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Questions as to the motives underlying U.S. foreign policy have long lay at the heart of the field of foreign relations history. Historians consistently weigh the relative import of the search for security, economic self-interest, domestic culture, ideology, and other factors in the policymaking process. In those discussions, the desire to expand human rights abroad rarely emerges as an end in itself. As Michael Schmidli explains, although the concept of ‘human rights’ was very much a product of particular political discourses, the promotion of human rights became an important objective for the Jimmy Carter administration. But transforming campaign rhetoric that promised a human rights oriented foreign policy into reality – in itself an unprecedented task – proved difficult, and even the most incremental victories were hard-won by the administration’s human rights proponents.

Schmidli pursues two objectives: first, he details the Carter administration’s general emphasis on human rights promotion as a policy objective. Second, he uses the case of Argentina to illustrate many of the challenges and, ultimately, the limits associated with that policy. Argentina lends itself to use as a case study because it served as the centerpiece of Carter’s professed commitment to human rights. Indeed, the country suffered tangible losses as a result of its denigration of human rights during the initial years of the Carter presidency. Over time, however, the administration’s commitment to protecting human rights in Argentina waned.

The reviewers find much that is praiseworthy in Schmidli’s work. Bradley Simpson calls The Fate of Freedom Elsewhere “a fine new book.” David M. K. Sheinin writes that it “has set the analytical gold standard on the evolution and exercise of those tensions [between a human rights centered foreign policy and the national security doctrine].” Jason Colby calls the book “well-researched, well-written, and thoroughly convincing.”

As the reviewers observe, Schmidli examines a wide array of individuals and institutions that influenced U.S. human rights policy. Members of Congress used their influence to guide administration policy. Newly prominent human rights activists pushed those members of Congress – as well as Carter administration officials – to adopt policies that consistently prioritized human rights promotion. While Schmidli details many of the internal divisions between Washington officials as to the wisdom of a human rights approach to foreign policy, Simpson particularly appreciates that the book moves past the conventional narrative centering on the human rights-national security dichotomy among government officials by integrating non-state activists into the narrative. Most notable among them was Olga Talamante, a U.S. citizen kidnapped by Argentine state security forces in 1974 who, upon her release, founded the Comisión Argentina por Derechos Humanos (CADHU) to lobby Washington officials as part of an effort to end any U.S. support for the Argentine government. By incorporating individual activists and Non-Governmental Organizations that lobbied on behalf of human rights, Schmidli offers a more complete explanation of the policymaking process. At the same time, Schmidli examines the business leaders and conservative journalists who mobilized to counter the new
emphasis on human rights during the 1970s. In this way, he analyzes the interchange between private and public actors in the formulation of policy.

Ultimately, Schmidli explains, the Carter administration was inconsistent in emphasizing human rights as a function of its foreign policies. This argument is not novel, but it is nonetheless important. During the second half of the Carter administration, as détente dissipated, so too did human rights promotion as a clear priority. A detailed examination of the Argentine case study serves to illustrate this trend. Argentina had been perhaps the most notable target of Carter’s initial human rights policy. The country’s military government lost access to U.S. capital and support because of its dirty war against its own citizens, in which some 30,000 Argentines perished at the hands of the state. Business leaders, who in some cases lost access to the Argentine market, and conservative journalists, who were sympathetic to the military government’s campaign against alleged subversives, struck back forcefully. They were aided by government officials who had never supported the policy. Eventually, human rights promotion became an unworkable basis upon which to construct foreign policy. Interestingly, the Reagan administration went on to employ the language of human rights as a bludgeon against communist governments (something U.S. officials had done with some regularity during the early Cold War).

