

Introduction

In January 1981, just days before Jimmy Carter left the White House, many of the president's officials were well satisfied with the campaign promoting human rights and its accomplishments. According to Lincoln Bloomfield, who dealt with the issue at the National Security Council (NSC), Carter's human rights policy "represented the clearest change from policies pursued by the previous two administrations. It produced some of the most notable moral and political successes" and was a "definite plus for the United States in its international position." Nevertheless, he admitted, the policy had also "generated the sharpest criticism" and was "the one least likely to be followed" by the incoming Reagan administration.¹

As Bloomfield anticipated, the new president seemed inclined to abandon Carter's commitment to defending human rights. Repeatedly, in his electoral campaign, Reagan had thundered against Carter's flawed approach to human rights. To him, the policy had failed to address Soviet abuses and to confront Soviet power and growing influence. Moreover, his words about the need to rebuild American foreign policy on strong anti-communist foundations had raised doubts both in Congress and among activists about his administration's commitment to the promotion of human rights abroad. Joshua Rubenstein – at the time an Amnesty International representative and a leading expert on Soviet dissent – claimed that activists feared "the Reagan administration will not have a positive emphasis on human rights and in some parts of the world his election has been taken as a green light, an encouragement for repressive forces".²

These fears were confirmed within days when President Reagan proposed Ernest Lefever as the new undersecretary for human rights. Lefever, a long-time researcher at the Brookings Institution and the founder of the conservative Ethics and Public Policy Center, had been an outspoken critic of Carter's human rights efforts. In 1978, he had published an essay titled "The Trivialization of Human Rights" in which he attacked the "futility and irresponsibility of human rights standards" seen as such because they added up to "confusing guideline[s] for responsible statecraft".³ The following year, during a Congressional hearing, he had argued that "we cannot export human rights ... in dealing with Third World countries ... their foreign policy behavior should be the determining factor, not their domestic practices".⁴ Lefever's appointment

was firmly rejected by the Senate; indeed, the Republican majority within the Senate Foreign Relations Committee went so far as to vote with the Democrats to reject him by thirteen votes to four. A full four months passed before the Reagan administration named its second choice, thirty-three-year-old Elliott Abrams, who had earlier served as an aide to conservative Senators Henry Jackson (D – Washington) and Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D – New York). Abrams became crucial for the definition of what he called a “conservative human rights policy”. With an explicit anti-Soviet twist, he welded human rights to the promotion of democracy abroad. As such, the new American stance on international human rights bore little resemblance to Carter’s “absolute commitment to human rights”, a policy that led the United States to criticize its international allies as much as its rivals.⁵

These controversies are telling. The Lefever fiasco and Abrams’ determination to pursue a human rights agenda were deeply rooted in the popularity of human rights both in Congress and in the American public at large. By the early 1980s, only a tiny minority considered human rights as marginal to American foreign policy. This was probably Carter’s most important legacy. Although he was not the initiator of the human rights policy, he played a crucial role in making human rights a central concern for American diplomacy. Yet to say that Carter’s human rights-based policy, its forms and its outcomes enjoyed popularity in Congress would be misleading. In the four years he spent in office, Carter had failed both to persuade the American public that he had a clear grasp on the US’s role in the world, and to build a lasting domestic consensus on foreign policy. Many blamed Carter’s emphasis on the promotion of human rights for many of the difficulties the United States was facing at the time.

A first strand of criticism, at the time extremely popular, came from those who began to call themselves neoconservatives. They saw Carter’s human rights campaign as a failure, an expression of morality without power that did not pay enough attention to the Soviet Union, and that trained the focus against America’s authoritarian allies. Another line of criticism, embraced by many liberals, pointed to a sense of delusion and frustration at the accomplishments of Carter’s campaign. Despite some significant and important outcomes, many claimed the human rights policy did not meet expectations and the White House had been too selective in its implementation.⁶ Further criticism came from those who had advocated for better relations with the Soviet Union. Members of the business community, supporters of arms control and the demilitarization of American foreign policy, as well as many academicians holding realist assumptions about the international system, blamed Carter’s campaign for worsening bipolar relations.⁷

Indeed, there were many contradictions and shortcomings in Carter’s human rights campaign. How could the White House integrate the promotion of human rights into other foreign policy concerns? How could it develop a policy that was supposed to be at once universal and based on case-by-case action? How could it alleviate the suffering of victims of human rights violations? How could an ideological assault on the foundations of Soviet power be reconciled with Carter’s commitment to develop détente and reach a new SALT agreement with Moscow? How could the administration follow a global human rights agenda without jeopardizing other concerns for

American foreign policy? And finally – something that probably troubles scholars more than policy-makers – did the human rights campaign aim to move American foreign policy beyond the Cold War horizon or to renew ideological confrontation with the Soviet Union?

