



David F. Schmitz and Vanessa Walker, “Jimmy Carter and the Foreign Policy of Human Rights: The Development of a Post-Cold War Foreign Policy,” *Diplomatic History*, Volume 28, Issue 1 (January 2004): 113-143.

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Published by H-Diplo on 15 February 2004

David Schmitz and Vanessa Walker have offered a challenging reappraisal of President Jimmy Carter’s integration of human rights considerations into U.S. foreign policy. In their review of the existing literature, they note several recent works by Douglas Brinkley and Robert Strong that emphasize the positive contributions of Carter’s integration of human rights considerations into U.S. policy-formulation. Carter’s revival of American idealism in his public statements on human rights has certainly been applauded by many historians who welcomed a recovery from the aftermath of the Vietnam conflict and the sometimes unsavory expediency of Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger’s detente strategy. Schmitz and Walker, however, emphasize that most interpreters stress inconsistency in Carter’s policies, debilitating conflict between Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, and naiveté in dealings with the Soviet Union and the implementation of human rights policy. (pp. 114-116)

Schmitz and Walker reject the critical perspective on Carter’s foreign policy based on human rights. In their examination of the administration’s development of a comprehensive policy on human rights in 1977, they emphasize that Carter and other officials involved in developing a new policy were “well aware of the difficulties, contradictions, and potential inconsistencies and problems with their policy.” (p. 117) In making use of documents from the Carter Presidential Library, the authors do make a persuasive case that on paper and in the abstract the Carter administration blended a recognition of the value of human rights as well as the limitations in what the U.S. could accomplish in this area. They note the emergence of Congressional concerns on human rights before 1976 and legislative requirements that banned economic aid and security assistance to nations that violated human rights. Schmitz and Walker devote extensive attention to President Carter’s public statements on human rights and the extensive preparations to transform Carter’s views into policy guidelines.

Most of the essay discusses the development of human rights guidelines through the efforts of the State Department Policy Planning Staff, an Interagency Group on Human Rights and Foreign Assistance, a Presidential Review Memorandum/NSC-28: Human Rights completed in July 1977, and Carter’s Presidential Directive on human rights in February 1978. Extensive description and direct quotation from these documents certainly confirms Schmitz and Walker’s thesis that on paper Carter officials recognized the challenges of applying human rights considerations with any degree of consistency and with any prospect of success. Secretary Vance, for example, in his instructions to start the policy formulation process exhibited a healthy recognition of the complexity of the issues, the special circumstances that would have to be taken into consideration, the potential risks in challenging other nations on human rights issues, and the

importance of coordinating human rights concerns with security and economic considerations. (pp. 122-123) This perspective held up through the review process and shaped Carter's final directive.

What Schmitz and Walker don't develop in their lengthy presentation of policy formulation is any real sense of internal debate and disagreement. The Interagency Group with 40 people from various departments, the National Security Council, and the Export-Import Bank meet and produce papers. The State Department and the National Security Council prepare the Presidential Review Memorandum of 85 pages; it is circulated through the administration with no apparent major disagreements; and it emerges as the President's Directive. All of this seems to take place without much disagreement despite the complexity of the issues and the recognition of limitations and problems with Cold War allies, adversaries, Congress and public understanding of this new policy. The authors do refer to some debate on issues such as whether to give priority to one of the three groups of human rights, the first category on the "right to be free from governmental violations of the integrity of the person" versus the second and third groups, economic and social rights of the individual, and the right to civil and political liberties. (p. 126). Since the authors did not have access to the records of the participating agencies and State Department files beyond what they could review at the National Security Archives at George Washington University, they probably could not develop much of the internal discussions which are needed to determine if Carter officials really thought through the complexities, priorities and inevitable contradictions that would have to be explained to Congress, the public, and all nations subject to this new foreign policy requirement.

Since Schmitz and Walker limit themselves for much of the essay to the formulation of human rights policy in the first year and include an optimistic in-house assessment on the policy from the National Security Council and Anthony Lake of the Policy Planning Staff of the State Department (pp. 133-137), their focus would have been strengthened if they had expanded their focus and research to include Congressional and public reactions to Carter's policy as it emerged and started to be implemented. They do look at Congress' initiative on human rights before 1980, but then Congress disappears until briefly resurfacing on Nicaraguan policy. The media and public reactions never appear in the essay. This is unfortunate since Carter officials do seem sensitive to Congressional and public reactions and appear to in part direct their statements and reports at these public perceptions.

Schmitz and Walker conclude their essay with a six page case study of the human rights policy and Nicaragua. They affirm that "Carter maintained his commitment to the essence of his human rights policy" in dealing with the Nicaraguan crisis that led to the departure of Anastasio Somoza in July 1979. "The policy was not naive, nor was it abandoned," conclude Schmitz and Walker, who applaud it as "an alternative to the previous policies of military intervention and support for dictatorships." (p. 138) The authors admit that they don't have space for a detailed analysis of Carter's responses in Nicaragua. Undoubtedly they will offer a more thorough evaluation in their forthcoming studies, most notably Schmitz's *Degrading Democracy: The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships, 1965-1989* (University of North Carolina Press), and Walker's research on U.S.-Latin American relations during the Carter administration.