Colby and Sheinin find great value in Schmidli’s use of a bilateral case study to exemplify the promise and shortcomings of human rights promotion as a cornerstone of Carter’s larger foreign policy. Colby holds that the “book proves just how important and compelling a focused case study can be.” Similarly, Sheinin finds that Schmidli “makes the most effective sort of case for the high value of bilateral studies of U.S. international relations.” With the international turn among historians of U.S. foreign relations, scholars have increasingly sought to decenter the United States in their narratives while highlighting the role of international actors, particularly from the Global South. Part of that process has involved framing research questions in increasingly multilateral terms. While Schmidli conducted research at archives in the United States, Argentina, and Europe, the focus of his analysis remains U.S. policymaking. That is, in light of its political, economic, and military power he at least implicitly makes the case for re-centering the United States.

Although Colby appreciates the value of a bilateral case study, he is more skeptical of Schmidli’s decision to provide greater depth of analysis to U.S. policymaking than to events in Argentina. The “domestic currents” within Argentina, he holds, remain underdeveloped in *The Fate of Freedom Elsewhere*. Colby would also like to have seen Schmidli better contextualize the Argentine case study. While Schmidli thoroughly explains the development and evolution of U.S. policies, and analyzes both the effects of those policies on Argentina and the ways in which Argentina caused changes in Washington, he does little to situate that bilateral story in a broader regional or global context. Argentina’s was far from the only government to disregard the human rights of its citizens during the 1970s. There remains work for historians to do to explain the connections between Carter’s shifting policies and the broader story of Latin America’s dirty wars, to say nothing of the various U.S. stances on human rights abuses globally during the 1970s.
Both the Carter administration’s human rights policies and the dirty wars of the 1970s and early 1980s have recently begun to receive the depth of analysis that only monographs based on detailed archival research can yield. Schmidli’s contribution is significant – particularly in its analysis of U.S. policymaking. It will provide an important touchstone for those who continue to develop our collective understanding of a violent and disruptive era.

Participants:

**William Michael Schmidli** received a Ph.D. in 2010 from Cornell University, and is an Assistant Professor of History at Bucknell University. His background is in the history of the United States in the world, transnational movements, human rights, and Modern Latin America. Schmidli has published articles in *Diplomatic History, Cold War History,* and *Diplomacy of Statecraft,* and his current book-length research project is an international history of the promotion of democracy during the Reagan era. During academic year 2014-2015, he will be a fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study, School of Historical Studies, Princeton.

**Dustin Walcher** is Associate Professor and Chair of History and Political Science at Southern Oregon University. A specialist in international history and the history of U.S. foreign relations, his scholarship analyzes international economic policy, inter-American relations, and social disruption. He is currently revising a manuscript that examines the link between the failure of U.S.-led economic initiatives and the rise of social revolution in Argentina during the 1950s and 1960s.

**Brad Simpson** is Associate Professor of History and Asian studies at the University of Connecticut. He is the author of *Economists with Guns: Authoritarian Development and US-Indonesian Relations* (2008), and is currently working on two books: an international history of Indonesian authoritarianism from 1966-1998, and a global history of the idea of self-determination.

**Jason Colby** is Associate Professor of History at the University of Victoria in British Columbia, Canada. He is the author of *The Business of Empire: United Fruit, Race, and U.S. Expansion in Central America* (Cornell University Press, 2011) as well as several articles and books chapter, including “A Chasm of Values and Outlook: The Carter Administration’s Human Rights Policy in Guatemala,” *Peace and Change,* 35 (October 2010), 561-593

**David M. K. Sheinin** is Professor of History at Trent University (Canada) and Académico Correspondiente of the Academia Nacional de la Historia de la República Argentina. He was awarded the 2013 Arthur P. Whitaker Prize (Best Book) from the Middle Atlantic Council of Latin American Studies for *Consent of the Damned: Ordinary Argentinians in the Dirty War* (University Press of Florida, 2012). Alongside Lester D. Langley, David co-edits the updated and expanded University of Georgia Press “United States and the Americas” series.
In her 2004 study of U.S. human rights policy in Latin America, *Mixed Signals*, political scientist Kathryn Sikkink called on scholars to consider the “longer-term” impact of human rights initiatives in U.S.-Latin American relations, and in particular she argued that the “effectiveness of the Carter human rights policy deserves reevaluation.”1 Mike Schmidli takes up that challenge in *The Fate of Freedom Elsewhere: Human Rights and U.S. Cold War Policy toward Argentina*. Schmidli’s topic is well chosen. Although Argentina was arguably the highest profile target of the Carter administration’s human rights policy, no book-length study of U.S.-Argentine relations in this era exists. And while historians and presses alike push for ever more sweeping interpretations of U.S. foreign relations, Schmidli’s superb book proves just how important and compelling a focused case study can be.

