

Human Rights and US Foreign Policy: Rhetorics and Interests

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to examine the role of human rights in the making of United States foreign policy. While the concept of human rights has had a prominent place in US foreign policy especially since the early 1970s, this paper argues that Washington's concern for human rights is mainly rhetorical and very much interwoven with perceived US national interests at any given time. This study takes examples from human rights policy of various US administrations, yet focuses on the Carter and Reagan presidencies in order to highlight the dynamics of human rights in US foreign policy both in theory and practice. The objective is to understand various executive approaches and limitations to and potentials for the promotion of human rights in American foreign policy. The reason for selecting these two administrations is that Jimmy Carter was the first US president to institutionalize human rights in US foreign policy formulation and implementation, while the Reagan Administration sought to roll it back. The article also demonstrates how human rights discourse can have its own impact on political developments abroad regardless of the intentions of foreign policymakers in Washington.

Keywords: foreign policy, human rights, morality, interests, rhetoric, institutionalization & unintended consequences.

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Introduction

The United States' abuse of human rights has received a great deal of publicity in recent years, whether institutionalized racism in its police force at home or torture and homicide in overseas prisons, such as Abu Ghraib in Iraq, Guantanamo Bay and Bagram airbase in Afghanistan. The US was also named by Amnesty International as the top human rights abuser in the world in 2004. However, the US Senate report on the CIA's use of torture in December 2014 was the icing on the cake for those who wanted to expose inhuman US practices officially. The US, as the leader of the "free world" during the Cold War and as the "only superpower" in the post-Cold War era, has projected itself as the most vociferous defender of human rights internationally. This is not only reflected in public statements by its leaders, but also in mainstream Western media and academia, that American liberal democratic values encourage US foreign policymakers to promote the very same American ideals of freedom and democracy abroad. This perception is undoubtedly very real in the United States; however, the reality does not always support the perception. As this paper will demonstrate, the US promotion of human rights abroad has proved mainly rhetorical and instrumental in practice. This is not, however, to neglect the impact of human rights discourse on objective developments on the ground independent from Washington's preferences.

The focus of this paper is on the role of human rights in US foreign policy. The paper has a twofold objective. First, to explore the relationship between the notion of human rights and US foreign

policy formulation; the impact of US national interests on the process, and attempts to institutionalize human rights within US State Department. Second, to highlight the practical implications of incorporating human rights as part of US foreign policy. To this end, the paper concentrates on two contrasting US administrations, with the Carter Administration seeking to promote human rights abroad through US foreign policy and the Reagan Administration to reverse the process. The country chosen as a case study for the impact of US human rights policy is Iran under the Pahlavi regime.

This study therefore consists of three parts. The first part, *Morality, Interests and Foreign Policy*, explores the American perception of human rights and how it was influenced by domestic and international political realities prior to the Carter Administration (1977-1981). This section also elaborates on congressional and executive inputs as well as tensions deriving from competing approaches to the question. The second part, *Carter, Reagan and Institutionalization of Human Rights*, elaborates on the political dynamics that led to institutionalization of human rights as part of US foreign policy-making. Finally, *Human Rights & the Fall of the Shah of Iran*, examines the challenges the Carter Administration faced in implementing its human rights policy and elaborates on the unintended consequences of the President's policy towards an important ally.

I. Morality, Interests and Foreign Policy

At the abstract-intellectual level, human rights aspirations are present in important documents of the United States' political life: the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Both texts refer to the unalienable rights of man, among them, "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness", and both made an important intellectual contribution to the evolution of the United Nations' Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. The UN Declaration contains a list of human rights in the sense of individual liberties, which could be traced back



to the writings of political philosophers of the Enlightenment such as John Locke, Montesquieu and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Therefore at the theoretical level American human rights aspirations and universal human rights are compatible.

However, despite its intellectual contribution and practical and political endeavours under the leadership of Eleanor Roosevelt in formulating the Universal Declaration, the US has had an uneasy relationship with it. Eleanor Roosevelt and her State Department advisers were at great pains to emphasize the Declaration's non-binding and aspirational character. In addition, while Washington was sympathetic to inclusion of human rights in the UN's Charter, in its multilateral diplomacy it has been far from the forefront of efforts to create international regimes on human rights. For example, the Genocide Treaty (1948), which embodied a moral reaction to the atrocities committed by Nazi Germany in the 1930s and 1940s, languished in the Senate for nearly four decades. The UN Covenants on Civil, Political, Social, Economic and Cultural Rights were not even submitted to the Senate until 1977.⁽¹⁾

David Forsythe has argued that US opposition to precise and binding obligations in the area of human rights in the 1940s and early 1950s was due to the fear of international scrutiny of US domestic civil rights practices in the South and elsewhere.⁽²⁾ The example below confirms his assessment and sheds light on the competing interpretation of US national interests in the policy community. Senator William Proxmire, a proponent of ratification of the Genocide Treaty, argued that the ratification of the convention was not only a moral imperative, but also good foreign policy, since the failure of the US to ratify it undermined its leadership role in the international community on human rights.⁽³⁾ Relying on contemporary fears of communism and world government, its opponents argued that the treaty would lead to abrogation of states' rights and federal interference in segregation and race-related crimes in the South. They succeeded in labelling the Genocide Convention and all human rights

treaties as un-American.⁽⁴⁾ The opposition also saw a link between the Genocide Convention and other human rights treaties, and regarded the UN covenants on human rights as the most dangerous for the United States. Senator John Bicker argued, "The only right recognized in Nazi Germany was the duty of obeying the Government. It will be the only right recognized in the United States if the Senate ever ratifies the proposed Covenant on Human Rights."⁽⁵⁾ The Senate's reluctance to approve the treaties had political and judicial reasons: it was not eager to accept the notion that US citizens should behave according to standards that were devised by the international community and supervised by an international body.

