Lobbying for Human Rights

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The oppressed peoples of Latin America are abundantly represented these days in Washington. A human rights lobby, motivated by idealism of ideology rather than economic gain, carries an often eloquent approximation of the Latins’ case to Congress and the executive branch. These efforts are low-budget but high-key and, according to those being lobbied, can be every bit as influential as those of the sugar or arms interests.

Whether the lobby is truly effective at saving lives and protecting rights depends ultimately on whether the government it seeks to influence is effective at those tasks—and that remains an open issue in this contentious capital. The lobby, which already had established a rapport with sympathetic congressmen during Gerald Ford’s presidency, now has at least as intimate a working relationship with the expanded human rights section of President Carter’s State Department.

With the Carter administration such a compliant target, the lobbyists find many other forums to promote their causes: urging legislation to restrict U.S. relations with countries violating rights; testifying in favor of such bills when they reach committees; sponsoring visits of exiled victims of oppression to dramatize their plight before the Congress, executive branch, and press; funneling information on alleged rights violations to the Department of State’s Bureau of Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs or to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights; even holding art shows and folk concerts to benefit the causes.

The lobby is diverse. Many of the organizations, such as Amnesty International, seek to protect rights worldwide and send representatives to Washington intermittently. Those here that specialize in Latin America have their counterparts for other regions. But all considered, those concerned with the Latins seem to have the most coherent approach.

According to Patricia Derian, head of the Rights Bureau at the State Department, the Latin rights lobby “approaches the Jewish community in its effectiveness.” In response to the lobby or not, the Carter administration seems to have taken its rights initiatives most consistently in Latin America. The least charitable explanation for this is that Latin America is the one area where U.S. influence is great and strategic costs are minimal. That has generally been the case in the past, however—except for the early Sixties, when Cuba’s alignment with the Soviets was perceived as an area-wide threat—and little thought was given to human rights initiatives then.

A State Department officer with long experience in the area put it more cynically: “We’ve always tried to protect human rights, it was just a question of whose.” It is the disposition of the present administration to intervene on behalf of the poor and its opposition to right-wing dictatorships that gives the lobbied, and the lobby, a new dynamic.

It was Chile specifically that gave impetus to the change. While unrepresentative governments had come and gone in most of the area’s nations, and the small U.S. community engaged in Latin America had learned to live with their leaders, in Chile the Americans had always dealt with democrats. When the military ended the democratic tradition with the coup against President Salvador Allende in 1973, they pricked consciences in Washington. This concern became pronounced as the oppression widened from a focus on Marxists to include the Christian Democrats who had worked so closely with the Americans while in power from 1964 to 1970.

Following the Chilean coup the Protestant and Catholic churches took up lobbying without necessarily calling it that. Thomas Quigley of the U.S. Catholic Conference became a channel of information to Washington from the largely Catholic Latin nations. The Reverend William Wipfle, director of the human rights office of the National Council of Churches, though based in New York, played a parallel role.

In 1974 the Reverend Joseph Eldridge opened an offshoot of the National Council of Churches, the Washington Office on Latin America. WOLA now has seven employees and numerous volunteers, but it is indelibly Eldridge’s operation. While his concerns cover the spectrum of Latin American issues, his passion is human rights. Besides being a persistent persuader in search of rights-oriented legislation on Capitol Hill, WOLA offers a platform for out-of-power politicians passing through. These visitors, whatever their own past
record, find it politic to wrap themselves in the rights issue in Washington.

When a medical society had its convention here, attending exiled doctors from Uruguay, Argentina, and Chile held a press conference at WOLA's Capitol Hill offices to accuse the military regimes at home of threatening the right to life of the poor through insufficient medical care and infant nourishment. As elections approached in El Salvador, WOLA offered a lunch for reporters at the Press Club to hear Napoleon Duarte of the Christian Democratic party describe his ouster by the military after having won the previous presidential election.

The journalists who attended largely comprised a press substratum of Washington that is important to the Hemisphere's perception of the rights issue: the wire service reporters assigned to cover developments here for client media in Latin America. Duarte's prediction that the election would be fraudulent—as indeed it turned out to be—did not appear in the Washington Post or Star, but it went out to Latin capitals on the Spanish services of UPI, AP, Reuters, Agence France-Presse, the Italian ANSA, and Spanish EFE.

There is not much new in fraud charges, but the temper of Washington being what it is, the allegations are likely to be described these days as a violation of the right to choose one's government.

While WOLA acts always with an eye to the press potential of its actions, Lawrence Birns's Council on Hemispheric Affairs relies almost entirely on press releases for its sometimes considerable impact—unfriendly critics would substitute "bombast" for "impact." Rights coordinator Derian at the State Department says that "most of the organizations seem to have come about because of the impetus of one concerned individual." Birns of COHA clearly is one of those.