If Jimmy Carter’s electoral victory in November 1976 was a “defining moment for U.S. foreign policy,”(1) as Schmidli asserts, Argentina’s military coup less than eight months earlier represented a pivot point in Latin America’s political history. In the ensuing ‘dirty war,’ the military junta abducted, tortured, and killed perhaps 30,000 Argentine citizens in the name of national security. In the process, Argentina became a test case for Carter’s effort to weave human rights into the fabric of U.S. foreign policy. The short-term results were mixed. Despite reducing military and economic aid to the Argentine regime and drawing international attention to the dirty war, the Carter administration failed to halt the killing. In the process, it opened itself up for conservative criticism that it was alienating a regional ally for little moral or strategic or gain.

Schmidli forces us to take a longer and more complex view of these questions. Like Greg Grandin’s *Empire’s Workshop* (2007) and Stephen Rabe’s *The Killing Zone* (2011), *The Fate of Freedom Elsewhere* returns U.S. Cold War policy to the center of the story.2 In this sense, it represents a powerful retort to Hal Brands’s *Latin America’s Cold War* (2012), which sweepingly attributes the region’s bloodshed to “extremists” on the left and right, and depicts the United States as only “one of several interested meddlers” in Latin America.3 Indeed, in Argentina’s case, Schmidli finds that U.S. Cold-War policy had a profound, perhaps determinative, influence on the rise of military rule and state violence.

The first two chapters of Schmidli’s study track this influence of U.S. imperatives on the ideological and institutional trajectory of the Argentine military. At the heart of this


dynamic was Washington’s successful effort, in the wake of the 1959 Cuban revolution, to shift the focus of Latin American militaries from external defense to internal security. Yet U.S. officials rarely contemplated the tension—perhaps the inherent contradiction—of encouraging Latin American military officers toward apolitical professionalism while urging them to focus obsessively on internal threats within their nations. As Schmidli observes, “it was only a small step from the selective repression prescribed by U.S. counterinsurgency strategy to systematic state-sanctioned terrorism.” (28) Although these patterns emerged during earlier U.S. interventions in Central America and the Caribbean, and thus were not as unique to the 1960s and 1970s as Schmidli implies, his discussion of U.S. Cold War policies is crucial to demonstrate what a sharp departure Carter’s policies represented.

Schmidli then moves on to the rise of human rights activism in the 1970s. In doing so, he offers extensive analysis of the rise of grassroots human rights organizations and its relationship to the reassertion of Congressional influence over U.S. foreign policy beginning in the early 1970s. The result is a much more complete picture of the human rights landscape prior to Carter’s election. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine reading this chapter and continuing to teach and write about ‘Carter’s human rights policy’ in the same way.

It is on the policy debates of the Carter years that Schmidli makes his most important contribution. In addition to extensive research in the United States and archival work in Argentina, he draws effectively on his own interviews of key figures to draw out the nuances of this story. In fact, one of the analytical and narrative strengths of this book is its use of biographical sketches to track developments in the human rights debate. Schmidli’s examines the career of Ambassador Robert Hill, for example, to explore the interlocking relationship between U.S. business interests and Cold War policy. The life of Mexican-American activist Olga Talamante, in contrast, reveals the arbitrary brutality of the dirty war as well as the diverse network developed by human rights advocates.