Many scholars – historians and political scientists alike – have tried to answer these questions, offering disparate interpretations of Carter’s human rights-based foreign policy. Since the mid-1990s, a growing body of scholarship has argued that Carter tried to move American foreign policy beyond the Cold War and the bipolar horizon.⁸

In part, the president himself contributed to this idea. Carter’s rhetoric, especially in the early months after assuming office, sought to tone down the Cold War and demonstrate that it was possible to cooperate with the Soviets to address new global challenges. Even some of his early opponents, neoconservative intellectuals like Jeane Kirkpatrick and Joshua Muravchik, or president Ronald Reagan, were instrumental in enhancing the alleged irrelevance of bipolar relations to Carter’s foreign policy, attacking his diplomacy for allowing the Soviets to increase their power and influence.

In part, scholarly appreciation of Carter’s international action as an early attempt to develop a post-Cold War foreign policy benefited and still benefits from an ongoing reappraisal of the 1970s as a crucial decade of transformation for the international system and for the United States. Several different processes had interacted to produce radical changes that no longer fitted into traditional Cold War categories: the emergence of global interdependence; the erosion of the bipolar balance of power and the rise of new actors in international relations; the affirmation of new political cleavages along with the rise of new global challenges. It was the moment in which a new and interdependent global order began to emerge.⁹ To many historians, Carter’s human rights policy was a major part of his attempt to manage an interdependent, post-Cold War international system. Daniel J. Sargent, for example, has suggested that Carter tried to develop a new foreign policy imbued with a mix of technocracy (Carter himself was an engineer) and moral beliefs, in which the management of global interdependence was matched by a new attention to human rights. Heavily influenced by the works of the Trilateral Commission, Carter developed a “world order politics” to replace the more traditional “balance of power politics”.¹⁰ Other scholars, for example David Schmitz, Vanessa Walker and Itai Nartzizenfeld Sneh, saw the formulation of Carter’s human rights as an explicit attempt to move American foreign policy beyond bipolar paradigms and perspectives and to develop a post-Cold War foreign policy. The subtitle of Sneh’s book is eloquent enough: through the human rights campaign, *The Future Almost Arrived*.¹¹ In so doing, Sneh and many others imply that Carter’s failure to move beyond the Cold War was manifest in his conversion to Cold War politics soon after the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in December 1979.¹²

Departing from most of these interpretations, this book is based on three main ideas.

First, it aims at placing Carter’s foreign policy and his human rights initiative in the Cold War context. The Cold War was the central reality of Carter’s foreign policy; the president himself “was a Cold Warrior from day one” who never abandoned anti-communism, as Nancy Mitchell wrote. From his first days in office, for example, Carter sought to elaborate a new SALT proposal to limit the arms race and check Soviet

rearmament. He did not overlook the deployment of Soviet SS-20 missiles, which began in 1976 and ended in 1979, and the need to elaborate a NATO response. He proposed that NATO Allies increase their defence spending. He also followed with anxiety the growing Soviet (and Cuban) military intervention in the Horn of Africa. Even strategic and military decisions that, to many, represented Carter's conversion to containment after the Soviets invaded Afghanistan began well before the invasion. Moreover, the White House was keen on completing normalization with China, an action to which the White House attached great geopolitical meaning. Similarly, Carter's proclaimed global and total commitment to human rights was calibrated to the Soviet Union and its violations of human rights. Even domestic politics did not allow Carter to overlook bipolar relations. Controversy over Soviet and Cuban adventurism in Africa, the Committee on the Present Danger, the political storm over Paul Warnke's double appointment to the head of both the United States Arms Control and Disarmament Agency and the SALT negotiations team, and protests over the presence of a Soviet Brigade in Cuba – all these were reminders that many Americans still believed the Cold War to be an appalling reality.¹³

While the book does not deny that Carter's human rights campaign had global extension and impact, it suggests that the Soviet Union was a specific target of both direct and indirect actions. By wielding the human rights "sword", the Carter administration renewed the United States' ideological competition with the Soviet Union. It followed a consistent approach to human rights violations in the world, denouncing allies' abuses and distancing the United States from many of them, but it specifically targeted the Soviet Union. Engaging the Soviets on human rights was an important weapon in Carter's strategy, one that allowed the United States to create new tensions and fuel political ferment within the Soviet Union, tarnish communism's image and global appeal and renew the global perception of America as a beacon of fundamental freedoms and rights.

