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The Carter administration’s decision to vote in support of seating the Khmer Rouge regime as the official Cambodian representatives to the United Nations in September of 1979 was a jarring, incongruous moment for the ‘human rights president.’ For proponents of human rights, it seemed to be the latest signal that the administration’s human rights agenda was retreating in the face of escalating Cold-War tensions between the United States and Soviet Union. How could the recognition and tacit support of one of the most brutal, genocidal regimes of the modern era be read as anything but an abandonment of human rights commitments? Yet Debbie Sharnak does just that in her article “Sovereignty and Human Rights: Re-examining Carter’s Foreign Policy toward the Third World.” Situating this moment in a broader global context of increasing demands for non-intervention and respect for national sovereignty by Third World and developing nations in the 1970s, Sharnak argues that this moment reflected a shift in the Carter administration’s human rights policy to incorporate sovereignty as a core element. “For most of [Jimmy Carter’s] presidency,” Sharnak writes, “sovereignty had interfered with his human rights policy.” Yet by 1980, “rather than seeing sovereignty as an impediment, he began to articulate sovereignty and self-determination as tenet he was protecting in the Third World as part of his human rights policy” (306). The article attributes this transformation in thinking to the twin invasions of Afghanistan and Cambodia, which together served as a critical turning point that changed the geo-political context of the administration’s policies and priorities, including its human rights agenda.

“Sovereignty and Human Rights” makes several compelling arguments. First, it challenges the notion that the Carter administration simply abandoned its human rights regime in the second half of its term. Instead, it presents a policy in flux, responding to a complex international environment. Second, although U.S.-Soviet relations certainly conditioned policy formulations, the article convincingly argues for “looking beyond U.S.-Soviet relations” to reveal the multipolar nature of human rights in the 1970s. Sharnak is not the first to observe that the Carter administration sought to use human rights “as a basis for relations with the Third
World as opposed to an ‘increasingly outmoded Marxist-non-Marxist standard’” (307). Her close examination of the later years of the administration’s policy sheds new light on this endeavor during the most tense moments when a return to “Cold War polarities” seemed imminent if not already underway. Even in this moment of heightened bi-polar tensions, human rights considerations and Third World alignments factored into the administration’s thinking and priorities. Sharnak also reveals a complicated relationship between sovereignty and human rights in this study, one that was as dynamic as the international environment in which these concepts operated.

One of the strongest points of the article is its use of the United Nations as a site to consider Third World nations’ constructions of their own visions of human rights, and how they in turn shaped the efforts of the Carter administration. Sharnak observes that it was not only the Carter administration that was perturbed by the Soviet Union’s increasingly aggressive policies in 1979. The invasions of Afghanistan and Cambodia, “fundamentally changed perceptions of the Soviets as benign and progressive in their policies toward the Third World” (312). This underscored the principle of national sovereignty for many Third World nations, and also created an opening for the United States to position itself as the champion of this very principle and of Third World interests more broadly. The wholesale rejection by Third World nations of Soviet and Vietnamese efforts to frame the invasion of Cambodia in humanitarian terms demonstrates that the United States was not the only power to struggle with the tensions implicit within a human rights policy that sought to change the internal behaviors of other nations. Moreover, by showing how the Carter administration borrowed language and ideas from these nations to reframe its human rights efforts in 1980, Sharnak demonstrates the influence of these seemingly ‘peripheral’ nations on the core focus of the administration’s policy.

For all its merits, the article would have been stronger with a more thorough look at the idea of sovereignty for both the Carter administration’s human rights policies and the Third World nations that championed the concept. In addition, the article could have better contextualized Third World nations’ prioritization of sovereignty as a basic right, particularly in global fora like the United Nations. It is unclear if Sharnak is arguing that this emphasis on sovereignty was a new priority for these nations, or simply a priority made more visible or compelling by the international events she surveys. Similarly, Sharnak suggests that this emphasis on sovereignty was a new consideration for the Carter administration in late 1979. In Latin America, however, the administration emphasized sovereignty as an integral part of its human rights agenda from its earliest days in office. In the end the article leaves one wondering if this was a new policy element for the administration, or an existing policy element re-appropriated for a new context.

Further, the implications of the administration’s ‘re-orientation’ of its human rights policy for U.S.-Soviet relations could be clarified. Sharnak seems to argue that the administration’s heightened focus on sovereignty

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was in part a response to Soviet aggression, as she asserts the need for historians to look at “other avenues” it used to counter the Soviet actions beyond “confrontational measures” (311). In Latin America, emphasis on sovereignty and human rights together had served primarily as a critique of past U.S. interventionism in the region. With twin invasions of Afghanistan and Cambodia reinvigorating Cold War tensions, championing sovereignty took on a new symbolic meaning in distinguishing U.S. actions from those of the Soviets, now an implicit criticism of the Soviet Union even if the rhetoric and policy remained unchanged. In 1980, the language of non-intervention and sovereignty fit more easily U.S. security concerns and national interests in the Cold War framework of Central and Southeast Asia than Nicaragua. Should we thus interpret this emphasis on sovereignty as a signal of return to Cold War framework, however unwilling, or as an attempt to still prioritize Third World concerns and a multipolar world-view, even as a post-Cold War foreign policy slipped away?

Despite these ambiguities, Sharnak’s article offers a nuanced, multilateral engagement with the later years of the Carter administration. Her emphasis on the ideas and articulation of rights by Third World nations presents the United States as an important international actor, even as it was often responding to the agenda set by others. This work once again reminds us of the malleability of human rights, which makes it both compelling and maddening to study at times. It makes a similar case for the importance of engaging with sovereignty and self-determination not as fixed concepts, but as powerful and historically contingent concepts in their own right.


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