Arguments for and against ratification illustrate competing American perceptions of human rights, US national interests, and different prescriptions for their promotion or implementation. This makes it essential to outline four terms which are crucial in the ensuing discussion on the role of human rights in US foreign policy: idealist, pragmatist, moralist and realist. First, idealists are more inclined towards the universal essence of human rights, and would like to see US foreign policy consistent in the promotion of global human rights regardless of US interests. Idealists are mostly active in non-governmental or international organizations, such as Americas Watch and the Lawyers Committee for International Human Rights, campaigning for the promotion of human rights ideals. Second, pragmatists, who believe that US human rights policy needs to take into account American national interests in each case. The pragmatist ranks include moralists such as Jimmy Carter as well as realists such as Henry Kissinger. Moralists are more outspoken in relation to American values, while realists prefer "quiet diplomacy". Pragmatists are criticized for the application of double standards in promotion of human rights by successive US governments, contributing to growing cynicism abroad regarding the role of human rights in US foreign policy. These perceptual and methodological differences among policy-makers bring the inherent contradiction between universal



human rights and interest-conscious US aspirations to the fore.

American leaders of different political persuasions have always expressed their belief in the universal nature of the American experience. For instance, President Carter, saw a direct link between American values and US foreign policy, "...it's very much in keeping with the character and the history of our own country. We became an independent nation in a struggle for human rights...We want our own worldwide influence to reduce human suffering and not to increase it..."⁽⁶⁾ President Ronald Reagan also commented that "Our democracy encompasses many freedoms - freedom of speech, of religion, of assembly, and of so many other liberties that we often take for granted. These are rights that should be shared by all mankind...We have an obligation to help [freedom-loving Central Americans] for our own sake as well as theirs."⁽⁷⁾ These statements, partly prescriptive and partly descriptive, are not always translated into policy decisions because of the different factors that influence US foreign policy towards a particular state, such as economic, political and strategic ones. Lincoln Bloomfield, the NSC staff member responsible for human rights under President Carter explained this candidly:

When it came to specifics, whether the aid was military or non-military, complex interests had to be balanced in reaching decisions on individual cases. Inescapably, there were numerous cases in which the Administration was exposed to the charge of inconsistency. Human rights performance became a dominant factor in conventional arms transfers to Latin America; but such considerations were clearly subordinate in weighing military aid to Egypt, Israel, North Yemen and Saudi Arabia.⁽⁸⁾

In general, US foreign policy is rich in its moral pronouncements. However, at the same time it is very aware of its own interests. The moralist track which is sometimes called Wilsonianism utilizes values and morality to achieve its policy goals. Related to this is the myth that Washington acts on altruism in its

foreign policy. This is a very strong self-image that American people have in their minds. However, while moralism illustrates a certain measure of morality and ethical principles, based on the idea that the US will bring good to the world, a careful eye is kept on preserving what it regards as US national interests. For instance, while the United States initially maintained a neutral stance during the First World War and President Wilson couched US foreign policy in terms of moral principle, lecturing the belligerents on their responsibilities as civilized nations, American businessmen traded with Europe and sought out the new business that war would bring. Thus guns and ammunition became an important part of the war traffic. Wilson supported this activity, which he regarded as a legitimate - not to mention profitable - expression of the rights of a neutral state.⁽⁹⁾ When towards the end of the war, Wilson reluctantly concluded that the nation would suffer less loss of life, property, commerce, and prestige by going to war than by remaining the victim of the unrestricted submarine warfare that the Germans had launched in the spring of 1917, he did a complete about-face. Once in the war, it became, "a war for freedom and justice and self-determination amongst all the nations of the world..."⁽¹⁰⁾ This pattern of behaviour has brought some observers to the conclusion that there is a tendency in US foreign policy, "to develop legal and moralistic arguments to rationalize foreign policy choices."⁽¹¹⁾

In contrast with the moralist approach, which in effect results in a cynical reading of US foreign policy by idealists, the realist trend, based on reasons of state and national interests, appears less hypocritical, if not fully moral. The former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger is one such political actor. A master of *realpolitik*, he was accused by Jimmy Carter of having "Europeanized" American foreign policy and made it almost indistinguishable from the chessboard politics of power. While President Carter believed that Americans needed a measure of idealism in their foreign policy,⁽¹²⁾ Kissinger advocated quiet diplomacy, "it is dangerous for us to make the



domestic policy of countries around the world a direct objective of American foreign policy.... The protection of basic human rights is a very sensitive aspect of the domestic jurisdiction of ... governments."⁽¹³⁾ Regardless of whether one agrees with his politics, Kissinger was a fine example of a realist statesman who did not have much time for moralising. He approached moral questions somewhat differently. For Kissinger, the US relationship with the Soviet Union was absolutely basic to any policy that sought stability:

Detente is not rooted in agreement on values; it becomes above all necessary because each side recognizes that the other is a potential adversary in a nuclear war. To us, detente is a process of managing relations with a potentially hostile country in order to preserve peace while maintaining our vital interests. In a nuclear age, this is in itself an objective not without moral validity - it may indeed be the most profound moral imperative of all.⁽¹⁴⁾

The moralist and realist approaches are found either alternately or simultaneously in US foreign policy. While using different degrees of emphasis on moral and ethical issues, both recognize the link between human rights aspirations and perceived American national interests. However, grassroots activists, inspired by the universal essence of human rights, strive to promote the ideals of human rights free from considerations of national interest through lobbying the Congress and the Executive. While the US political system allows for such pressures to find their articulation somewhere in the legislation, it also ensures that the executive is not prevented from carrying out its policies effectively. Understanding the dynamics of human rights in the policymaking process therefore requires an examination of the contribution of the Congress in this area.

II. The US Congress and Human Rights

There is no doubt that the most distinctive innovation of President Carter's foreign policy was his emphasis on human rights. However, his personal influence was largely that of catalyst. He recognized an

issue that was in cyclical upswing and correctly gauged the nation's temper and the mood of a resurgent Congress.⁽¹⁵⁾ Congress had already started introducing legislation to improve human rights abroad through its financial leverage.