Perhaps the most compelling sketch is of U.S. embassy official Franklin A. ‘Tex’ Harris, whose story underscores the profound change that Carter’s human rights initiative brought to U.S. policy on the ground as well as the tense relations between human rights advocates and committed Cold-Warriors within the U.S. government itself. Schmidli’s account of Harris’s efforts to get his dispatches to Washington in the face of obstruction from his superiors is worthy of a spy novel. Indeed, such accounts should serve as cautionary tales for scholars and activists who tend to depict U.S. foreign policy as monolithic.

In this teasing out of the internal debate over U.S. policy toward Argentina, no figure plays a more important role in Schmidli’s study than Patricia Derian. Appointed Coordinator (and later Assistant Secretary of State) of Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs, Derian proved critical to framing and promoting the administration’s human rights policy, and she focused especially on Argentina. As Schmidli notes, Derian’s experience with the U.S. Civil Rights Movement strengthened her commitment to human rights but also contributed to some of her clashes with State Department colleagues. Accustomed to utilizing publicity to draw attention to injustice, she recoiled from suggestions that private discussions would work more effectively in the context of international relations.
This is an insightful discussion that Schmidli might have pushed further. After all, the strategy of the Civil Rights Movement was to generate a crisis atmosphere that would draw public attention and ultimately the intervention of the federal government. In the case of the dirty war, however, there was no sovereign power above the Argentine government to which human rights advocates could appeal. In this sense, Derian was perhaps too quick to dismiss the ‘quiet diplomacy’ associated with former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and denounced by human rights advocates. After all, the problem with Kissinger’s diplomacy was not its volume but rather its message of complicity in the violence of the Argentine state.

Nevertheless, this book makes it difficult to argue that Derian’s loud and public diplomacy did not have a powerful effect on U.S. and international views of the dirty war. She played a central part, for example, in Carter’s decision to submit lists of the “disappeared” to the Argentine government, which Schmidli rightly declares a “signal moment in the evolution of the U.S. human rights policy.” (135) Likewise, Derian’s efforts helped bring about the 1979 visit to Argentina of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), which played an important role in publicizing the abuses of the military government within Argentina itself.

The final section of *The Fate of Freedom Elsewhere* places Argentina within the familiar post-1978 narrative of U.S. foreign policy. In response to the Iranian Revolution and Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Carter administration returned to more traditional Cold-War priorities, in the process attenuating its commitment of human rights. The way these trends played out Schmidli’s case study, however, are revealing. On the one hand, international and economic anxieties heightened the American business community’s attacks on Carter’s human rights policy. In turn, the administration’s efforts to appease conservatives “hamstrung Patricia Derian’s ongoing struggle to maintain pressure on the Argentine military junta.” (172) At the same time, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan raised Argentina’s strategic importance. As Schmidli shows, in order to prevent Argentina from undercutting the U.S. grain embargo on the Soviet Union, the Carter administration muted its criticism of and resumed its military aid to the junta. Ronald Reagan’s election the following year threatened to permanently decouple human rights from U.S. policy toward Latin America. Indeed, the new Reagan administration encouraged the Argentine military junta’s effort to export its repressive techniques to Central America.

Yet the question of human rights was not so easily expunged from U.S. foreign policy. As Schmidli convincingly argues, the combined efforts of human rights activists and committed officials such as Derian and Harris not only drew international attention to the abuses of Argentina’s military, but also institutionalized human rights within the U.S. policy apparatus. As a result, rather than discarding human rights, as it initially seemed eager to do, the Reagan administration was forced to wrestle with the legacy of Carter’s policies and the continued effort of human rights advocates. In this sense, Schmidli’s study underscores the fact that the human rights ‘moment’ of the late 1970s was hardly a moment at all. Rather, it brought a profound, if incomplete, transformation of the way Americans conceived of their role in the world.
Despite all of these strengths, Schmidli’s study does have limitations. First, notwithstanding its excellent analysis of the United States’ influence on Argentina’s military, it fails to engage more deeply with domestic currents within Argentina. In light of the longstanding tension between the two nations prior to the early 1960s, for example, Schmidli might have more thoroughly explored the role of Argentine nationalism and anti-American sentiment during the tensions of the late 1970s. Likewise, although Schmidli acknowledges the wave of leftist terrorism in the early 1970s, he gives little sense of the activities of insurgents during the dirty war.

