

2017

H-Diplo

 @HDiplo

FRUS Review No. 34

Published 7 December 2017

H-Diplo FRUS Review Editors: Thomas Maddux and Diane Labrosse

Web and Production Editor: George Fujii

H-Diplo FRUS Review of Kristin L. Ahlberg, ed. *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977-1980, Volume II, Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs*. Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 2013.

<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v02>.

URL: <http://www.tiny.cc/FRUS34>

Review by **David Johnson Lee**, Temple University

The *Foreign Relations of the United States* series on Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs e-book, edited by Kristin Ahlberg, is a valuable addition to the study of a key moment in U.S. diplomatic history. The existence of such a volume is testament to the changing priorities of the executive branch, marked by President Jimmy Carter's embrace of the human rights revolution that scholars have attributed to a panoply of activist groups and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), as well as to more traditional state interests.¹ It also marks a broadening of the scope for what is considered worthy of documentation in the *FRUS* series: as recently as the Kennedy administration series, there was no separate volume on foreign aid or international development, both of which are now staples of diplomatic history, though the Berlin crisis received two separate volumes. The volume's extensive cross-referencing and editorial notes mark it as much a historiographical intervention as documentary collection. As the literature on human rights continues to expand and diversify, the volume corroborates much conventional wisdom in the field while also suggesting new directions.

In seeking to understand the explosion of human rights talk in the 1970s, scholars are drawn to pinpointing continuity and rupture. Does the age of human rights that many believe we currently inhabit have a moment of inception?² If so, to whom do we attribute the role of prime mover: activists, victims of human rights abuse, the U.S. Congress, the executive branch? In what way did the Carter years mark a continuum with either left (Donald M. Fraser of Minnesota) or right (Henry M. Jackson of Washington)

¹ Mark Philip Bradley, *The World Reimagined: Americans and Human Rights in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Marco Duranti, *The Conservative Human Rights Revolution: European Identity, Transnational Politics, and the Origins of the European Convention* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

² Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012).

Congressional concern, or with that of NGOs and civil rights and civil liberties groups?³ Did Carter break with his own professed belief in the cause of human rights; if so, why?⁴ Did President Ronald Reagan traduce the Carter legacy and reject human rights, or bring about its apotheosis as democracy promotion?⁵ The volume does not, of course, answer these questions that preoccupy the literature, but it does offer new ways of imagining the issues at stake.

The volume illustrates many well-known aspects of the Carter administration's initial preoccupation with human rights. It depicts the ongoing difficulty with defining the term at all: do economic rights count? Should collective rights override individual rights? What counts as "gross and consistent" violation (79, 206)? It shows the continued pressure from the U.S. Congress and NGO community for action, to the point that officials feared the whirlwind they had helped to sow (330, 519). The selection of documents gives equal weight to both the National Security Council headed by Zbigniew Brzezinski and his assistant Jessica Tuchman with the State Department where Deputy Secretary of State Warren Christopher monopolized policy-making. It shows the gradual sidelining of the most vigorous and visible champions of human rights, people like Patricia Derian and Mark Schneider in the Department of State (607). The structure of the documentation itself illustrates the decline of human rights as a key issue for the administration: documents from the first year of the Carter presidency account for over 300 pages and fall in each successive year to under 200, just over 100, and finally less than 30.

Though the difficulty of defining human rights is well known among scholars, another and more surprising conundrum comes out of the *FRUS* documents: Carter administration officials also had difficulty in defining the purpose of foreign aid. One of the first tasks the administration faced once it chose human rights as a key issue was how to exercise leverage over offending countries. International financial institutions were major sources of funding, but resisted politicization. The Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC) and the Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC) offered other means of applying pressure. Human rights skeptics pointed out that the primary purpose of organizations like the CCC and OPIC was not actually to benefit the recipient nation, but rather to benefit U.S. business and agriculture (314, 491). Thus cutting such aid would hurt U.S. interests as much as those of offending countries.⁶

The dilemmas went even deeper when it came to the most basic of commodities: food. Carter himself acknowledged that "human rights begins at breakfast" (48). By giving an entire section to the campaign against world hunger, the volume acknowledges the important place of food in administration policy.