During Richard Nixon's presidency a committee of the House of Representatives, headed by Congressman Donald Fraser, held hearings on human rights which resulted in an amendment to the *Foreign Assistance Act* of 1961. Section 116 of the Act determines that the United States may give no assistance to the government of any country, which engages in a consistent pattern of gross violations of internationally recognized human rights, including torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment, prolonged detention without charge, or other flagrant denial of the right to life, liberty, and the security of person, unless such assistance will directly benefit the needy people in such a country.⁽¹⁶⁾ However, if such a government is given assistance, the President must report to Congress on the special circumstances which make this necessary; and if the House or Senate disagree with the Administration's justification they may initiate action to terminate assistance.

Congress also amended section 502b of the *International Security Assistance and Arms Export Control Act* in 1976, and introduced the prohibition of security assistance and arms sales to countries which are guilty of the systematic and gross violation of internationally recognized human rights. Only under "extraordinary circumstances" or to protect vital national interests may the President deviate from this rule.⁽¹⁷⁾ As a result President Carter discontinued military support to a number of Latin American governments which were not strategically important. However, there was no termination of military assistance programmes for this reason under his successor, President Reagan. The escape clause was not only used to justify US military support for undemocratic regimes such as those of the Shah of Iran, Marcos in the Philippines and Suharto in Indonesia, but it also illustrated the dependence of human rights variables on national



interests in US foreign policy.

In addition, Congress sought to promote human rights abroad by linking the activities of the World Bank and its affiliated institutions with regard to loans to human rights violations in recipient states. Section 701 of the *International Financial Institutions Act* of 1977 requires American Executive Directors of international financial institutions to oppose all financial or technical assistance to such countries, unless assistance is directed specifically to programmes serving the basic human needs of the citizens.⁽¹⁸⁾

Finally, Congress established the position of Coordinator for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs in the Department of State in 1976, later upgraded to Assistant Secretary. This piece of legislation required the Department of State to submit an annual public report (Country Reports) on the human rights situation in countries receiving US foreign aid, including information on the number of political prisoners, torture, arbitrary arrests and detention, arbitrary restriction of existing political rights, extralegal executions and unfair trials.⁽¹⁹⁾ This reporting obligation was later extended to all UN member states.

In conclusion, on the one hand such legislative measures confirm the impact of the convictions of at least a section of the foreign policymaking community on policy formulation, while on the other hand it exposes the link between promotion of these aspirations and the extent of US national interests abroad. However, since the US Constitution leaves the presidency in a better position to implement US foreign policy, it is also essential to consider the role of the Executive Branch in the realization of US human rights aspirations. As stated previously, two US administrations, Carter's and Reagan's, are the focus of attention here.

III. Carter, Reagan & Human Rights

Jimmy Carter regarded human rights as a major aspect of US foreign policy. While he was well aware of the limitations of such policies in

practice, he argued, "...I also believe that it is a mistake to undervalue the power of words and of the ideas that words embody. In the life of the human spirit, words are actions."⁽²⁰⁾ Among other measures, his administration opposed the Byrd Amendment permitting trade with Rhodesia and supported UN mandatory sanctions on the Ian Smith government; it voted in favour of a mandatory arms embargo on South Africa at the UN Security Council, accepted socio-economic human rights in principle, and submitted the two UN Covenants on Human Rights, the American Convention on Human Rights and the Convention on Racial Discrimination, to the Senate.⁽²¹⁾ On the other hand, in the case of Iran, the Shah released some political prisoners and, according to the Wall Street Journal, placed rugs in some Iranian prisons. Similarly massive US aid to South Korea continued even though General Park's regime frequently punished political dissent with imprisonment. Only in Latin American countries, where US interests were relatively minor, were arms sales linked to progress in human rights.⁽²²⁾

As far as US (military) aid was concerned, research has demonstrated that the most important factor in predicting the amount of money spent on aid was the assistance given in the previous year. In addition, there was hardly any difference in military aid given by the Carter and Carter Administrations. The researchers found that: 'There was a great deal of difference between the rhetoric and the reality of the Carter human rights policy as applied to aid distribution. The Carter Administration did not significantly withdraw material support from repressive US friends. It made ample use of the 'extraordinary circumstances' clause written into human rights legislation.'⁽²³⁾

Although the Carter Administration was not consistent in implementation of US human rights policy, it did at least encourage debate in this field and helped create a bureaucratic infrastructure to encourage improvements in human rights.⁽²⁴⁾ In 1974 there was only one official in the State Department who dealt with human rights on

a full time basis. This official was responsible for preparing US government positions on human rights issues at the United Nations. Carter substantially enlarged the apparatus dealing with human rights in the State Department. A bureau was created, headed by an Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs, Patricia Derian.⁽²⁵⁾ The staff was increased to thirty, ten of whom dealt solely with human rights matters. Others covered related issues such as refugees, disappearances and prisoners of war. In addition, an interdepartmental committee, chaired by Deputy Secretary of State Warren Christopher, dealt with the coordination of human rights policy with other policies, especially economic.⁽²⁶⁾ However, coordinating different interests was not always an easy task. The final say belonged to Christopher. As Patricia Derian put it, "it was one man, one vote - Christopher was the man and his was the vote".⁽²⁷⁾

Humanitarian Affairs was probably the most active section of the Christopher Group, arguing consistently for a broad, active human rights policy in the Multilateral Development Bank. On the other hand, three regional bureaux, Africa, East Asia, and Latin America, generally opposed Humanitarian Affairs' approach. They preferred to engage in private diplomacy to improve the observance of personal rights and, in some cases, political rights. Consequently, the primary conflict in the Group was between these three geographical areas and Humanitarian Affairs. Countries covered by the European, Near East and South Asian bureaux were rarely discussed.