Carter undoubtedly tried to follow a human rights policy on Nicaragua and break with the tradition of U.S. hegemony and intervention into Caribbean states. Schmitz and Walker, however, are unable to develop the intensifying disagreements within the Carter administration over U.S. policy toward the Somoza regime that have already been discussed in depth by officials dealing with the issue, most notably Robert Pastor, director of Latin American and Caribbean Affairs in the National Security Council, and Anthony Lake, the State Department's director of policy planning, and in many accounts by journalists such as Shirley Christian and by scholars such as Walter LaFeber and William Leo Grande. [1] The authors also applaud Carter's determination to stick with "human rights as a yardstick" and reject American intervention. (pp. 141, 143) Carter officials, however, have indicated that multiple considerations including Cold War concerns about the likelihood of a Sandinista takeover increasingly affected the White House's policies and contributed to escalating interference by Washington leading to requests for an Organization of American States intervention in June 1979 and a final mediation effort to try and keep Somoza's Liberal Party and the National Guard intact as a counter to the Sandinistas in an interim coalition government. Carter rejected pressure from a variety of sources to engage in a military intervention but could not resist the advocates who wanted interference as the Somoza regime disintegrated.

Instead of trying to take on the Nicaraguan crisis, Schmitz and Walker might have focused on the initial efforts of the Carter administration to apply human rights to Latin American policy in 1977 as officials developed Carter's human rights directive. In response to Congressional requirements for human rights reviews on economic and security assistance as well as its own preferences, the Carter administration found itself quickly in conflict with Southern American regimes in Argentina, Brazil, and Chile and with all of the Central American military regimes in Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. Two of the regimes in El Salvador and Guatemala responded to human rights criticism by refusing to accept further U.S. military assistance; Somoza, however, responded to pressure for reform with concessions and gained increased assistance. How did officials formulating the human rights policy in 1977 respond to the practical experience with Latin American regimes? Did this experience contribute to what appears to be increasing conflict within the Carter administration over giving priority to human rights after the directive is issued in February 1978? How were different officials and agencies such as Pastor, Lake, Secretary Vance and Brzezinski, and Patricia Derian, director of the Bureau of Human Rights in the State Department, affected by the initial problems and apparent successes in applying human rights considerations?

Schmitz and Walker have successfully revived debate about Carter's human rights policy even if they face significant challenges from recent studies about how extensively Carter and his advisers pursued this policy, their degree of success, and the overall wisdom of their stated priority to human rights. Brent M. Geary from Ohio University, for example, has examined Carter's policies towards Iran and the policies of the Shah of Iran which came under criticism on human rights conditions in Congressional hearings in 1976. Carter and Secretary Vance publicly indicated that they human rights issues were raised with the Shah, but Geary found no evidence of this before and during the Shah's visit to Washington in November 1977 and Carter's trip to Iran in January 1978. In the face of resistance from the State Department and the American embassy in Teheran which frequently reported that the Shah was making progress on human

rights issues, Carter, Vance and Brzezinski turned down repeated requests from the Bureau of Humanitarian Affairs for human rights pressure on the Shah. [2]

Kenton Clymer has also offered a contrasting assessment on the importance of human rights in Carter's policies in a recent essay on "Jimmy Carter, Human Rights, and Cambodia" in *Diplomatic History*. [3] In a persuasive assessment that makes extensive use of Carter library documents, Congressional, and media sources, Clymer suggests that "human-rights considerations hardly entered into the administration's foreign-policy calculus" and that "old fashioned geopolitical considerations-in particular, the desire to oppose the perceived expansion of Soviet influence in Southeast Asia at the expense of America's new friend, China-won out over human rights in Carter's Cambodia policy." (p. 246) Clymer carefully depicts Carter and the State Department as being consistently behind public and Congressional criticism of the Khmer Rouge regime's genocidal policies. The Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in December 1978 brought even more geopolitical maneuvering by Brzezinski to counter a perceived increase in Soviet influence to the extent of supporting Thai and Chinese arms to Khmer Rouge forces on the western border, backing Khmer Rouge retention of Cambodia's seat in the UN, and, most troubling of all with respect to human rights concerns, resisting aid to Cambodians in the area of the country controlled by the Vietnamese and the Heng Samrin. I doubt that Carter and his human rights advocates ever anticipated when they drafted the human rights directive in 1977 that they would find themselves in a situation where they went against humanitarian concerns with the biggest offender of human rights.

1. Shirley Christian, *Nicaragua: Revolution in the Family* (New York, 1985), 40-138; Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America* (2nd ed.; New York, 1993), 208-213, 225-237; William M. LeoGrande, *Our Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill, 1998), 16-27; Anthony Lake, *Somoza Falling: A Case Study of Washington at Work* (New York, 1989)
2. Brent M. Geary, "Jimmy Carter, Human Rights, and the Iranian Revolution," unpublished paper presented at the Eighth Annual Graduate Student Conference on the Cold War, UC Santa Barbara, 2003.
3. Kenton Clymer, "Jimmy Carter, Human Rights, and Cambodia" in *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (April 2003), 245-278.

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