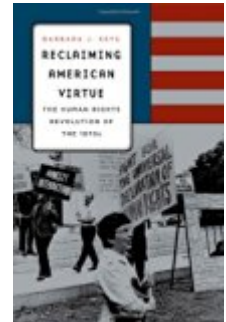


**Barbara J. Keys.** *Reclaiming American Virtue: The Human Rights Revolution of the 1970s*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014. 368 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-72485-3.



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Barbara J. Keys's *Reclaiming American Virtue: The Human Rights Revolution of the 1970s* offers a chronological assessment of the human rights movement from the fringes of ideological concerns in the 1960s to the center of American foreign policy by the late 1970s. Beginning in the 1960s with the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War, the book explores how human rights was initially another way of framing civil rights and shows that it did not enter into the consciousness of the average American. Keys then explains the factors that slowly brought human rights to the political mainstream until the Carter administration finally adopted it as a central component of its foreign policy. According to Keys, as the United States began to move past Vietnam, concerns about torture in places like Greece and Chile became key elements in a campaign for human rights.

Keys's main thesis is that the human rights revolution of the 1970s stemmed from liberal guilt over the Vietnam War. She argues that the adoption of human rights in US foreign policy only tan-

genially related to calls for human rights that dated back to the 1790s. Further, the transition was not a direct result of the civil rights movement; in fact, civil rights activists did not immediately switch their focus to human rights, if they switched it at all. Additionally, while it was a way for Americans to come to terms with the Vietnam War, the emphasis on human rights in American foreign policy actually had very little to do with the atrocities of that war. Instead, human rights concerns centered on Americans' need to feel better about themselves and thus can best be understood as a psychological response to Vietnam. Both liberals and conservatives took up the human rights cause, albeit for different reasons: liberals did so out of guilt, whereas conservatives rejected that guilt. As Americans attempted to move past the trauma of Vietnam in the late 1970s, human rights became a way for the nation to show that it had its house in order: by dictating to other nations on the issue of human rights, the United States could demonstrate that it had resolved its own civil rights problems.

Using numerous personal and official archives and the *New York Times* as her main sources, Keys pieces together a political history of human rights. She focuses her narrative on specific individuals, using each of them to chart the evolution of human rights. The main figures in Keys's story are Donald Fraser, Henry Jackson, George McGovern, Henry Kissinger, and Jimmy Carter. She also details the rise of Amnesty International as the main organization pushing for human rights in the 1970s. In using these individuals to frame her book, Keys examines how specific people were instrumental in driving the call for human rights as a political concern. She also outlines the fluidity of human rights as a concept (i.e., it meant different things to different people). For conservatives who opposed détente, human rights concerns represented a way to prevent the Cold War from thawing, primarily because it allowed the United States to oppose the Soviet Union over its treatment of political dissidents and Soviet Jews. For both liberals and conservatives in Congress, human rights became a tool to check the power of an overreaching executive branch, seen primarily in the actions of Henry Kissinger, during both the Nixon and Ford administrations.

Keys structures her chapters chronologically, but uses each to focus on her selected individuals and their actions in turn. In the first two chapters, she discusses the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations and the efforts of the civil rights movement in the United States, showing how despite these efforts human rights still was marginalized within the American public consciousness. Chapter 3 examines the effect of the Vietnam War on the national psyche. The next two chapters explore how liberals and conservatives attempted to utilize human rights as part of their larger foreign policy goals, whether they were opposing right-wing dictators or attempting to check the influence of communism. Keys argues in chapters 6 through 8 that Congress seized on the idea of human rights as a way to exert greater influence over foreign policy

and to regulate the influence of executive branch officials. She specifically highlights how Kissinger's opposition to human rights became a rallying point for Congress, as well as the influence of special interest lobbies, such as Amnesty International, in encouraging congressional support for incorporating human rights in American policy. In the final two chapters, Keys focuses on Carter, from his slow progression toward human rights while campaigning for the presidency to the consequences of his eventual decision to adopt human rights as a central component of his foreign policy agenda. Keys concludes by arguing that human rights has remained a central focus of American foreign policy rhetoric to the present day by highlighting examples from the Obama administration.

*Reclaiming American Virtue* has several strengths. Keys ably charts the various converging factors that contributed to the rise of human right consciousness in the 1960s and 1970s. Unlike other political historians who tend to focus largely on one political viewpoint, Keys integrates both liberal and conservative efforts to use human rights, suggesting the great appeal of the concept. Further, in doing so, she demonstrates the fluidity of human rights as a buzzword in politics and asks the reader to consider what individuals actually mean when they use this term. The book is clearly well researched, with Keys having spent a significant amount of time in multiple archives around the country. The depth of her research gives her arguments added credibility. She generally maintains a focused narrative that moves both chronologically and thematically through her story, allowing the reader to see the development of human rights within the American foreign policy apparatus. Given the cogent construction, collectively, all of the chapters support her overall thesis of explaining how the Vietnam War was an integral factor in moving human rights from the fringes of American political consciousness to the center of US foreign policy.

Keys's book is not without its weaknesses, though. She has a tendency to treat groups like civil rights activists as a monolithic entity with a hive mind. When discussing the shifting focus from civil rights to human rights, Keys argues that civil rights activists as a whole did not shift easily from one movement to the other while not bothering to nuance the fact that individual actors did not necessarily think or behave as a single unit. She also includes some anecdotes that do not serve the book and in fact distract the reader from her larger point. For instance, her introduction of Jackson begins by informing the reader about the members of the administration of George W. Bush who worked in Jackson's office during his congressional tenure, an interesting historical tidbit, but one that does little to help advance her arguments regarding human rights and American foreign policy. Keys also seems to accept the dichotomy of a good civil rights movement and a bad civil rights movement, which scholars of the "movement" have long since discarded. She continues to perpetuate the false notion of an evolution of civil rights from a "good" movement of peaceful protests and sit-ins to a "bad" movement of violent confrontations and a loss of the moral high ground of the earlier years of the movement. This construction ultimately damages her arguments regarding the linkages between civil rights and human rights.

Keys adds to a growing historiography on human rights in the 1970s, but her book is unique in its focus on the political developments within the United States, with the international context serving as a backdrop for her examination of internal American politics. While there is a significant body of literature on international human rights, as well as numerous discussions of her actors in other contexts, Keys fills a void by examining their motives and by showing how their actions came together to collectively influence US foreign policy.

Overall, *Reclaiming American Virtue* offers a useful reassessment of human rights in the United States in the 1970s. Keys incorporates multiple factors into an interesting political narrative that helps to explain how this concept became so ubiquitous. Keys's book will appeal not only to scholars specializing in US foreign relations or human rights history but also to a more general audience. Her writing is generally accessible and would serve well as an introduction to the rise of human rights for readers less acquainted with the topic.

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