³ Barbara J. Keys, *Reclaiming American Virtue: The Human Rights Revolution of the 1970s* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2014).

⁴ David F. Schmitz, "Jimmy Carter and the Foreign Policy of Human Rights: The Development of a Post-Cold War Foreign Policy," *Diplomatic History* 28 (January 2004): 113-143; Hauke Hartmann, "US Human Rights Policy under Carter and Reagan, 1977-1981," *Human Rights Quarterly* 23 (2001): 402-430.

⁵ Joe Renouard, *Human Rights in American Foreign Policy: From the 1960s to the Soviet Collapse* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

⁶ William Michael Schmidli, *The Fate of Freedom Elsewhere: Human Rights and U.S. Cold War Policy toward Argentina* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016).

Food policy provided the link between humanitarianism, long a U.S. government concern, with human rights, the policy newcomer. The two turned out to be difficult to disentangle: representatives of the poorest nations such as those in Africa reacted skeptically to a human rights policy that threatened to cut the means of basic subsistence. Administration officials also quickly learned that PL-480, the law donating farm surpluses to needy countries, was in fact a highly politicized tool for subsidizing farm states, and was often used to prop up balance of payments in countries like Chile instead of alleviating hunger (298). The administration quickly realized that threatening to cut aid to poor countries could actually hurt the populations that aid was designed to help, and thus agreed to continue aid in cases where it benefitted the “poorest sectors of the population,” as already mandated by Congress (387). In addition to the already complex and fraught bureaucratic mechanisms necessary to discover which nations were “gross and consistent” violators of human rights, it would also be necessary to examine closely the aid programs which could be cut without harming the poor, giving rise to the Interagency Group on Human Rights and Foreign Assistance led by Warren Christopher. The *FRUS* volume does not delve into aid decisions for particular countries, but the Committee’s records show that many small to medium-scale aid programs stayed in place despite strong evidence of direct benefit to some of the worst human rights offenders like Nicaragua’s Anastasio Somoza Debayle.⁷

The problem raised by the politics of food point to other worrisome aspects of human rights promotion. Officials frequently voiced concerns that the process of compiling a list of countries that were both “gross and consistent violators” and which lacked significant diplomatic importance would end up creating a “hit list” of nations that were essentially expendable to U.S. foreign policy. Such a list began forming early on, consisting primarily of nations in Latin America and Africa. “We sometimes seem to be ‘punishing’ countries which don’t matter very much to our security or economic interests,” worried State’s Anthony Lake (365). Officials urged the administration to get away from simple “exhortation and penalty,” but it was unclear what else they could do (274). The soonest the administration could foresee increasing global economic assistance levels was 1982, optimistically projecting 4 more years of a human rights-committed presidency that never happened (235).

What the documents collected here begin to reveal, and what the literature on human rights has yet to fully account for, is the relationship between human rights and the concept of development itself. Scholars like Barbara Keys rightly point out the importance to the human rights activism of the U.S. failure in Vietnam and the rise and growing repressiveness of authoritarian governments from Latin America to East Asia. Insufficient attention has been given to the relationship between the crisis in development thinking that these events denote and the rise of human rights. The foreign-policy literature on the 1960s has for over a decade concentrated on modernization policy, especially in Latin America and Asia, while that of the 1970s concentrates on human rights. Even as the Carter administration struggled continually to define a coherent ideal to offer nations that successfully respected human rights, it is clear that the kind of integrated image of progress central to U.S. self-conception so prevalent a decade before was absent. The few appearances of the term modernization, central to the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, indicate its waning conceptual importance (1125).

⁷ Records of Deputy Secretary Warren Christopher, 1977-1980, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD.