Second, the study would have benefited from greater regional perspective. Although Schmidli repeatedly declares Argentina “the hemisphere's worst human rights violator” (80), he offers relatively little discussion of political violence elsewhere, including nations such as Guatemala and El Salvador, whose relations with the United States took parallel turns during the Carter administration. Finally, on a more nitpicky note, it is a shame that a book so evocatively written offers no illustrations of any kind. It is understandable that there are no maps, as Argentine geography does not figure prominently, but it is surprising that no photos of key players such as Carter, Derian, Harris, and Talamante are included.

In sum, Schmidli has produced a well-researched, well-written, and thoroughly convincing account of U.S. human rights policy toward Argentina. On the whole, his interpretation of the Carter years is not novel. Rather, Schmidli’s study strengthens the claims of revisionists who stress the long-term impact and legacy of the U.S. human rights policies and activism of the late 1970s. What is noteworthy about this study is the remarkable material Schmidli has gathered and his use of that material to present a nuanced portrait of the aspirations, impact, and limitations of the U.S. human rights initiative in the case of Argentina. At its heart, it is policy-centered analysis at its finest—placing officials, legislators, and activists within the context of their times.
In this expert historical analysis, William Michael Schmidli uses the Argentine case to untangle how human rights-based policymaking worked. The author makes the most effective sort of case for the high value of bilateral studies of U.S. international relations. At their best, they deftly explain ties between two nations. But in addition, they relate something much larger. In this vein, Schmidli broadens and deepens our understanding of how policymaking was structured in the Jimmy Carter administration, the ways in which human rights drove policy making in ebbs and flows, and the nature of presidential power and its assertion as policy and action.

The author has taken a page out of the historian Stephen Rabe’s playbook in being the first to mine with high intelligence newly released U.S. government documents for every nugget. Moreover, he does so with such skill that others will likely be wary of having another crack at this material for some time to come. Schmidli complements that research with a strong review of a range of manuscript collections, oral histories, and a variety of other sources. On that base of strong scholarship, the book snuck up on me. Before reading it, I thought my version of President Jimmy Carter, human rights, and Argentina was pretty much set. I was wrong.

There are three vital accomplishments here. First, in a tightly written chapter, Schmidli gives a stellar overview of the intersections between the beginnings of what he calls a human rights movement in the United States and a related awakening in Congress on overseas rights violations. Second, there is an adept and lucid tracing of the stages in Carter’s thinking and that of his pro-human rights advisers that brought him in 1978 to what many considered a State Department ‘hard line’ toward Argentina. Intertwined with the above is Schmidli’s third, and perhaps most important, key analytical success. We knew that, in terms of human rights policy and how presidential policy making works, National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski was a thorn in the side of Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs Patricia M. Derian. Now, Schmidli shows precisely (both chronologically and, more importantly, in how power was structured in the executive branch) the ways in which Brzezinski’s power in the Carter administration short-circuited the drive for a human rights-based foreign policy in the long run.

The author is at his best on the evolution of Brzezinski’s views and the toughening of his hard line approach. In 1978, at the height of the State Department human rights office’s power in the administration, Brzezinsky, already at odds with Derian’s emphasis on rights in foreign policy, pushed back with unusual fervor. Schmidli posits that, as much as anything else, Brzezinski was responding to broad based political change. The electorate was drifting to the right and the National Security Adviser likely saw an opening. Schmidli points to data showing that by late 1978, a declining and scant fourteen percent of Americans believed that the United States was stronger than the Soviet Union – a starting

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point for President Ronald Reagan’s shift to the right on Cold War power politics three years later.

