

# The Carter Administration and Human Rights—Part II

## A Commitment Sustained Patricia Derian

Enhancing respect for human rights and human dignity is a fundamental objective of U.S. foreign policy. It is an objective based on our laws, our international obligations, and on the strong personal commitment of President Carter. The human rights policy, after a year, already has changed the way



this country is seen by others, placing us more and more frequently, as President Carter has said, "with the tortured and the unjustifiably imprisoned, and with those that have been silenced."

We have done that, and more. No government today doubts that this nation stands for the same ideals and values abroad that we assert at home. We freely acknowledge our own internal flaws and readily admit that there is much to do to assure full equality with economic opportunity for all our citizens. But searching for solutions at home should not detract from our concerns for others abroad, or our obligations—under the U.N. Charter, under our laws, and under our traditions—to stand for the same values beyond our frontiers as we pursue at home.

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President Carter's determination to establish a new dimension in U.S. foreign policy has been evident during his travels abroad—in his public statements and in his meetings with human rights advocates. When he talked with Cardinal Arns in Brazil, the message of U.S. concern for individual rights echoed beyond Brazil's borders. Vice-President Mondale also raised human rights issues in his visits to Indonesia and the Philippines. At the conclusion of that trip in May he said: "If our foreign policy is to be credible, enduring and effective, it must be based on those principles of human rights: the right to live without fear of cruel and degrading treatment; to participate in the decisions of government; to achieve social justice; and to seek peaceful change. We can take great pride in our military strength and our economic prowess, but the greatest source of American influence is the power of our example."

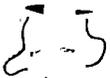
There are some who would trade one set of rights for another, claiming, for example, that the pursuit of economic rights justifies political repression. Rejecting that criticism, President Carter told the Indian Parliament: "There are those who say that democracy is a kind of rich man's plaything and that the poor are too preoccupied with survival to care about the luxury of freedom and the right to choose their own government. This argument is repeated all over the world—mostly, I have noticed, by persons whose own bellies are full and who speak from positions of privilege and power in their own societies. Their argument reminds me of a statement made by a great President of the United States, Abraham Lincoln. He said, 'Whenever I hear anyone arguing for slavery, I feel a strong impulse to see it tried on him personally.'"

We have implemented the policy with the following three principles:

- It is a global policy, not aimed at any particular country but asserting the ultimate ideal of the full exercise of human rights for all peoples.
- The policy should be implemented pragmatically, with tactics that take account of the individual situation in each country. In every case judgments must be made to find the action most likely to edge aside the curtain of repression.
- Human rights does not replace other objectives of U.S. foreign policy, some reaching to the very core of our security. But human rights objectives no longer are shunted aside. They have moved from the wings to the

knack. It comes easily from the lips of those who deny the right to liberty but rationalize it by extolling the right to food, shelter, medical care, and other good things that may be found in any well-ordered prison. So Carter can now hear the tune whistled back at him anytime he makes a decision someone finds disagreeable. Perhaps to his credit, perhaps to his dismay, some allusion to human rights has become standard for political polemics in every province of the globe. Carter even got it from Reaganites, arguing that Panama's Torrijos showed insufficient regard for human rights to be trusted with the Canal.

As a professed disciple of Reinhold Niebuhr, Carter might have shown greater awareness of political ambiguities, of the limitations on American capacity to remake the world, and of the dangers of moralistic posturing. But he could win votes by going around telling the American people they were good and he would give them a government as good as they were. The promise was nailed down as this strange Niebuhrian evangelical with no apparent consciousness of sin presented himself as a politician who simply would not lie. Yet, when he made a fumbling attempt at identification with the *Playboy* audience by confessing his fair share of lust, and then found himself in trouble, his first and



center stage of American foreign policy decisionmaking, and they will be pursued along with other significant interests.

We find, not infrequently, that our long-term security interests are best served by an active and vigorous effort to achieve our human rights concerns. As Deputy Secretary of State Warren Christopher stated: "The pursuit of this cause is not an ideological luxury cruise with no practical port of call. Our idealism and our self-interest coincide. Widening the circle of countries which share our human rights values is at the very core of our security interests."

Some critics refer to "inconsistency" in the human rights policy. This argument implies that we should view each nation as a replica of every other nation and apply automatic formulas to them all. Such critics feel they make a telling, devastating point when they observe, for example, that we have not treated the Soviet Union the same way we have treated Nicaragua. It is never clear whether the critics feel we should do more with respect to the Soviet Union or less with respect to Nicaragua. It is never clear why the critics feel that because you can't help people everywhere, you shouldn't help people somewhere when you are able to do so. Their conclusion is a prescription for business as usual. It is a prescription we reject. Instead, we candidly recognize that diversity of cultures and interests and different stages of economic and political maturity make it essential to treat each country on the merits of its own situation. It would be impossible to pursue our human rights objectives in precisely the same way for all countries, and silly to try. In short, tactics must differ from country to country, but our goal—to enhance respect for human rights—remains constant as to all countries.

instinctive reaction was to see if he could escape by not staying strictly with the truth.

Now, after the Lance and Marston affairs, no one considers Carter above a little pragmatic deception. And after a year of foreign policy bumps, he deals with shahs, sheiks, and Soviets from a more modest stance. He may in fact now stand closer to Christian realism.

Commendable as this shift appears in some respects, the American people *do* have an authentic concern for human rights, mixed as it is with some less admirable traits. And they will not now want this cause lost altogether to cynicism or relativism. But any renewal of emphasis should perhaps begin with the biblical principle of first taking the beam out of one's own eye before hunting specks in the eyes of political rivals.

Alas, the principal purpose of Carter's crusade for human rights was to keep Americans from having to think about what went wrong in Vietnam, and after that in a few other places such as Chile. Even if, as Guenter Lewy and others argue, the United States did not commit officially sanctioned war crimes in Vietnam, the war itself was a crime. When Americans discover what that blockage of vision got them into, then they may have something more positive to offer the world than slaps at a little fellow like Nicaragua.

The State Department's Bureau of Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs has worked long and hard with other parts of the department to explore ways of promoting human rights. At times we have stressed private diplomatic dialogue, and in other instances public comments have been used to convey our concerns. The power of words to expose injustice and bring to bear the weight of world opinion has been evident throughout the course of the past year.

However, the implementation of our policy has not been confined to words alone. During the past fifteen months, we have deferred bilateral economic assistance or opposed loans by the World Bank and other international financial institutions to countries that seriously violate human rights. Where projects have carried benefits directly to the needy, we generally have supported them. We believe that the international economic system, with limited resources to be transferred, should demonstrate that benefits accrue to those countries that promote human rights and are restricted for those who violate them. Human rights concerns have prompted us to reduce or deny increases in military aid to some countries, to withhold licenses for arms sales, and to limit other aspects of our military relationship.

To those who are unable to live with a complex policy being applied in a complex world the beacon of the human rights policy always will appear dim. Let them ask the repressive governments whether the U.S. has raised the priority of human rights in its bilateral relationships, and let them ask the dissidents in any of those countries. For seventeen months the human rights policy of the United States has been casting new rays of light and hope into dark corners of nations. That light will continue because it is right and because it is in our national interest.