The Carter strategy of pressuring countries where Washington had influence caused concern that the US was ignoring the worse records of other, less friendly, states. Even the high level Christopher Group was not able to establish clear policy criteria. According to one study, "doubts about the basic advisability of human rights policies were fed by scepticism that such policies could be applied consistently or fairly."⁽²⁸⁾

The Reagan Administration, which took over in January 1980, saw human rights as mainly instrumental in the foreign policy process. It believed that the Carter policy on human rights had cost the United States dear, particularly with the loss of Iran and Nicaragua. According to Jeane Kirkpatrick, "In each country the Carter Administration not only failed to prevent the undesired outcome, it actively collaborated in the replacement of moderate autocrats friendly to American interests with less friendly autocrats of extremist persuasion."⁽²⁹⁾ Only a few weeks after Reagan's inauguration, Secretary of State Alexander Haig announced at his first news conference that "international terrorism will take the place of human rights in our concern because it is the ultimate of abuses of human rights."⁽³⁰⁾

Reagan and his advisors saw the Carter Administration's policy as a primary cause of the United States' recent setbacks abroad, particularly in Nicaragua and Iran. The intellectual foundations of the Administration's policy were laid down by Jeane Kirkpatrick, a professor of government at Georgetown University. Her doctrine advocated preferential treatment for "authoritarian allies" over "totalitarian adversaries".⁽³¹⁾ The Reagan Administration basically maintained the human rights organization at the State Department as designed by Carter. However, it was clear that Reagan's interest in human rights was very limited and mainly instrumental. The Administration's first candidate for the position of Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights, Ernest Lefever, was rejected by a Republican-dominated Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Lefever had criticized President Carter for "trivializing" human rights by not seeing the subject as part of the Cold War. He also expressed the view that he was in favour of rolling back human rights legislation passed by Congress for the same reason. In addition, he had also accepted money to circulate views favourable to white minority rule in South Africa.⁽³²⁾

During the spring and summer of 1981 the Administration

seriously considered discontinuing Country Reports or giving the responsibility to the State Department's regional bureaux. President Reagan made no further nominations, and within the State Department high level policy discussions often excluded the Humanitarian Affairs bureau. Differentiation of "totalitarian" and "authoritarian" nations complicated efforts to assess human rights practices even-handedly. Furthermore, the focus on "international terrorism" seemed to divert attention from human rights, and complicated the interpretation and measurement of violations.⁽³³⁾ Finally, the Administration nominated Elliot Abrams for the position, and in doing so, made the commitment to continue the reporting process, but with a Reagan Administration stamp:

The Administration was to retain the format and style established under Derian along with the same basic production and review procedures. They were also to add introductions explaining administration policy and to alter limited aspects of the Report to mesh with their policies.⁽³⁴⁾ Despite this shaky start, the Country Reports continued to increase in consistency, length and public acceptance in general.

Like Jeane Kirkpatrick and Alexander Haig, Abrams believed that human rights should be subordinate to larger geopolitical concerns. His 1981 memo at the State Department stated bluntly that the very purpose of a human rights policy should be to convey to the public, at home and in Europe, just what the difference was between East and West. He encouraged the President to use human rights as a rhetorical weapon against Moscow. He told reporters in 1982, "It is not enough to ask who is in power and what is he like. We also have to ask what is the alternative, what are the likely prospects for improvement."⁽³⁵⁾ He was even more explicit by December 1983; "[human rights] are not a free-floating goal to be considered in isolation each morning. We do not betray the cause of human rights when we make prudential judgements about what can and can't be done in one place at one time."⁽³⁶⁾

The Reagan Administration introduced its own double standard for human rights. On the one hand, it adopted Kissingerian quiet diplomacy for its authoritarian friends; in the words of Elliot Abrams, "Traditional diplomacy has the drawback of being least visible precisely where it is most successful."⁽³⁷⁾ On the other hand, when it came to the unfriendly dictatorships, the Administration raised human rights issues as loudly and clearly as possible. As a result much publicity was paid to human rights situations in communist countries such as Cuba, Nicaragua, Czechoslovakia and the "evil empire" i.e. the USSR, while there was silence in the case of Turkey, Kenya, South Africa, Honduras and Indonesia. Of course, this did not go unnoticed. In 1987, Human Rights Watch and the Lawyers' Committee for Human Rights accused the Carter Administration of only paying attention to human rights violations by its opponents, leaving out those by its allies.⁽³⁸⁾ Having considered the Carter and Reagan approaches to human rights in general, it is now appropriate to move on to President Carter's human rights policy towards Pahlavi Iran, which involved much more complex processes and possibly more achievements than it has been given credit for.

Basic to the liberal legacy is Thomas Jefferson's belief, enshrined in the Declaration of Independence, that the purpose of government is to secure for its citizens their inalienable natural rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. "Whenever any form of government becomes destructive of those ends," he concluded, "it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it."⁽³⁹⁾ However, when the Iranian people finally rose against Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's autocratic and corrupt regime in 1978, even President Carter, known for his strong moral and human rights convictions, found himself supporting the Shah and his administration and tried hard to prevent the Pahlavi regime from power. How could this contradiction be rationally justified? Stephen Ambrose explains the reason behind US hostility towards change succinctly: Given the American habit of defining social change as Communist aggression, given the needs of American business to

maintain an extractive economy in the Third World, and given the military desire to retain bases around Russia and China, the United States had to set its face against revolution⁽⁴⁰⁾. While such an explanation may demonstrate the role of continuity in US foreign policy in general, it does not fully explain the complexity of Washington's Iran policy during the Carter Administration.

During the presidential campaign of 1976, Carter had preached a US foreign policy based on "constant decency in its values"⁽⁴¹⁾. He entered office at a difficult point in American history. The legacy of the Johnson and Nixon years was a loss of faith in the US government, both at home and abroad. The experiences of Vietnam and Watergate had raised the expectations of the nation for something more than 'politics as usual'. President Carter, elected by a slender majority, had campaigned for restoring morality to US domestic as well as foreign policy.⁽⁴²⁾ The issues of human rights and arms control were seen as the means by which morality could be restored to US foreign policy. This included the need to strengthen respect for human rights in countries around the world. Consequently, when he was elected to the White House, he ordered a review of arms sales to the Shah for the first time since 1972.