Moreover, while Carter’s human rights policy had strong public support, the November 1978 electoral defeat of prominent human rights supporters in Congress underlined a turning point, with Carter administration policy veering to the right in anticipation of the 1980 election. One of those who lost in 1978 was Rep. Donald M. Fraser (a Democrat from Minnesota-). Schmidli ties this case to Brzezinski’s prescience and the precariousness of human rights policy in the Carter administration; Fraser’s defeat not only pushed out the most influential human rights backer on Capitol Hill, but also closed a key avenue for non-governmental human rights advocates. Brzezinski built on Democratic congressional losses and a hardening Cold-War line among many Americans in order to strengthen his position on the National Security Council, marginalize the Human Rights Bureau within the State Department, and close off Derian’s access to Carter.

*Fate of Freedom* also shows how profoundly the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in late 1979 re-confirmed Brzezinski’s marginalization of Derian and pro-human rights constituencies in Congress, the State Department, and beyond. At the time of the U.S. grain embargo on 4 January 1980, the Carter administration entirely ignored the risk of Argentina supplying the Soviets with wheat. A remarkably short two weeks later, that error was rectified. The departure on 25 January of General Andrew J. Goodpaster as Carter’s representative to Argentina on the grain issue was the death knell of human rights as a policy priority. Just like that, Argentina emerged as central to U.S. Cold-War policymaking, with commerce at the core of that shift. In February Under Secretary of Commerce Luther H. Hodges went to Buenos Aires to inform the junta that Washington would approve Export-Import Bank funding guarantees for Argentina, and in March, after a long chill in bilateral nuclear ties that dated to India’s first experimental nuclear detonation in 1972, the U.S. president sent his chief disarmament negotiator, Gerard C. Smith, to Argentina to discuss the construction of that country’s third commercial atomic reactor.

Most senior Argentine military officers depended on a core line of reasoning to explain what seemed to them inexplicable: how the Carter administration could buy into the Amnesty-International led chorus on human rights abuses in Argentina when, according to the junta and its backers, Argentina was fighting the opening salvo of a U.S.-led third world war on communism. Their answer built on a Vietnam-era canard in some American political and military circles; if only American politicians had given the U.S. military the necessary political backing, the U.S. might have (indeed, should have) won the Vietnam War. Argentine officers applied that same logic to Carter on Argentine military rule. Carter was a liberal aberration in Washington, incapable of recognizing ‘true’ U.S. friends and strategic interests in South America. By this same rationale, the Argentine military anticipated an end to the policy deviation with the election of Ronald Reagan to the presidency (and with the naming of Jean Kirkpatrick, an Argentina expert, to his foreign policy team).

But just as Schmidli uncovers nuanced fluctuations on Carter’s human rights policies, so too was the Reagan administration sensitive to a range of factors that would prompt sharp
policy shifts. *Fate of Freedom* draws a compelling set of links between the success – and institutionalization – of human rights international policy under Carter; the dynamic media presence in the United States of Argentina’s most famous human rights victim, the journalist Jacobo Timerman; and a dramatic Reagan about-face. During the 1980 election campaign, Reagan’s hostility to Derian and what he called ‘her minions’ underlined both how significant human rights had become to U.S. foreign policy and the candidate’s intention to nullify that impact as soon as he reached the White House.

But the confluence of the Argentine human rights case and an early administration failure changed Reagan’s position, though it scarcely marked a policy realignment in favor of the Derian legacy. In 1981, the administration’s failed effort to have Ernest Lafever confirmed by the Senate Foreign Relations committee as Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs featured an electric, surprise appearance by Timerman on the Hill that was received with thunderous applause. Timerman did not testify, but his opposition to Lafever was well known. Just as important, Lafever had suggested an alternative to sharp moral policy stands and quiet diplomacy in dealing with dictatorships – which many in the Senate and beyond read as a tepid abrogation of human rights as a policy priority. In a brilliant if mercenary change of course that followed, Reagan abandoned his excoriation of this human rights office in the State Department. Instead, he melded an updated human rights policy with a shift right on Cold War anti-communism, nominating Elliot Abrams to the Assistant Secretary position and redirecting human rights policy back toward an early 1970s emphasis on violations in the Soviet Union and its satellites.

