

## [Moler on Brucken, 'A Most Uncertain Crusade: The United States, the United Nations, and Human Rights, 1941-1953'](#)

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**Rowland Brucken.** *A Most Uncertain Crusade: The United States, the United Nations, and Human Rights, 1941-1953.* DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2013. x + 362 pp. \$48.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87580-471-2.

**Reviewed by** Dale Moler **Published on** H-USA (June, 2016) **Commissioned by** Donna Sinclair

In *A Most Uncertain Crusade*, Roland Brucken challenges traditional understandings of America's conflicting approach to international human rights in the postwar era. The ultimate failure of the United States to take a strong leadership role in the quest for global human rights policies and enforcement represented an unfulfilled vision for many Americans. While Cold War concerns and resistance from segregationist Southerners played an important role in undermining the lofty ideals established by Franklin Roosevelt during the war, Brucken argues that Roosevelt himself carefully used vague rhetoric and avoided discussion of enforcement of human rights policies as part of his own conservative approach to the issue. He shows how, through the subsequent decade, the conservative outlook underlying the origins of Roosevelt's idealistic human rights rhetoric strongly influenced the ways in which American politicians and diplomats, as well as their critics, understood the issue of human rights and the evolving role of the United States in ensuring them at home and around the globe.

Brucken begins his study by discussing Franklin Roosevelt's approach to human rights during the war and traces the evolution of American foreign policy on human rights under subsequent postwar administrations. In broad declarations like the Atlantic Charter, Roosevelt, along with other allied leaders, carefully crafted a pro-human rights platform on which to build support for the war effort while simultaneously remaining intentionally vague on any kind of implementation or enforcement strategies granted to an international body. Truman, faced with the difficult task of translating Roosevelt's lofty rhetoric into hard realities, ultimately followed the conservative line taken by his predecessor. Eisenhower, also following the conservative approach but with different strategies, focused more heavily on the human rights violations of the Soviet Union than on playing a strong leadership role in international human rights. Brucken shows how American leaders continued to support human rights initiatives rhetorically, but remained careful to protect the constitutional legality of situations that could be considered human rights violations, including the system of Jim Crow segregation entrenched in the American South.

At the center of Brucken's narrative is the interplay between several groups shaping American understanding of and opinions about international human rights legislation. American presidential administrations approached human rights diplomacy in different ways, although each maintained the conservative line set by Roosevelt during the early days of World War II. Nongovernmental organizations in the United States, including religious groups and the NAACP, advocated for the creation of strong human rights standards on an international level, building on the strong public support for human rights following the atrocities of the Second World War. The creation of the United

Nations and the activism of American ambassador Eleanor Roosevelt play a central role in Brucken's narrative, as this new international body became the center of global discourse concerning human rights, and a new hope for advocates of international enforcement of human rights policies.

Brucken balances the forces pushing for increased American participation in human rights with that of a growing backlash against American involvement in any international or supranational organization. Led by a small group of anti-New Deal legislators and the American Bar Association, this conservative coalition harbored anxieties about constitutional supremacy in international law and fought tirelessly to prevent the crafting and ratification of human rights treaties in the United States. Balancing both sides were the State Department legal experts struggling to craft acceptable positions on human rights that would nevertheless leave systematic human rights violations in the United States untouched. Brucken demonstrates the major role these groups played in the high hopes and ultimate failure of American involvement in international human rights.

Although much of the action takes place on an international stage, Brucken's study is heavily focused on the development of international human rights as it progressed within the United States. He does suitably establish the international context in which American positions developed, as other allied nations followed similar conservative approaches in the postwar era. He also shows how an international bloc of nonaligned countries, especially those in Asia and South America, were able to overtake the United States and become the driving force behind international human rights activism. Thus, as the United States relinquished the leadership role it had established with its World War II rhetoric, other countries with more intimate experiences with human rights issues were able to create new understandings and international agreements about human rights, often in spite of American resistance and opposition. Even so, Brucken's real focus is the impact of these developments on American legislators and those working for and against human rights involvement.

Brucken's source-driven study brings the groundwork of international legal systems to life. He relies heavily on meeting minutes, Senate deliberations, and the lengthy development process of policy writing to show the complications of balancing so many different interests in pursuit of a common goal. His use of personal correspondences, from presidents and State Department workers to Eleanor Roosevelt, reveals the conflicting views held by many of those most closely involved in these negotiations concerning human rights and America's role in establishing and securing them at home and abroad. In both his introduction and conclusion, Brucken ties the conservative American approach to human rights in the postwar era to more recent challenges facing the United States in the wake of international criticism of its human rights record. While these connections are underexplored, they do point to the relevance of human rights history today. In a new global environment in which the United States finds itself in new and difficult situations, studies like Brucken's *A Most Uncertain Crusade* help illuminate the conflicting past of American involvement in human rights issues around the globe.

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