However, the President's moral commitment soon brought him into conflict with the reality of US-Iran relations. While the promotion of human rights was a matter of principle for the President, he was no idealist. He had inherited an Iran policy from his predecessors which required a fine balancing act between interests and values. US national interests in Iran were not negligible. Economically, lucrative US military contracts played an important role. American arms sales to Iran, which had totalled \$1.2 billion over the twenty-two years since 1950, increased almost sixteen-fold to a total of \$19.5 billion between 1972 and 1979⁽⁴³⁾. In addition, Iran's political and strategic role in the Middle East and Persian Gulf regions was very important for the Western alliance. His National Security Adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and the ambassador to Iran, William

Sullivan, urged continued support for the Shah.⁽⁴⁴⁾ During his visit to Tehran in December 1977, Carter also praised the Shah publicly: "... because of the great leadership of the Shah" Iran had become, "an island of stability in one of the more troubled areas of the world".⁽⁴⁵⁾ He also said that the Shah was an enlightened ruler who justly deserved his people's "admiration and love".

Does this not reduce his efforts to improve human rights to mere rhetoric? Governments command a great number of instruments which can be used to influence other governments' policy. They range from the "friendly request" to military intervention. It seems that the President had chosen a combination of "quiet diplomacy" and general public statements on human rights to promote human rights issues in Iran. Carter was clearly aware of the limitations of his human rights policy, "The result of our human rights policy will seldom be dramatic. There will be tension along the way, and we will often be perceived as either being too rash or too timid. But this is a small risk, compared to the risk assumed by brave men and women who live where repression has not yet yielded to liberty."⁽⁴⁶⁾ Nevertheless, he was hoping that the Shah would take notice of the attitude of his administration towards human rights issues.

What distinguished Carter from previous US leaders who had dealt with the Shah, with the exception of John F. Kennedy, was his consistent attempts to promote human rights and not to confine himself to rhetoric alone. He used the US aid instrument to illustrate his displeasure to violators of human rights. While the Administration did not publicly link foreign aid and human rights in the case of Iran, total US aid to Iran reached zero in 1977.

In addition, Carter emphasized the importance of human rights in both his meetings with the Shah. When the Shah visited the United States in November 1977, the President brought up the subject of human rights abuses in Iran at their private meeting and asked if there was anything that could be done to alleviate that problem.⁽⁴⁷⁾ The



Shah's reply was, "No, there is nothing I can do, I must enforce the Iranian laws, which are designed to combat communism."⁽⁴⁸⁾ As Carter remembers in his diary, "It was a sensitive subject between us, because some news sources had attributed the disturbances in Iran to my frequent statements in support of human rights throughout the world. Still, we ended our first meeting in good spirits."⁽⁴⁹⁾ Carter also referred to the same issue during his 24-hour stay in Tehran a month later, starting with a quote from the sixth-century great Persian poet, Saadi:

Human beings are like parts of a body, created from the same essence. When one part is hurt and in pain, others cannot remain in peace and quiet. If the misery of others leaves you indifferent and with no feelings of sorrow, then you cannot be called a human being.⁽⁵⁰⁾ So was the President successful in getting his message across to the Shah? It seems that the Shah did take some steps towards improving human rights in Iran before the revolutionary crisis began in 1978. The State Department's report to Congress in 1978 registered an improvement in human rights under the Shah: "Amnesty's 1977 report does not refer to any cases of torture. The International League for Human Rights' 1976-77 annual review does mention torture. In Congressional testimony on October 26, 1977, the Chairman of the Executive Committee of the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) stated that the ICJ was not aware of any case of torture in Iran for at least the previous ten to eleven months.... The Department of State itself has received in recent months significantly fewer allegations of torture in Iran than was the case in previous years and does not believe torture has been used recently."⁽⁵¹⁾

The report for the following year, however, indicates a reversal of the trend established in 1977, "Amnesty International reported that a mission it sent to Iran in November heard reports of numerous examples of torture used during interrogations and as punishment for political activities."⁽⁵²⁾ It could therefore be concluded that the Carter

policy did at least result in some minor human rights improvements in Iran before the revolutionary crisis of 1978-79 began. While with the overthrow of the Shah it was impossible to predict how the intended US reforms would have influenced the evolution of Iranian autocracy, the concept of human rights in its abstract and universal form did play an important role in the ensuing dynamic changes which followed.

IV. Unintended Consequences

The Carter Administration's human rights policy with regard to Iran also demonstrated the complex impact of democratic ideals on political processes, independent of the policy objectives that foreign governments pursue. Regardless of whether the Administration had any real achievements in promoting human rights overseas, Carter's human rights policy influenced the course of events in Iran during the revolutionary crisis in at least three different ways. First, the opposition's resolve to fight the Shah was strengthened by the perception that the Carter Administration was determined to improve human rights in Iran. Dumbrell put it succinctly: Ibrahim Yazdi, a naturalized American and a close adviser to Khomeini, gave his opinion to the Ayatollah in November 1976 that the 'liberals' were back in power in Washington. The 'Shah's friends are out', he advised, it 'is time to act'... Some opposition members continued to hope, even after the New Year visit, that Carter would extend his human rights policies to Iran....⁽⁵³⁾

In late October 1979, just before the hostages were taken, the Iran Country Director at the State Department, Henry Precht, was in Iran and met the influential Ayatollah Hossein Montazeri. Referring to President Carter's election, the Ayatollah told Henry Precht that he was in prison when he heard the news, and added: "my heart lifted up, that now an American who would pay attention to human rights is in the White House."⁽⁵⁴⁾ While Montazeri implied that he was later disappointed when he saw the President's support for the Shah, the



fact remains that the opposition's perception that the new US Administration valued human rights increased their optimism in pressing for change.

