
inspiring model for the region and a potential support base for movements in other countries."

Such democratic movements are personified by the slight but formidable figure of Tawakkol Karman, the Yemeni rights activist and one of three women to share the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize. A NED grantee for several years, she represents the drive and commitment so characteristic of the dissidents, human rights and women activists, trade unionists, business figures and civil society groups that the Endowment nurtures and supports, often in the least promising of circumstances.

One of the most intractable cases was thought to be the military dictatorship of Burma, a country that has long been a high priority for NED. But that country’s prospects for a democratic breakthrough became more promising in recent months, arising from the government’s reform process and the revived democratic opposition, led by Aung San Suu Kyi. The Endowment has been the largest and most consistent source of assistance for Burmese democrats and civil society for many years, and we are well-positioned to help turn signs of progress — relaxed censorship, economic reforms, release of political prisoners, growing freedom of association, including independent labor unions — into sustainable democratic reform.

One of the Burmese democracy movement’s greatest champions was former Czech President Václav Havel, whose death toward the close of 2011 was felt deeply by all who believed in the universality of freedom and democracy. In a letter to Aung San Suu Kyi that she received after his death, Havel expressed his concern for Burma’s future, offering for inspiration the example of the struggle his own countrymen had endured in overcoming 50 years of tyranny.

She told this story in a video tribute played at the memorial service for President Havel that the Endowment organized in cooperation with the Czech Embassy in Washington on January 6th of this year, the 35th anniversary of the liberation movement Charter 77. “Although he is no longer here,” she pointed out, “I feel he continues to give us help by his example, by his belief in people’s ability to overcome their weaknesses, by his belief in a society’s ability to reconstruct itself along the lines that will be most acceptable to its people.”

Due in no small part to the bipartisan commitment of the US Congress and the Obama administration, the Endowment has the good fortune and privilege to be able to provide the practical assistance, vital resources and political solidarity that help thousands of activists and groups worldwide strive day in and day out to spread, reinforce and amplify the moral force and vision that Václav Havel personified.

At a time of financial stringency and tightening budgets, it is not a privilege that we take for granted. Rather, it is a profound responsibility that we will embrace and exercise over the coming year.

Richard Gephardt
Chairman, National Endowment for Democracy