Second, the book points out that *détente* and human rights intertwined and overlapped in unexpected, ambiguous and contradictory ways in the 1970s. Benefiting from growing contact between the blocs, dissidents in the Soviet Union and communist Europe found an international sounding box for their demands, strengthening Western interest in the state of human rights beyond the Iron Curtain. The bipolar dialogue and growing global interdependence thus favoured greater attention to human rights. This was an unexpected and paradoxical result of *détente*, a policy that was conceived as conservative in nature and, often, in opposition to the promotion of human rights. This forms the second element of the relationship between human rights and *détente* and shows the tension and apparent irreconcilability between them. Moscow perceived every action in favour of dissidents as an intolerable interference in Soviet domestic affairs and part of an ideological offensive aimed at delegitimizing the Soviet State, and therefore denounced it as irreconcilable with bipolar dialogue. Still more importantly, genuine indignation at the repression of political dissent became a weapon in the hands of critics and opponents of *détente* within the United States. Led by Senator Henry M. Jackson (D – Washington), the heterogeneous coalition that opposed Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger's *détente* continuously denounced bipolar

dialogue as a “one-way street” in which there was no room for human rights. They made the same argument to the Carter administration, casting a prolonged shadow over any attempt to develop a dialogue with the Soviet Union. This tension formed the backdrop against which Carter developed his Soviet policy. From his first days in office Carter had tried to develop a human rights policy that was complementary and functional to détente. The simultaneous promotion of human rights and détente was based on the idea that the Soviets needed to understand that the repression of dissent was detrimental to détente and the attempt to conclude a new SALT Treaty for the control of nuclear weapons. In other words, by linking foreign policy to American domestic politics, and détente to human rights, Carter was seeking to legitimate détente within the United States once again, silencing or at least containing charges from those who repeatedly affirmed it to be a form of appeasement of Soviet totalitarianism. For this reason, the book argues that Carter’s Soviet policy in its entirety was conceived as a double process of negotiations geared to making the Soviets accept the reduction of internal repression so as to strengthen détente and the prospects for the ratification of the SALT II agreements in the United States. In doing so, the book also offers a fresh interpretation of Jimmy Carter’s détente. Benefiting from Zbigniew Brzezinski’s intellectual contribution, the president elaborated a conception of détente as a dynamic process that could stabilize bipolar relations in order to allow the United States to compete politically and ideologically.

The political balance between détente and human rights soon revealed itself to be unable to simultaneously satisfy both the Soviets and the American public. This is the basis of the third major idea of this book: the origins, changes, results and failures of Carter’s human rights campaign can be explained in large part by analysing the political debate within the United States and Congress’s criticism of the White House’s foreign policy. Trying to appease domestic critics of détente, the Carter administration overlooked the negative impact of its human rights campaign on bipolar relations.

For this reason, the book adopts an “intermestic approach” to the study of Carter’s foreign policy. A traditional diplomatic history approach, one that focuses on government-to-government relations, fails to assess the complexity and the main constraints the White House faced when developing its human rights campaign, as well as the debates Carter’s foreign policy elicited within the United States and within Congress. By assuming an intermestic approach, the book aims to uncover how domestic politics shaped Washington’s foreign policy, its promotion of human rights and its attempt to develop bipolar détente. It also aims to understand how the evolution of international politics, and the deterioration of bipolar détente, affected the American domestic debate over Carter’s foreign policy.¹⁴ The legislative branch, in particular, came to play a crucial role. On the one hand, it contributed to the emergence of human rights in American foreign policy and, in the post-Vietnam, post-Watergate climate, it was determined to keep its role in foreign policy discussions. On the other, the Carter administration itself immediately identified Congressional support as fundamental for its foreign policy, as well as Senate ratification of the SALT II Treaty as the crucial obstacle for policy vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. Through this perspective, the main limits and shortcomings of Carter’s foreign policy emerge: the inability to create

a lasting consensus for his foreign policy, the failure to guide American attention to human rights and the failure to confer a new sense of legitimacy to *détente*.