While COHA's board includes some distinguished members—the widely respected scholar-activist Kalman Silvert was a founding force before his death in 1976—Birns is a one-man band. He lives in New York but comes often to Washington and sometimes, incredibly, is in both places at the same moment. COHA does not spend much money; what it has comes from unions, foundations, Birns's family. Birns is not interested only in human rights, but the issue is his entrée. His dogged hounding of Carter's choice for the top Latin America post in the State Department, Terence Todman, focused on what Birns said was Todman's incompatibility with the administration emphasis on human rights.

As in all the COHA campaigns—against Argentine, Chilean, and Nicaraguan powers that be—Birns infuriated his adversaries in the Todman case. It may be that his outraged releases to the press had no effect on the decision, one year into the Carter government, to move Todman out. But the public record shows that Birns, virtually alone, advocated such a course in the open.

Birns's effectiveness lies in his willingness—no, compulsion—to state for the record what bureaucrats sometimes and journalists almost always would like to see spelled out publicly. For example, a press release from COHA, dated June 22, purports to report on a "country-by-country human rights" survey. It states that, "Concerning Argentina, the region's worst transgressor, COHA's researchers found that abductions, disappearances, torture and right-wing terrorism continue." Heady material for a Washington-based wire service reporter compiling a file on Washington's attitude toward Argentina. In fact, though, there was no COHA report other than the nine-page press release itself. And though COHA defines itself as a "non-profit research and informational organization," there is no research as that word is normally defined.

Birns embodies what the more conservative field workers in human rights regard as the offensive overkill of zealots in Washington. A Chilean priest put the question in terms of his own experience in dealing with rights violators in his country: "If you try to get them out of their ignorance just by sending them to Hell, they're not going to pay any attention....You can shout or you can go to a general and reason with him."
The Lobbied:

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Chances are that the general will have heard of COHA, and if that acronym comes up in the conversation, chances are that he will be unwilling to reason. Nevertheless, most rights activists ascribe an important role to publicity, of which Birns is a heavy-duty generator.

"The threat of negative international public opinion is one of the most important pressures on repressive governments," said Derian's deputy, Mark Schneider. "I would not agree that going public is detrimental—at times it's essential." Schneider is a former aide to Senator Edward Kennedy who has both a congressional and executive-branch perspective. Schneider has high praise for the rights lobby, especially as a reporting medium—flagging critical situations to which his other sources of information, U.S. diplomats, have no access. At the same time, Schneider acknowledges the need for a corrective lens in dealing with rights lobby groups: an awareness that ultimately almost all of them have interests other than protection of the rights specified in the U.N. or Inter-American rights charters.

Birns, for example, is interested not only in correcting the rights abuses of authoritarian governments but in the replacement of those governments by democratic socialists. Even more blatantly political, and often less candidly so, are such groups with Washington offices as the Chile Committee for Human Rights, the Panamanian Committee for Human Rights, or the Argentine Commission for Human Rights. These groups serve the interests of politicians out of power, and more (blatantly) so, are such groups with Washington offices as the Chile Committee for Human Rights, the Panamanian Committee for Human Rights, or the Argentine Commission for Human Rights. These groups serve the interests of politicians out of power, and often more so. Schneider has high praise for the rights lobby, especially as a reporting medium—flagging critical situations to which his other sources of information, U.S. diplomats, have no access. At the same time, Schneider acknowledges the need for a corrective lens in dealing with rights lobby groups: an awareness that ultimately almost all of them have interests other than protection of the rights specified in the U.N. or Inter-American rights charters.

Bolivian Luis Reque, who served as executive secretary of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights through its first seventeen years, has come to distrust politicians who turn to human rights advocacy only when they are out of the palace. The commission, based in Washington, has published the testimony of reborn Cubans in Miami many times over the years, underlining the undoubted infringements of the rights of some of those still on the island. But, warns Reque, "If those in Miami returned to Havana, there would be blood. No doubt of that."

Within the WOLA staff itself, Uruguayan exile Juan Ferreira offers Washington a vivid case history of rights violations but also of the singlemindedness of political orientation. He and his father, former senator Wilson Ferreira Aldunate, were hounded from Uruguay because of their defense of that country's democracy—which the military destroyed in 1973. After taking refuge in Argentina, they survived the assassination of two fellow prominent Uruguayan democrats in Buenos Aires, and moved on. Juan Ferreira is courageous and eloquent, and on the basis of recognition and respect in the halls of power in Washington he is far more representative of Uruguay than its ambassador. He is also at least as dedicated to his own vision of what Uruguay should be as is the ambassador. WOLA willy-nilly becomes an associate of his ambitions, as do, ultimately, the Protestant churchgoers who pay its way.

The Carter government, meanwhile, continues to issue its official invitations to the Uruguayan ambassador and to proclaim that oft-violated principle of nonintervention in Latin American affairs, even as it offers tea, sympathy, and supporting policy to the Ferreiras. The dilemma implicit here bothers some officials. It does not seem to concern the lobbyists.

