

a NOBLE WAFFLING

The Role of Human Rights in President Jimmy Carter's Presidency



President Jimmy Carter

When Jimmy Carter was elected President in the fall of 1976, he was a single term governor from Georgia with no foreign policy credentials. As a candidate, and in the early months of his administration, Carter announced a new vision for American foreign policy that promoted human rights. This was the first time an American President had put forth such a bold idea in peacetime; however, there is a lack of critical consensus and a great deal of debate questioning the execution of this foreign policy plan. Some argue Carter was revolutionary in shifting American foreign policy to focus on human rights, toleration, and human dignity. Others claim that his commitment to human rights was purely rhetorical, and that he continued the sort of cynical realpolitik foreign policy enacted by Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger: a system of

politics not based on moral but practical motivations. Ultimately, Carter's agenda was impassioned and unprecedented, with a strong moral commitment to human dignity. His lack of foreign policy experience, however, combined with intra-administrational conflict and national security concerns, led to his failure to implement a uniform human rights agenda.

Analyzing the human rights policies of the Carter Administration, political scientist Glenn Mower argues that human rights concerns were very appealing to American voters, who wanted the government to act benevolently, but were nearly impossible to translate into policy.¹ Presidents before Carter had only discussed human rights abstractly: William McKinley claimed that the Spanish-American War was fought for "the cause of

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humanity," and Woodrow Wilson fought for human rights protections in creating the League of Nations.² Jimmy Carter ran an unprecedented campaign based on asserting a new morality in American foreign policy. Following Watergate and the Vietnam War, which he characterized as a moral crisis, Carter wanted to achieve a real ideological shift in American government. A call for a new human rights influence was written into the 1976 platform of the Democratic National Committee and was widely popular in the campaign amongst an electorate dissatisfied with the containment policies and global meliorism that led to the Vietnam War.³ Once elected, Carter emphasized a specific human rights program of action in multiple speeches. This program included ending United States' aid to despots, achieving an international focus on nuclear non-proliferation, and reaching détente with the Soviet Union.⁴ By incorporating these ideas in his inaugural address, as well as in the high profile address to the United Nations General Assembly, Carter created an expectation of ambitious action.⁵

Carter's struggle to implement a human rights policy began when he assembled a team of foreign policy advisors who profoundly disagreed on the optimal course of American foreign policy. Lacking personal experience in foreign affairs, Carter sought out two respected, but disparate, voices to be his senior advisors. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski embodied the intra-administrational disagreement that often lay at the heart of the Carter Administration's foreign policy inconsistencies. While not a moralist like Carter, Cyrus Vance believed that the human rights initiative could be an integral part of American foreign policy if it was attached to various proposals and incorporated as part of multi-lateral international partnerships. Conversely, Brzezinski was an anti-Soviet hardliner in the traditional Cold War model. He believed that the United States should focus on remaining an independent world power and that the Carter Administration's human rights agenda should not draw from the American objectives in the Cold War. Carter saw himself as the referee between Vance and Brzezinski, siding with

whomever held a stronger argument.⁶ By delineating between the counsel of Vance and Brzezinski, Carter gave the appearance that his foreign policy was inconsistent—caught between two conflicting ideologies.

Still, in the initial years of his administration, Carter was able to parlay public support and congressional support for human rights into substantive action. Carter had some significant successes, namely the Panama Canal treaties, the Camp David Accords, and normalizing relations with China. Regarding human rights, Carter established the Bureau of Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs in the State Department and appointed the Assistant Secretary of State at the head, an action symbolizing his commitment to a substantive human rights agenda. Through this office, Carter established the Country Reports on Human Rights that used each nation's compliance with the United Nation Universal Declaration of Human Rights to determine the amount of military aid each country would receive from the United States.⁷ This new policy led to prompt changes in how the United States distributed international aid. For example, the United States immediately ended security assistance to Chile, Ethiopia, Argentina, and Uruguay, and the Administration redirected American support of the historically United States-backed Somoza regime in Nicaragua to the Sandinista National Liberation Front.

Additionally, President Carter was able to work with Congress to pass the 1978 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Act. This act declared nuclear weapons as a danger to human beings everywhere, and that the United States would embrace a policy of collaboration and peace with other nations for nuclear disarmament. Unfortunately, the non-proliferation agreement would be one of the final human rights achievements of the President in collaboration with Congress. Frequently concerned about what he considered to be Congressional encroachment on the executive's purview, Carter worked to prevent the passage of certain Congressional aid cuts to countries with disconcerting records of autocratic abuse of citizens like Brazil, Guatemala, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Uganda, Cuba, Mozambique, and Angola.⁸ He did so out of fear, worried that such actions would restrict the



Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and NSA Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski

executive and hurt the long-term power and flexibility of the office. This confused the national narrative of Carter's foreign policy, giving the impression that the President was not entirely committed to his human rights agenda.⁹ Furthermore, in retaliation, Congress refused to ratify the 1979 Strategic Arms Limitations Talks Agreement, SALT II, an arrangement between the United States and the Soviet Union on how to curtail the production of nuclear weapons. This contentious relationship with Congress would damage his human rights legacy, because despite the President's efforts, he was never able to gain Congressional approval for the UN's International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, nor the UN's International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination.¹⁰ Carter's failure to work with Congress revealed a conflicted

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administration and contributed to his inability to enact a comprehensive human rights policy.