Second, what complemented this subjective force was the Shah's own sense of vulnerability resulting from the suspicion that the Carter Administration wanted to remove him from power. This perception weakened his resolve and encouraged him to take a course of action that he thought the Administration wanted him to adopt, rather than the one he would have otherwise taken. He knew he owed his throne to the United States, and believed that without US support he would be unable to remain in power. He was never fond of "American liberals". Recalling the Kennedy era, he stated:

The early sixties were a particularly turbulent time for us. They coincided with the advent of the Kennedy Administration and increased US intrigue against our country.... The US pressed me to name Ali Amini, Mossadegh's Minister of Economics and by then an opposition leader, as Prime Minister.... In May 1961 I gave in and appointed Amini to head the government.⁽⁵⁵⁾

The Shah America's post-war history is an uninterrupted demand that the rest of the world resemble America, no matter what the history - political, economic and social - of other nations might have been. The example of Vietnam haunts me still.... Ngo Dinh Diem refused to bend his policies to an unrealizable democratic ideal as pronounced by dogmatic young journalists. It was apparent that the Kennedy Administration ordered Diem's removal.⁽⁵⁶⁾

The Shah did not feel comfortable with Carter either. While he saw Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford as 'friends', he referred to Jimmy Carter as 'a smart man'. Recalling the President's 'prepared remarks' at dinner during his visit to Tehran in 1977, the Shah noted, "I have never heard a foreign statesman speak of me in quite such flattering terms as he used that evening."⁽⁵⁷⁾

The Shah did not believe in a democratic political system for Iran: Democracy is an historical process that cannot be imposed by

fiat, either from the bottom or the top, though my own experience suggests that gradual introduction from the top that allows time for adjustments is more effective than violent upheaval from below.⁽⁵⁸⁾

In practice he never took any steps towards the genuine democratization of Iranian society. He had a conspiratorial and paranoid mind-set, possibly resulting from his own experience of being installed in power by the CIA, and perceived all manifestations of desire for democratic ideals as a conspiracy. With reference to his trip to the United States in 1962, he recalled:

The first student demonstrations against my regime broke out... interestingly enough, in the United States.... Clearly this was part of an organized effort to discredit me and my government. I cannot help but believe that the oil companies and an organization like the CIA were somehow involved in fomenting and financing this campaign against me.... For the next twenty years students and media echoed the same anti-Iran themes intermittently, whenever the West felt my wings needed clipping. The late fifties and early sixties were one such period. The years after the oil embargo and the hike in world oil prices were another.⁽⁵⁹⁾

The Shah therefore saw the encouragement of liberalization in Iran by the Carter Administration as another conspiracy to remove him from power. He wrote in exile, "I did not know it then - perhaps I did not want to know - but it is clear to me now that the Americans wanted me out."⁽⁶⁰⁾ The Carter Administration had brought many liberals together with whom the Shah disagreed over the way the revolutionary crisis was to be contained: What was I to make, for example, of the Administration's sudden decision to call former Under Secretary of State George Ball to the White House as an advisor on Iran? I knew that Ball was no friend and I understood that he was working on a special report concerning Iran.... I read [it] months later in exile and found my worst fears confirmed.⁽⁶¹⁾

He also regarded Secretary of State Cyrus Vance's support for the liberalization programme as "Herculean fantasies" which "left me



stunned."⁽⁶²⁾ However, he appreciated the NSC Adviser's approach: "... Zbigniew Brzezinski, at least, had his priorities straight. He called me in early November to urge that I establish law and order first, and only then continue our democratization programme."⁽⁶³⁾ Suspicious of an American conspiracy to remove him from power, he saw no other choice but to give in to the Administration's demand for liberalization during those turbulent times: "The West still urged me to continue my liberalization program, while maintaining law and order. Unfortunately, liberalization with a gun pointed at one's head has inherent limitations."⁽⁶⁴⁾ In short, the Shah's perception of American motives behind human rights improvements in Iran weakened his resolve to use the iron fist against the opposition.

Finally, the institutionalization of human rights within the State Department led to bureaucratic discord, resulting in developments which influenced Iranian perceptions of American motives on both sides of the political divide. Following the Jaleh Square massacres in September 1978 and the increase in anti-Shah demonstrations, Iran's military regime asked Washington for riot control equipment including tear gas canisters. The related bureaux of the Department of State agreed to authorize the deal; however, the Humanitarian Affairs bureau blocked it. This meant that the Secretary of State would have to intervene.⁽⁶⁵⁾ Although the order was finally approved, the delay which was caused in the process sent different signals to the Shah and the opposition as to whether the US supported the Shah fully.

In conclusion, there were many objective and subjective reasons behind the collapse of the Shah's regime, elaboration on which is beyond the scope of this paper. However, suffice it to say that President Carter's human rights policy had an important impact on the interaction of some of these factors.

Conclusion

To sum up, there emerges a consistent pattern of links between American human rights aspirations and US national interests in the

conduct of US foreign policy. This on the one hand contradicts the proposition that American values automatically promote human rights and democratic ideals abroad. On the other hand it demonstrates that, while American values and universal human rights share the same theoretical roots, the human rights aspirations of the United States' government are more limited in their scope, and are dominated by what policymakers perceive as the country's national interests.

In this sense, human rights has played an instrumental role in US foreign policy rhetoric. However, as was demonstrated in the case of Carter's human rights approach to Iran, it is important to note that human rights discourse can have its own independent impact on political developments in a given country, regardless of US policy intention. President Carter was genuinely interested in the promotion of human rights, and his administration took concrete steps to institutionalize human rights in the US policy-making process, adopting a more active human rights-orientated foreign policy. However, while the President's approach to Iran was normatively superior to that of his predecessors, in practice the Administration found that its ability to manoeuvre politically was restrained by the extent of US interests. While Carter reminded the Shah of the importance of human rights on both occasions they met, the growing revolutionary situation in Iran and the extensive US interests in that country left the President with no other option but to give public support to the Shah's regime. Whatever the criticism of the Carter presidency and his handling of US foreign policy, Jimmy Carter remains the most important high-level US policymaker who sought to institutionalize human rights in the foreign policy process.

