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Two Steps Forward, One Step Back

In *Mixed Signals*, Kathryn Sikkink has crafted a well-written, succinct, and engaging overview not only of the general evolution of the human rights tradition in U.S. foreign policy, but also of its specific application and manifestation in U.S. relations with Latin America. While this book will appeal principally to students of U.S. international relations, and specifically to students of U.S.-Latin American relations, its attention to the evolution of the human rights agenda in Congress and in various U.S. executive agencies also offers an excellent case study of how foreign policy is rooted in the domestic political culture and political system of the United States.

In exploring this aspect of the development of a human rights policy, Sikkink skillfully demonstrates the complex and often contradictory dynamic in the relationship between the Congress, the executive, and the U.S. public in the formation and implementation of foreign policy. In fact, Sikkink’s principle thesis, which is that the United States has sent “mixed signals” to the other countries of the world regarding its definitions and applications of its human rights policy, is directly a product of complex domestic political interactions, shaded by the inherent messiness of pluralist, liberal democracy. In short, Sikkink characterizes the creation and implementation of a human rights policy in the United States as one of advances and retreats that has been confusing to other countries and, consequently, perhaps even counterproductive to the ultimate goal of promoting and defending human rights in practice. Nevertheless, Sikkink is also firm in the conviction that undeniable forward progress has been made in establishing and institutionalizing the human rights agenda in U.S. foreign policy, in spite of broadcasting such “mixed signals” in the process.

While there is much nuance and richness in the case study details provided throughout the text, I would argue that there are three main aspects of this book that make it a must-read. First, the book provides an excellent summary of the conceptual evolution of “human rights” in the both the United States and in the world system. Second, the book tracks in a very coherent, organized, and chronological way the progression of a human rights policy in the United States toward Latin America, showing the tension between the human rights identity of the United States in the public imagination and the security interests of the United States that often put U.S. foreign policy as it relates to human rights at odds with this identity. Third, the book shows by specific example how this tension created an atmosphere of confusion among Latin American policy elites, who found themselves struggling to make sense of these “mixed signals.”

Organizationally, the book is divided into two very distinct parts. The first part gives a summary overview of the human rights debate conceptually and theoretically. Included in this section is also a discussion of how this conceptual and theoretical debate worked its way through the international system as well as through the U.S. domestic political system. The second part provides a closer look at how this debate manifested itself in U.S. foreign policy as it evolved through U.S. presidential ad-
ministrations in their Latin America diplomacy over the past 30 years, beginning with the Nixon administration of the early 1970s and ending with the Clinton Administration.

An important sub-theme that permeates the book is the author’s clear intention to correlate the creation and implementation of human rights litmus tests in U.S. foreign policy and foreign policy institutions with the advocacy and lobbying of human rights NGOs and other non-state actors. Sikkink’s particular emphasis on the role of human rights NGOs and other non-state actors in moving the human rights policy agenda forward in the formal legislative and executive arenas in the United States and in keeping attention on the importance of human rights policy during periods of waning interest in such matters in the halls of Congress and the White House is perhaps the book’s signature contribution to scholarship on the subject, since most other studies of the topic tend to focus less on the non-state roots of human rights policy and more on the institutionalization and implementation aspects of human rights policy.

In the case study section of the book, Sikkink thoroughly and carefully explores U.S. relations with a balanced selection of Latin American countries where human rights violations were a constant issue in the relationship. Such countries include Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, Guatemala, and El Salvador. What makes this section of the book so effective are its structure and its consistent methodology of evaluation. Sikkink, using human rights as a baseline of analysis, traces U.S. relations with each of these countries over a period of almost 30 years, dividing the analysis by periods corresponding to U.S. presidential administrations. In this way, Sikkink is able to show critical junctures where evolving domestic and international attitudes towards human rights agendas encountered the realities of the human rights situations in the Latin American country case studies in ways that either aided or undermined the goals of protecting human rights and countering human rights abuses. The way Sikkink organizes and evaluates her case studies makes for a very persuasive argument in support of her notion of the unevenness in the development and implementation of a human rights policy in U.S. international relations, and the “mixed signals” transmitted to the Latin American countries and their policymakers regarding human rights that characterized this unevenness.

If the book can be faulted for anything, it would be that it gives very scant attention to the evolution of human rights in the Latin American region itself. Even though the purpose of the book is to trace the subject of human rights in U.S. policy towards the region, the absence of any substantive discussion of the subject as it relates to a similar movement in Latin American policy circles and debates once again places the region in a reactive and essentially passive role. Sikkink does recognize that the human rights movement was and is alive and active in Latin America, but she does not explore it as fully as she might. The reader gets a sense of the history and impact of the human rights movement in Latin America when Sikkink mentions the specific behavior on the part of Latin Americans themselves, particularly the victims of human rights violations as well as their political supporters, such as Senator Wilson Ferreira of Uruguay or Hernán Santa Cruz of Chile, in shaping U.S. and international human rights policy. But given that the origins of Latin American conceptions of human rights play a significant role both in the repressive nature of human rights-violating regimes in the region as well as in the reaction of individuals and groups protesting such repression, one might expect this critical element to the evolution of U.S. policy to be explored a bit further as a measure of Latin American contributions to the conceptualizations of a global human rights regime. This impact should not be understated, especially as it is usually the victims of human rights abuses that contribute to the conceptual refinement and nuancing of the emerging human rights regime that Sikkink evaluates. None of this, however, takes away from the fact that Sikkink’s book is an engaging and well-written seminal work on the subject of human rights and its place in recent U.S. policy towards Latin America.

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