COHA, too, has an associate with a special interest, Argentine-born Gino Lofredo. He and another American citizen, Olga Talimante, who was jailed in Argentina, founded the U.S. branch of the Argentine Commission for Human Rights. In Europe the branches are manned by exiled Argentine leftists. When the Justice Department acted on a complaint—apparently originating in the Argentine embassy—that the commission was lobbying for foreign interests without registering, Lofredo dissolved the commission and moved into COHA. The Justice Department appears to have abandoned the
case, apparently foundering on the question of what foreign government's interests would be involved.

Lofredo, working with Argentine exile organizations, has helped compile exhaustive lists of Argentine prisoners and missing persons that the U.S. Government has submitted to the military rulers in Buenos Aires. He is also author of a document that circulated anonymously in Washington purporting to be an intelligence estimate that repression clogging the Argentine jails was setting the stage for riots. It was written in the imitable style of a State Department political officer.

For all the questionable motivations that sometimes slip in under the banner of human rights, the results are often gratifying to concerned officials. Mark Schneider, referring to legislation restricting U.S. aid to countries violating human rights, said: "These provisions were a result in part of the lobbying efforts of the human rights groups. They were essential." Actually, while Schneider the senate staffer has championed those legislative restrictions, he now finds them sometimes rigid. Does he favor them? Usually quick to reply, he hesitated, then responded, "I would probably say yes."

One of the deputy assistant secretaries of state for Latin American affairs, Sally Shelton, paid perhaps the ultimate compliment to the rights groups. While discussing with an audience of experts the pressures that help shape U.S. policy toward Latin America, she was asked if business interests were not the principal influence. No, she told the gathering that included Birns and Eldridge, she'd say that these days WOLA and COHA probably play a more influential role than business.

Abalardo Valdez, AID's assistant administrator for Latin America, noted that he keeps running across his friends in the lobby, which he deemed "an important body of support for the human rights policies of the administration." "But I think they sometimes lose track of the big picture, in that they don't recognize that unless you have economic security you cannot have the human rights." The left-wing Democrats that have sponsored the legislation requiring cutoff of aid to countries violating citizens' rights have seen their bills enacted with the support of antiaid conservatives of both parties.

Schneider, asked what the lobbyists could do better, replied: "They tend to focus on specific legislation...They could do more in continued sensitizing of the political actors, so there is a general understanding." Underlining the difficulty of the lobbyists holding the attention of legislators and their aides—"It's hard to get in"—he added: "I think they've done an exceptionally good job...if you think of the present awareness compared with a few years ago."

There is considerable feeling among the lobbyists and among bemused onlookers that the publicity efforts of the rights groups may be reaching a point of diminishing returns. Not many publicists, whatever the field, have been known to cut back in Washington, however. Birns, for one, is not at a loss for words. As one begrudging admirer in an international rights agency put it, "To keep him quiet, you'd have to violate his rights."

But are lives and rights really being protected? There seems little doubt that the publicity and denunciations of the most egregious acts have intimidated their perpetrators. Unquestionably, fewer prominent politicians are being killed today than two or three years ago, although probably just as many are deprived of normal political rights, and perhaps as many are still in jail. Just the other day Peru flew another clutch of opposition leaders into exile. It was the third time for leftist Hugo Blanco.

Diplomatic pressures have produced modest amelioration in the main small offending countries: Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, Panama, Paraguay, Uruguay, Haiti, the Dominican Republic. They also have affected most middle-sized offenders: Chile, Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador. Argentina and Brazil have even responded in small measures. It is not clear that pressures have been applied on Mexico, Venezuela, or Colombia, although rights are often in jeopardy in lesser measure there too. Whether the rights of the poor, the powerless, have been buttressed in any of the countries is questionable. As Valdez of AID suggested, these people's economic situation is so low that they really have no means to sustain a claim on the rights that others hold inalienable.

The congressionally created Inter-American Foundation—one of the lower-profile targets of the rights lobby—probably has done more than Congress itself or the executive branch to protect rights at this level. Through aid to such private groups as the Chilean Catholic Church's legal advisory service, the foundation can touch the lives of those whom the politicians say they want to help but do not know how to reach.

Just as the case of Chile helped create the human rights lobby, it has given the cause a martyr who has riveted public attention: ex-Ambassador Orlando Letelier, whose car-bomb death in 1976 on Massachusetts Avenue so shocked the capital. It now seems clear that Letelier's death was ordered in Santiago precisely because he was so effective a lobbyist here, never more effective than when on the theme of human rights. Yet his death gave his message an urgency he could not have conveyed alive. And his widow, Isabel, inspired by circumstance, has become a more vigorous, eloquent, and persuasive proponent of human rights and leftist politics than was he.

The Chilean junta has been the prime target of the lobby and of the Carter administration's rights effort in Latin America. It has responded with astonishing concessions, to the point of acceding to the visit of the U.N. Commission on Human Rights, which for years provided a platform for Chilean exiles. But to offset each Chilean concession on human rights there has been a further revelation in the case of the man who died for human rights.

That case, and the broader question of U.S. relations with Chile as affected by the rights issue, may ultimately redefine the basis of ties between sovereign states. The rights lobby will be there to testify in the interest of the oppressed, each lobbyist with an eye on his own constituency.