The main ideas explored in the book are thus the implication of Carter's new universalism on human rights for the Cold War, the manifold and contradictory ties between human rights and *détente* and Carter's domestic failure.

In the first two chapters, I describe the rise of human rights in American foreign policy and the rationale for Carter's emphasis on human rights during the 1976 presidential elections. Specifically, the first chapter focuses on the emergence of human rights in international politics and American foreign policy. Human rights became what historian Samuel Moyn has defined as a global and non-political "last utopia", and many activists genuinely believed that their advocacy transcended politics on behalf of a new moral *lingua franca* to rebuild international relations.¹⁵ But the actions of these defenders of human rights were filtered by politicians who did not transcend their own ideologies or interests. Therefore, the first chapter focuses on Congress and its attempts to introduce human rights into American foreign policy. It argues that the Congressional human rights surge was based on the experience of the Vietnam War and the rejection of Kissinger's alleged amoral foreign policy. Human rights became common ground for both liberals and "neo-internationalists", who asked the American government to rediscover its traditional values and define a foreign policy for growing global interdependence, and for conservatives and neoconservatives, who wanted to abandon *détente* with the USSR and relaunch a traditional policy of containment.

The second chapter focuses on the role of human rights and Soviet dissidents in the 1976 presidential campaign. It highlights three major changes: the creation of the Congressional Committee on the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) (known as the Helsinki Commission); the influence of Zbigniew Brzezinski's reflections on Carter's campaign; and the electoral relevance that Soviet violations of human rights assumed in 1976. As a latecomer to the language of human rights, Carter's adoption of their promotion as a platform for his foreign policy was intended both to bring together the different components of the Democratic Party, divided over foreign policy at the time, and as a new consensual principle for American international action.

The third chapter focuses on 1977 and Carter's open diplomacy addressing Soviet violations of human rights. While prioritizing human rights, the administration constantly recalled the importance of *détente* and arms control. Although several historians consider this the major contradiction in the administration's foreign policy, the chapter argues that Carter truly believed he could preserve *détente* while, at the same time, promoting human rights in the USSR. His strategy was based on a reconceptualization of Kissinger's linkage, which was supposed to play a pivotal role in the domestic debate, helping Carter to develop a political dialogue with those conservative and neoconservative Cold Warriors who were dissatisfied with *détente*. In this view, American diplomatic efforts aimed both at making the Soviets willing to accept human rights criticisms and at creating new legitimization for SALT II within the United States.

The fourth chapter analyses the decision to shift the human rights policy towards the Soviet Union from open to quiet diplomacy. This change occurred in mid-1978 after

the closing of the CSCE Belgrade conference. While many historians have argued that after 1978 human rights no longer figured prominently in Carter's agenda, this chapter highlights how the United States and the Soviet Union continued to discuss human rights in private talks. To explain the choice for quiet diplomacy, the chapter stresses two points. First, as seen from Washington, the Soviets were making some positive moves to openness, especially regarding the free emigration of Soviet Jews or CSCE humanitarian provisions. Reducing public criticism was conceived as a tool to reward the Soviets for their cooperative attitude. Second, within the United States, a number of liberal critics began to point out how Carter's firm stance on Soviet violations of human rights was detrimental to détente and arms control negotiations, while others denounced the selectiveness of a supposedly universal campaign. The Carter administration decided to move discussions of Soviet violations of human rights from open to quiet diplomacy, in order to address such growing criticism and Soviet protests. Yet this shift occurred at a moment when, because of Soviet actions in Africa and the conclusion of trials of a number of well-known dissidents such as Yuri Orlov and Natan Sharansky, American scepticism towards détente and Soviet intentions was at its peak.

The fifth chapter discusses how conservative and neoconservative critics of Carter's foreign policy lashed out at the president's quiet diplomacy, denouncing it as a betrayal of his firm commitment to human rights and Soviet dissidents. To them, as Jeane Kirkpatrick wrote in a well-known *Commentary* article in late 1979, the human rights campaign was targeting allied countries and ignoring the Soviet Union. By exploiting détente and its misconceived human rights campaign – critics argued – the Carter administration had allowed the Soviets to strengthen their military capabilities, to expand their global influence and to continue their violations of human rights. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan seemed to confirm this criticism. Soon after the invasion, the administration decided to interrupt détente with the Soviets while continuing to focus on Soviet violations of human rights. Yet the meaning of the campaign was now different. Human rights had lost their dynamic linkage with détente: no attempt to advance human rights in the Soviet Union was possible; and ideological coverage to create domestic support in favour of détente was no longer required. The human rights campaign was now just another tool to score propaganda points against the Soviets.