Foundationally, the greatest triumph of the Carter Administration's foreign policy was not the implementation of a specific proposal, but the macro-level elevation of human rights to the top tier of American foreign policy concerns. This triumph may also be used to account for the failures of implementation of the Carter human rights agenda. Mary Stuckey, professor and author of political rhetoric, discusses the point when Jimmy Carter announced he wanted human rights to have universal consideration in policy matters. She argues that he did not want it to be the sole consideration, but rather a factor on equal footing with traditional concerns like economic policy and national security interests.¹¹ Despite these intentions, Carter's failures are clearly seen in the episodes where the policy acted against its own lofty rhetoric.

When looking at the human rights agenda in the Carter Administration, the major outstanding inconsistencies all occurred when the US had key geo-strategic interests or was worried about conceding an area to communist control. Some academics, like 20th century historian David Schmitz, believe that Carter underestimated the challenges of taking on the continuity of traditional Cold War thinking.¹² Advisors like Brzezinski, who subscribed to traditional thought, were powerful in the Carter bureaucracy and able to successfully argue that, in many instances, security concerns outweighed human rights ambitions. Areas like South Korea and the Philippines were given exemptions from aid cuts—despite their State department country reports documenting human rights abuses—because of their importance to national security. While Carter was highly critical of Soviet oppression of dissidents at the onset of his term, he mitigated his criticism and backtracked on his previous comments when he entered into the SALT II arms talks. Similarly, Carter was only able to achieve success in normalizing relations with China—thereby securing a major new trade partner for America—by remaining noticeably mute on China's notoriously harsh tradition of repressing dissidents. By supporting military dictators who agreed to reject communism, the Carter Administration found itself at least partially culpable for supporting regimes that killed hundreds of thousands of people. More specifically, the Carter Administration continued supporting Suharto's



President Carter with the Shah of Iran

dictatorship in Indonesia with military aid despite the fact that his regime was responsible for the death of nearly 100,000 people in East Timor and that Congress had called for the cessation of aid.¹³ In former Rhodesia, where Carter had initially cut all military aid, he eventually chose to defy Congress and back a new insurgency in hopes of creating a stronger anti-Soviet alliance. Consequently, Robert Mugabe took power, a brutal dictator who brought nothing but genocide and poverty to the people of Rhodesia. These examples speak to the asymmetrical foreign policy that constitutes an irrefutable part of Carter's legacy.

The most famous example of Carter's selective application of human rights in American foreign policy came in Iran, a situation that exemplified Carter's inconsistent and incompetent control of foreign policy affairs. Iran was a uniquely important geo-strategic country in the Cold War. With the Soviet Union to the North and an extensive shoreline on the Persian Gulf, the United States government felt that it was of utmost importance to keep Iranian oil reserves and control of the Persian Gulf safe from Soviet control. With these intentions the administration supported Muhammad Reza Shah, the autocratic Shah of Iran backed by the Carter Administration. The Shah, working with his secret police force, the SAVAK, formed at the urging of the Eisenhower Administration as a means to preserve power, had an extensive record of kidnapping, torturing, and murdering political dissidents. At the onset of his Presidency, Carter had threatened to cut off aid to the Shah unless he put an end to the oppression. Later, as Cold War tensions rose in the second half of his term, Carter retracted these demands and eventually referred

to Iran as a dear friend of the United States.¹⁴ This ideological middling was detrimental to both internal affairs and international relations. His initial call for reform motivated protests against the Shah by liberal activists, sparking a movement that would allow Ayatollah Khomeini and the clerics to assume control over the Iranian government and establish the Islamic Republic. Not only did Carter's actions create the anti-western sentiment that eventually spurred the Iranian hostage crisis, but according to Ervand Abrahamian, historian of Middle Eastern history, this exponentially worsened the human rights situation in Iran. There was no religious freedom, no freedom of association, and, whereas less than 100 political prisoners had been executed between 1971 and 1979, more than 7,900 were executed between 1981 and 1985.¹⁵ Despite his noble intentions, Carter's waffling between the ideas of Vance and Brzezinski led to the rise of an antagonistic Iranian regime responsible for even more egregious human rights abuses. This example is an apt summary for the lofty goals and failed implementation that defines Carter's foreign policy.

In evaluating Jimmy Carter's legacy in foreign policy, the successes and failures combine to create a mixed and inconsistent record. As a candidate and new President, he promised that human rights considerations would be “absolute” in American foreign policy. Once in office, Carter never wavered on his commitment to a human rights agenda, but he soon discovered that the ill-defined parameters of human rights made it exceedingly difficult to translate those values into an effective policy. Carter achieved certain successes in his human rights agenda, from implementing legitimate bureaucratic change, to halting aid to abusive regimes, and to working towards new multilateral agreements for world peace. Despite these victories, he was equally likely to support despotic regimes like those in Iran and Rhodesia when he felt it aligned with American security interests. These inconsistencies can be attributed to an inexperienced president receiving divergent advice from senior advisors and Cabinet officials. Ultimately, Carter's inconsistent human rights agenda is best viewed as a combination of noble intentions that influenced international discourse, and the failed implementation that marred his Presidency.

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ENDNOTES & REFERENCES

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Image 2: "Girl and a Soldier by Banksy." Stencil Revolution, September 19, 2012. <http://www.stencilrevolution.com/banksy-art-prints/girl-and-soldier/>

Image 3: "TIME Magazine Cover: Yasser Arafat - Dec. 13, 1968." TIME.com, December 13, 1968. <http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19681213,00.html>.

Image 4: "A Visual History of Palestinian Refugees." Al-Jazeera America, September 12, 2013. <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2013/9/12/a-visual-history-of-palestinian-refugees.html>.

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