

UNDER COVER

On Human Rights and Good Fortune

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In the matter of human rights the Reagan administration seems to be of two minds. First, some have contended, following Ernest Lefever, that we should prefer "quiet diplomacy" when dealing with friendly regimes. The basis of this view is the observation that there is a difference between foreign policy and internal affairs. Our friends, the argument goes, are defined by their roles in international politics, not by their domestic regimes. India is inclined to be sympathetic to the USSR; Pakistan is not. Since the Soviet Union is our chief antagonist, we are constrained to be friendly toward Pakistan, even though its internal politics are less congenial than those of India. And, the argument concludes, we should be gentle with our friends.

This thesis does not ask, however, why our hostility to the Soviet Union is of such overriding importance. Our "interest" is not explanation enough. If it were, we would have been more tempted by the possibility of an American-Soviet condominium, a prospect the Russians hold out from time to time. Powerful interests would be served by such an arrangement. We could limit nuclear proliferation, and we could tell various Third World regimes to climb a tree. But we have always rejected shared hegemony because we distrust the Russians and we object to the kind of rule they exert in their sphere. We oppose the Soviet Union because of what it is—secretive, arbitrary, and oppressive.

Thus, internal politics is not separable; the basis of our foreign policy lies in our opposition to the domesticities of the Soviet regime. We may have to accept right-wing autocracies as allies, but only as a matter of necessity. "Necessity" is relative. In wartime "quiet diplomacy" would be correct, just as it was proper for us, in public, to mute our criticism of the Russians during World War II. Lefever's view, however, presumes that contemporary America is embattled and that we cannot risk offending allies or diverting opinion at home from the main enemy. He and his supporters would have to *prove* that necessity—a difficult task, given the statements by Reagan and Haig that it is the Russians who are on the ropes.

Mrs. Kirkpatrick's now-famous article, however, diverges from Lefever's case. Her distinction between authoritarian and totalitarian regimes turns on the character of the states themselves, not on their attitude toward us or their position in the contest of superpowers. Kirkpatrick claims that we should be easier on authoritarian governments because (1) presently they are less oppressive than totalitarian governments, if only because they are less efficient, and (2) potentially they are more likely to evolve into liberal democracies. In general I agree with these points, though arguments based on the supposed "good historical tendency" of bad policies make me uneasy, and terms like "totalitarian" turn slippery when applied to Poland or Yugoslavia. In

any case, it will be interesting to see if the administration lives up to Kirkpatrick's standard. Will it be more severe with China, so undeniably totalitarian, than it is with authoritarian states like Syria or Iran? It seems far more probable that Reagan and Haig will fall back on something much more like Mr. Lefever's stance, and Mrs. Kirkpatrick, if she is serious, may have to reassess her own position.

Be that as it may, both Lefever and Kirkpatrick seem to have taken the definition of human rights for granted. They only question where and how vigorously we should insist on those rights being observed. Here, as Senator Moynihan suggested, is the crux of the problem: Our current definitions, based on modern political philosophy, do not make a distinction between what we are *entitled* to—our "rights"—and what is *best*—that which is right simply. As a result, we either demand that states do more than we can reasonably ask them to do (as Carter's regime sometimes did) or, in the interest of "realism," lower our standard of what is best.

When Mr. Reagan refers to America as "blessed," he reminds us that we are rich and powerful beyond most of the world's imagining. Things that are routine here are impossible for most governments. Even in today's straitened circumstances we can allow a good many liberties and the inefficiencies they entail because we can afford the cost. Reagan's rhetoric also speaks to the fact that our riches are only in part attributable to our own efforts. A great part of our wealth is due to the good fortune that brought us to a relatively unpeopled continent abounding in resources.

Even good fortune is tricky. The price of America's power is that we live in an enormous country in which very few individuals matter much. Yet even if we wished, we could not live in city-states; international politics alone forbids it. Accept the ancient view that human beings are meant to live in the *polis*. It still does not follow that we are denied our "human rights" because we must live in a large state. It only means that fortune has denied us what is politically best, just as it has given us what is economically best.

Most countries in the world are not blessed by fortune at all. They do well enough if they provide their peoples with those things that human beings can claim as essential to any human life. Secretary Haig was close to the truth when he put terrorism high on the list of crimes, for a society in which people can expect reasonable order is a precondition of the higher faculties. But similarly, an arbitrary government disorders a polity far more than any terrorists. The administration needs to remember that regimes can be severe—and governments not blessed by fortune may have to be—without being lawless.

People do not have a human right to the kind of wealth or liberty that comes only with good fortune. That, however, does not make things easier for America. Peoples who are fortunate have received more than they deserve, and God's grace creates the duty to help, not the ground for self-congratulation.

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