Human rights, these documents suggest, were part of a broader post-1960s re-imagining of development ideals for both the United States and the world. In addition to food policy, the collection rightly gives equal weight, though less space, to issues like international health, population, and women's issues, whose uneasy relationship with human rights mark the fragmentation of the ideals of the 1960s. The foreign-policy historiography of the 1960s has for over a decade concentrated on modernization policy, while that of the 70s concentrates on human rights, and the 1980s on democracy promotion.⁸ Connections between these eras and areas of concern have yet to be fully drawn.⁹ This will require broadening the conceptual lexicon historians now use, which often brackets issues like human rights, modernization, and democratization, as well as other relevant categories such as women's rights, indigenous rights, and sustainable development that were quickly gaining traction in the 1970s.¹⁰ It will also require looking to the complex ways these ideas were produced, translated, and manipulated all over the world, and connecting local politics with the politics of world order that met and clashed in this rich historical moment.¹¹

To the ongoing project of connecting the global with the local must be added the connection between the global and the personal, another key aspect of the human rights revolution. Diplomatic historians are beginning to take seriously the role of imagination and emotion in foreign relations.¹² Scholars now recognize the essential role activists and organizations played in appealing to the conscience of mankind in mobilizing assistance to political prisoners, famine victims, and refugees—the left-behinds of geopolitics. The use by rights activists of creative appeals to conscience is undeniable, but the *FRUS* documents offer little sense of the imaginative worlds decision-makers inhabited. This is understandable in the case of Carter administration officials trying to reshape the entire bureaucracy of the U.S. government: the bureaucratization of affect seemed to call for a blurring of the individuality on which human rights were premised. National Security Council (NSC) Global Issues Cluster coordinator Jessica Tuchman expressed alarm that bodies like the Christopher Committee might succumb to too much individual concern: “15 people were arrested in Togo in 1974 for distributing pamphlets, do we know what happened to them?”

⁸ Michael E. Latham, *The Right Kind of Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010); Sarah B. Snyder, *Human Rights Activism and the End of the Cold War: A Transnational History of the Helsinki Network. Human Rights in History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

⁹ Barbara Keys, “The Newest Idealism: Human Rights in US Foreign Policy,” *Lawfare Blog*, 19 April 2017.

¹⁰ Stephen J. Macekura, *Of Limits and Growth: The Rise of Global Sustainable Development in the Twentieth Century* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Todd A. Eisenstadt, ed, *Latin America's Multicultural Movements: The Struggle between Communitarianism, Autonomy, and Human Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

¹¹ Carol Gluck, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, Itty Abraham, eds, *Words in Motion: Toward a Global Lexicon* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2009); Daniel J. Sargent, *A Superpower Transformed: The Remaking of American Foreign Relations in the 1970s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

¹² Barbara Keys, “Bernath Lecture: Henry Kissinger: The Emotional Statesman,” *Diplomatic History* 35 (September 2011): 587-609.

There was little place for micro-level (or as Tuchman put it, “picayune”) concern when formulating a policy burdened with the fate of a world full of individuals (212).

One series of documents in which emotion does seem to enter the fray begins with an editorial note telling of the complaint in July 1978 by the Memphis Tennessee Committee on Human Rights and the Bridgewater Shelby County NAACP to the United Nations (UN) Subcommission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities that “African-American residents of Memphis and Shelby County had been subject to discrimination by the Memphis police and denied due process” (526). Thus the United States itself might have been guilty of a “gross and consistent” pattern of human rights violations. Though NSC staffers argued that political blowback could be managed, Tuchman expressed a singular emotion: shock (543). Such allegations threatened to derail the entire human rights crusade. Ignoring systematic abuses of human rights at home was more than the moral smugness officials continually worried about presenting. It was simple hypocrisy.

A few weeks later, State suggested calling for a worldwide amnesty for political prisoners as a way of returning wind to the sails of the human rights efforts (itself an echo of UN ambassador Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s own short-lived human rights crusade in 1975). Tuchman was skeptical, wondering if the Wilmington 10, a group of black protestors imprisoned in North Carolina for alleged arson, could be considered political prisoners as well (543). The idea was dropped, and human rights continued to lose force in administration decision-making. Though the breakdown of détente in the ‘sands of the Ogaden’ was well underway and the Soviets would soon invade Afghanistan, thereby hurrying the slow decline of human rights policy, this brief moment of recognition on the part of one of the human rights campaign’s erstwhile defenders points to other possible sources of a loss of crusading zeal. Holding up a mirror to the world’s injustices risked glimpsing other truths.

David Johnson Lee teaches U.S. and Latin American history in Philadelphia. He is completing a book about post-1960s development, human rights, and democratization in Nicaragua.