By the time the Reagan Administration took over, the rationale of human rights discourse had become so dominant that the Administration failed to implement its roll back policy fully. Reagan finally combined Kissingerian quiet diplomacy with Carter's moralism in a Machiavellian synthesis to advance what he perceived as US national interests.



Decades after Carter-Reagan attempts to find the right balance between American human rights values and US interests, US foreign policy-makers continue to demonize their adversaries by using human rights rhetoric, be it China, Iran or Russia. At the same time, they systematically support and defend US allies such as Israel, which has the worst record of human rights abuses and war crimes in the Middle East. At the time of writing this article, the tacit US support for Saudi Arabian bombardment of another sovereign state, Yemen, which has killed thousands of innocent people in a war of aggression, confirms the thesis that Washington does not really value human rights.

What then should the countries subjected to US human rights rhetoric do? Given that in general the countries under US propaganda attack have no worse record (if not better) on the issue than the US itself, the following recommendations come to mind:

1. These states should seek to improve their human rights records for their own sake, not because of hypocritical pressure from Washington but because expanding human rights of citizens would lead to increased social cohesion, which will in turn contribute to maintaining, enhancing and deepening trust between the state and society. A state that enjoys the overwhelming majority support and respect of its citizens is in a stronger position to reject and resist US human rights accusations.

2. To contain US aggression, a genuine social and political consciousness based on equality and humanity, and committed to international peace, harmony and prosperity is needed. This requires a long term strategy for deconstructing the dominant Western liberal human rights discourse and exposing its inner theoretical and empirical contradictions. The US as a hegemonic power is of great value in this process. Despite lofty words in defence of human rights from its leaders, US history and politics contain numerous dark episodes, including the genocide of its own native population, continuing institutional racism against its non-WASP population⁽⁶⁶⁾, support for authoritarian and fascist regimes and finally, being a party

to war crimes either committed by NATO or US satellite states.

The best defence for any government seeking to block US rhetorical aggression, is a well-informed, fair and thoughtful citizenry who would not fall for frivolous commentary on human rights from the most aggressive nation on the planet. The educational system and the mass media can play an important role in explaining not only the competing approaches to human rights but also the practical obstacles where there are different socio-cultural, historical, developmental, discursive and ideological challenges.

3. When exposing Washington's systematic human rights abuses abroad and at home, states should adopt an objective, balanced and transparent approach. The emphasis on objectivity is fundamental, since any exaggeration may lead to an adverse effect as far as world public opinion is concerned. Washington's demagogic tactics have been the main reason for its own moral standing on the issue being discredited. The decline of US moral leadership is partly the product of the contradiction between its words and its deeds, as well as the double standards it applies to friends and foes when it comes to democracy and human rights.

Notes

1. David P. Forsythe, 'Human Rights in US Foreign Policy: Retrospect and Prospect', *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 105, No. 3, 1990, p. 437.
2. Ibid, pp. 436-437.
3. The Senator spoke in favour of ratification every day the Senate was in session from 1967 until the resolution on ratification was adopted in 1986 - over three thousand speeches. In recognition of his important contribution to the ratification effort, the Senate Committee on the Judiciary decided that the Genocide Convention Implementation Act of 1988 would also be known as the Proxmire Act [See Lawrence J. LeBlanc, *The United States and the Genocide Convention* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 6].
4. Natalie Hevener Kaufman, **Human Rights Treaties and the Senate: A History of Opposition** (Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990) p. 62. For a detailed account of the American critique of the treaty, also see pp. 37-63.
5. *Congressional Record*, 1951, cited in Natalie, Hevener Kaufman, p. 64.
6. 'The President's News Conference, 15 December 1977', *Public Papers of the Presidents, Jimmy Carter*, Vol. II, 1977, p. 2115.
7. Charles W. Kegley Jr. & Eugene R. Wittkopf, *American Foreign Policy: Pattern & Process* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), 4th edition, p. 252.
8. The Department of State Bulletin, October 1988, p. 56.
9. For more details see John G. Stoessinger, **Crusaders and Pragmatists: Movers of Modern American Foreign Policy** (New York, London: W. W. Norton & Co., 2nd edition, 1985) p. 13.
10. Ibid., p. 14.
11. Lloyd Jensen, *Explaining Foreign Policy* (Englewood Cliffs N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1982), p. 84, cited in Peter Baehr, *The Role of Human Rights in Foreign Policy* (Macmillan Press Ltd., 1996), 2nd edition, p. 84.
12. For an account of differences between Carter and Kissinger see John G. Stoessinger, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 250-263.
13. Peter R. Baehr, *The Role of Human Rights in Foreign Policy* (Macmillan Press Ltd., 1996), 2nd edition, p. 85.
14. Henry Kissinger, *The Process of Detente, American Foreign Policy*, (New York:

