

HUMAN RIGHTS AND FOREIGN POLICY: WHO WILL
GRASP THE NETTLE?

It was only yesterday that human rights were the stepchildren of foreign policy. Few things so assured a ticket to obscurity in our national security establishment as an articulate concern with the humanitarian impact of U.S. behavior beyond the national frontiers.

Suddenly concern is politically de rigueur. In their recently adopted platforms, both the Republican and Democratic Parties profess an unparalleled commitment to making foreign policy serve fundamental American values rather than operating merely to produce greater national wealth and power.

For those, like ourselves, who believe that the United States is more than a convenient association to promote selfish individual ends, that it is as well the institutional and normative expression of the highest human aspirations, even the change in rhetoric is good news. But until the candidates commit themselves more concretely, it will be hard to escape the skepticism enjoined by our recent national history. For neither party comes to us with clean hands. Both presided over a war in which humanitarian restraints were constantly stretched and all too frequently violated. Both have in the past failed to dissociate the United States from regimes employing barbarous means to achieve squalid ends. U.S. collusion with the Greek colonels, for instance, was only one case of bi-partisan continuity.

What kind of commitments can overcome doubts which rest on so solid a bed of precedent? Or, to put the question a little differently, how could the next President translate humanitarian concern into practical policy? It will not be easy.

Cynicism often amounting to acrid hostility towards incorporating human rights considerations into the policy process still enjoys a respectable life within the foreign policy elite. Moreover, the arguments generally marshalled against proposals to promote humanitarian ends at the possible expense of

amicable relations with a delinquent regime are in many real cases not insubstantial. They include the following: (1) the regime is immune to our influence; (2) friendly persuasion conducted against a backdrop of material and rhetorical support (i.e. "quiet diplomacy") produces the best results; (3) external pressure will only prick nationalist sentiment and thus both strengthen the regime and provoke heightened intransigence; (4) pressure will cut the ground from under the moderates and bring the real monsters to power; (5) If we weaken the regime, it may be replaced by forces inimical to U.S. interests, and (6) The regime's cooperation on other issues is more important to the U.S. than its treatment of its own citizens.

While some combination of these arguments may properly be decisive in particular cases, because of the powerful bias in favor of amoral statecraft, they are rarely subjected to rigorous scrutiny. Rhetoric alone, no matter how sincere, will not overcome that bias. It can be neutralized only by the establishment of coherent operational guidelines, including certain powerful presumptions, and of mandates for senior officials to oversee their implementation. In addition, the President must encourage Congress to institutionalize those guidelines through legislative incorporation and committee review.

Given the manifest complexity of the problem and the limited means available to the United States, what reasonable commitments might the candidates now make which would bear witness to their seriousness and their sincerity? The minimum commitment would be to terminate military and economic aid, whatever its form, to any country that engages in gross violations of fundamental human rights. Governments that have institutionalized torture, that seize and detain citizens for long periods of time without trial, or practice or encourage quasi-private groups to practice the execution of

political opponents, all would fall under this ban. So should governments that convict and incarcerate men and women for exercising the inherent right to express their political views.

After the recent failure of the Secretary of State to find a single recipient of U.S. largesse satisfying this minimal criterion for aid termination, the abstract commitment no longer seems a sufficient earnest of sincerity. If we are to take the candidates seriously, either they must offer specific examples or accept an operational criterion--for example, findings by an impartial human rights monitoring body such as the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights or the International Commission of Jurists--which will bring the commitment to earth.

A second earnest of sincerity would be a commitment to transfer taxpayer dollars, saved through application of the termination criteria, to a special fund, for which an additional Congressional appropriation would also be sought, that would be used to reward developing countries that display a marked solicitude for human rights or at least demonstrate significant progress in this realm, however low the base from which they may rise. As a third modest sign of real concern, the candidates could commit themselves to seek changes in the immigration laws and to impose changes in administrative regulations and personnel required to facilitate the immigration of political exiles. Similarly, the candidates could pledge U.S. support for the venerable Latin American tradition of political asylum. U.S. Embassies in Latin American states should be open as a place of temporary refuge for persons fleeing persecution for the exercise of basic political and civil rights; and we should then assist their safe departure from the country.

Finally, the candidates could reveal some substance behind the platform rhetoric by undertaking to appoint a White House Human Rights Advisor who would, among other things, sit on the National Security Council and whatever inner committee authorizes and oversees foreign intelligence operations. With the approval of Congress, counterparts of the White House Adviser should be established at the level of Assistant Secretary in the Departments of State and Defense.

The time is long past in this interdependent world when our concern for human dignity could stop at the water's edge. It is a valid Bicentennial thought that the central reality of America must be the enlargement of freedom and justice for all, if not positively by intervention, at least negatively by making our most important national concern and ethos color our relationships with other nations.

"All that is necessary for the triumph of evil," Edmund Burke once wrote, "is that good men do nothing." Scarred by the discovery that we were not immune to the arrogance of power, there are those who will say that we are too flawed as a society to condemn much less to sanction other governments. If this country adopts that self-lacerating disregard of every moral distinction, it will not only deny hope to millions of desperate men and women around the globe but will as well guarantee the progressive erosion of freedom and dignity here at home. For human rights presupposes a voluntary community. Ours is above all a community of shared belief. If we deny our right or capacity to promote our beliefs abroad, they will wither here. And once gone, they will never be recovered.

Prudence as well as love require that we affirm the universal relevance of our aspiration towards human dignity. The platforms are a beginning. Now we must await more concrete commitments before we can decide whether they are, as well, the end.

Theodore M. Hesburgh / ccs
(Rev.) Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C.


Tom J. Farer