Notes

- 1 L. Bloomfield, "The Carter Human Rights Policy. A Provisional Appraisal", 16 January 1981, JCPL, ZBM, Box 34, Folder "NSA Accomplishment – Human Rights".
- 2 Associated Press, "Soviet Dissident Calls Reagan Human Rights Policy Dangerous", 10 February 1981.
- 3 E.W. Lefever, "The Trivialization of Human Rights", *Policy Review* 3 (Winter 1978), pp. 13–34.
- 4 House Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Human Rights and U.S. Foreign Policy*, Hearings Before the Subcommittee on International Organizations, 96th Congress, 1st Session (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1979), pp. 230–231.

- 5 M. Freudenheim and B. Slavin, “White Hats Have a Practical Use”, *New York Times*, 8 November 1981; R. Sinding Søndergaard, “‘A Positive Track of Human Rights Policy’: Elliott Abrams, the Human Rights Bureau, and the Conceptualization of Democracy Promotion, 1981–1984”, in R. Pee and W.M. Schmidli (eds), *The Reagan Administration, the Cold War, and the Transition to Democracy Promotion* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 31–53.
- 6 J. Muravchik, *The Uncertain Crusade: Jimmy Carter and the Dilemmas of Human Rights Policy* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1988), pp. 8–9.
- 7 G.F. Kennan, *The Cloud of Danger: Current Realities of American Foreign Policy* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1978); C. Marcy (ed.), *Common Sense in U.S.–Soviet Relations* (Washington, DC: American Committee on East–West Relations; New York: Norton, 1978).
- 8 John Dumbrell was among the first to propose such interpretation. See J. Dumbrell, *The Carter Presidency: A Re-Evaluation* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1993). See also J.A. Rosati, “Continuity and Change in the Foreign Policy Beliefs of Political Leaders: Addressing the Controversy over the Carter Administration”, *Political Psychology* 9:3 (September 1988), pp. 471–505; J.A. Rosati, “The Rise and Fall of America’s First Post-Cold War Foreign Policy”, in H.D. Rosenbaum and A. Ugrinsky (eds), *Jimmy Carter: Foreign Policy and Post-Presidential Years* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), pp. 35–52; D. Skidmore, *Reversing Course: Carter’s Foreign Policy, Domestic Politics, and the Failure of Reform* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 1996).
- 9 C. Maier, “Consigning the Twentieth Century to History: Alternative Narratives for the Modern Era”, *American Historical Review* 105:3 (2000), pp. 807–831; N. Ferguson, C. Maier, E. Manela and D.J. Sargent (eds), *The Shock of the Global: The 1970s in Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010). The concept of interdependence was first discussed in R. Keohane and J. Nye, *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1977).
- 10 D.J. Sargent, *A Superpower Transformed: The Remaking of American Foreign Relations in the 1970s* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 233.
- 11 D.F. Schmitz and V. Walker, “Jimmy Carter and the Foreign Policy of Human Rights: The Development of a Post-Cold War Foreign Policy”, *Diplomatic History* 28:1 (January 2004), pp. 113–143; D.F. Schmitz, *The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); I.N. Sneh, *The Future Almost Arrived: How Jimmy Carter Failed to Change U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008).
- 12 The first to offer such a perspective was W. Lafeber, “From Confusion to Cold War: The Memoirs of the Carter Administration”, *Diplomatic History* 8:4 (1984), pp. 1–12.
- 13 N. Mitchell, *Jimmy Carter in Africa: Race and the Cold War* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press and Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2016), quotation at p. 8; N. Mitchell, “The Cold War and Jimmy Carter”, in O.A. Westad and M.P. Leffler (eds), *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, vol. 3: *Endings* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 66–88; A.H. Cahn, *Killing Détente: The Right Attacks the CIA* (University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 1998); B.J. Auten, *Carter’s Conversion: The Hardening of American Defense Policy* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2008).

- 14 F. Logevall, "Domestic Politics", in F. Castigliola and M.J. Hogan (eds), *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations* (3rd edn) (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 151–167; C. Craig and F. Logevall, *America's Cold War: The Politics of Insecurity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); W.M. Schmidli, *The Fate of Freedom Elsewhere: Human Rights and U.S. Cold War Policy toward Argentina* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 2013).
- 15 S. Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).