- Norton, 1977) 3rd edition, pp. 141-176.
15. Sandra Vogelgesang, 'What Price Principle? US Policy on Human Rights', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 56, no. 4, July 1978, p. 820.
 16. *United States Statute At Large* (Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 1977), Vol. 89, p. 860.
 17. *United States Statute At Large* (Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 1977), Vol. 90, Part I, pp. 748-749.
 18. *United States Statute At Large* (Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 1978) Vol. 91, pp. 1069-1070.
 19. Judith Innes de Neufville, 'Human Rights reporting as a Policy Tool: An Examination of the State Department Country Report', *Human Rights Quarterly*, Vol. 8, No. 4, November 1986, p. 684.
 20. Speech at the University of Notre Dame, 22 May 1977, cited in Peter R. Baehr, p. 89.
 21. David P Forsythe, p. 440.
 22. John G. Stoessinger, p. 279.
 23. David Carleton and Michael Stohl, 'The Foreign Policy of Human Rights: Rhetoric and Reality from Jimmy Carter to Ronald Reagan', *Human Rights Quarterly*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (May 1985), p. 216.
 24. There was a dramatic increase in unofficial activity within the United States and elsewhere to complement the moves of official international actors. The "human rights lobby" on Capitol Hill and in New York grew from a relative handful with no voice in the early 1970s to over 50 organizations exercising major influence through congressional testimony, background information for US legislation and UN deliberations, pressure on multinational firms and operation of a communication "internet" [Sandra Vogelgesang, 'What Price Principle? US Policy on Human Rights', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 56, No. 4, July 1978, p. 825].
 25. Patricia Derian was a Mississippi civil rights advocate with a well-established commitment to human rights. A political appointee with little foreign policy background and an outsider to Washington DC, she shaped the institutional role of Human Affairs in executive decision-making and fought vociferously for the incorporation of human rights concerns into US foreign policy. See Edwin S Maynard, 'The Bureaucracy and Implementation of US Human Rights Policy', *Human Rights Quarterly*, Vol. 11, No. 2, May 1989, p. 179.
 26. The Inter-Agency Group on Human Rights and Foreign Assistance, better known as the Christopher Group, included representatives from all interested State Department bureaux and offices as well as the Treasury, Defense, Agriculture, Commerce, and Labor Departments, the National Security Council, the Export-Import Bank, and the Agency for International Development. For a better comprehension of the function of the Group and the complexity of the inter-departmental dynamics coordinating broader US interests with human rights policy, see Edward S. Maynard's work above, pp.205-212.



27. Ibid., p. 210.
28. Judith Innes de Neufville, 'Human Rights reporting as a Policy Tool: An Examination of the State Department Country Report', *Human Rights Quarterly*, Vol. 8, No. 4, November 1986, p. 685. For the details of how research methods and procedures were improved, see pp. 684-688.
29. Jeane Kirkpatrick, 'Dictatorships and Double Standards', *Commentary*, November 1979, p. 34.
30. Tamar Jacoby, 'The Reagan Turnaround on Human Rights', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 64, No. 5, Summer 1986, p. 1069.
31. Jeane Kirkpatrick, 'Dictatorship and Double Standards', *Commentary*, November 1979, pp. 34-45.
32. '**Nomination of Ernest W. Lefever**' *Hearings, Senate Committee on Foreign Relations*, 97th Cong., 1st sess., 18, 19 May, 4, 5, June 1981 (Washington, DC.: GPO, 1981), cited in David P. Forsythe, p. 442.
33. Judith Innes de Neufville, p. 688.
34. Ibid., p. 689.
35. Tamar Jacoby, p. 1078.
36. Ibid.
37. US Department of State, **Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1981**, February 1982, p. 11.
38. Lawyers' Committee for Human Rights, *Human Rights and US Foreign Policy*, New York, 1992, p. 8.
39. Kegley & Wittkopf, p. 249.
40. Stephen E. Ambrose, *Rise to Globalism: American Foreign Policy Since 1983* (Penguin Books, 5th edition, 1988), p. 146. The Cold War era had its own logic. While Washington resisted change in countries allied to it, in Eastern and Central Europe the US media and leaders addressed the "captive nations" living under Communism, encouraging them to rise up against their repressive governments. As Norman Graebner has argued, "American policy was designed to create maximum change behind the Iron Curtain and to prevent it elsewhere." [Ibid., p. 146].
41. James E. Dougherty & Robert L. Pfaltzgraff Jr., **American Foreign Policy: FDR to Reagan** (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), p.284.
42. Sandra Vogelgesang, p. 821.
43. Stephen E Ambrose, p.306.
44. See Zbigniew Brzezinski, **Power and Principle: Memoirs of a National Security Adviser**, 1977-1981 (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1983); & William H. Sullivan, *Mission to Iran* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981).
45. 'Tehran, Iran, Toasts of the President & the Shah at a State Dinner', **Public Papers of the Presidents**, *Jimmy Carter*, Vol. II, 1977, p. 2221.
46. 'The President's News Conference, 15 December 1977', *Public Papers of the Presidents*, *Jimmy Carter*, Vol. II, 1977, p. 2116.

47. Jimmy Carter, **Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President** (Toronto, New York, London, Sydney: Bantam Books, 1982), p. 436.
48. Ibid.
49. Ibid., 437.
50. 'Toast of the President & the Shah at a State Dinner, Tehran Iran', **Public Papers of the Presidents**, *Jimmy Carter*, Vol. II, 1977. p. 2222.
51. **Country Reports on Human Rights Practices**, Report Submitted to the Committee on International Relations, US House of Representatives & Committee on Foreign Relations, US Senate, by the Department of State, 3 February 1978 (Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 1978), p. 352.
52. **Country Reports on Human Rights Practices**, Report Submitted to the Committee on International Relations, US House of Representatives & Committee on Foreign Relations, US Senate, by the Department of State, 8 February 1979 (Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 1979), p. 550.
53. John Dumbrell, **The Carter Presidency: A Re-evaluation** (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 2nd edition, 1995) p. 164.
54. **Interview with Henry Precht**, Washington DC, 11 April 1997.
55. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, *Answer to History* (New York: Stein and Day, 1980) p. 146.
56. Ibid., pp.27-28.
57. Ibid., p. 152.
58. Ibid., p. 28.
59. Ibid., p. 146.
60. Ibid, p. 165.
61. Ibid., p. 169.
62. Ibid., pp.164-165.
63. Ibid., p. 165.
64. Ibid., p. 170.
65. **Interview with Henry Precht**, Washington DC, 11 April 1997.
66. WASP stands for White Anglo-Saxon Protestant.

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