Patricia Derian tells a good, but chilling story about her 1977 visit to Buenos Aires as Assistant Secretary of State. On her return to Washington, a Central Intelligence Agency colleague invited her to lunch, where he asked with whom she had spoken in Argentina. Years later, Derian recalled the chill she felt at that moment. Knowing that any information offered up on human rights activists with whom she met might find its ways into the hands of the Argentine junta, she said nothing. ² The story points to how contentious and how nuanced human rights-as-foreign policy had become in late 1970s Washington, and how dramatically National Security Doctrine in the Americas had come to divide those advising the president on Latin American dictatorships. *Fate of Freedom* has set the analytical gold standard on the evolution and exercise of those tensions.

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The death in May 2013 of Argentina’s former military leader, Jorge Rafael Videla, symbolized the complex politics of human rights in a country still scarred by atrocities committed by its government during the period of military rule between 1976 and 1983. Videla died in prison, serving a life sentence for crimes against humanity committed during his rule, but one begun in 2012, thirty one years after he left power. Justice delayed or justice served? The answer depends on one’s vantage point, and on the questions being asked.


The answer, the author suggests, is sobering. In the country that came to symbolize the Carter Administration’s avowed support for human rights, the short term impact of U.S. policy was limited, fleeting, and provoked a fierce backlash in both Argentina and the United States. The “multifaceted opposition to Carter’s human rights policy significantly constrained what it could do,”(5) and after 1979 the renewal of Cold-War tensions with the Soviet Union prompted a reversal of U.S. policy under President Ronald Reagan to once again emphasize U.S. national security goals in Latin America.

This is perhaps the best study we have of U.S. human rights policy toward a single country, and probably one of the best regarding the complicated interaction between states, bureaucracies and nongovernmental organizations in formulating human rights policy during the Cold War.

Schmidli artfully frames his chapters through a biographical lens, beginning with U.S. Ambassador Robert Hill, the “inveterate cold warrior” (46) whose fierce anti-Communism was tested by the Argentine government following the 1976 coup that installed General Videla in power.

Hill’s career in the State Department tracked the growing commitment of the Dwight D. Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy Administrations to deeper ties with Latin American Armed Forces establishments as bulwarks of anti-Communism. The Kennedy White House in particular, Schmidli argues, through its support for civic action, counterinsurgency, and military modernization helped to develop the national security doctrine that the Argentine military later used to justify its seizure of power (19).

As he rightfully notes, however, the commitment of Argentine military officials to counterinsurgency and counterrevolution predated the Kennedy Administration (29). But over the course of the 1960s, the Kennedy and later the Johnson Administrations worked to wean the Argentines from their reliance on French military training and equipment, integrate them into the Alliance for Progress, and encourage the armed forces to focus on
internal security (38-39). The indecent haste with which the White House recognized Army Chief General Juan Carlos Ongania following his ouster of President Arturo Illia in June 1966 suggests the degree to which support for democracy now ranked a distant second to concerns about political stability.

Years of military training and assistance not only “significantly enhanced the Argentine military’s repressive capacity against perceived subversives” but helped to facilitate the development of a “distinctly Argentine doctrine of National Security” and “sharpened Argentine officers’ belief in their own capacity to resolve Argentina’s complex political, economic and social issues.” (40)

In 1970, Juan Perón returned to power after eighteen years in exile, amidst a deepening political and economic crisis. The unraveling of the economy – with inflation running at up to 700 percent - and the emergence of left wing terrorist and militant student groups acting with Perón’s apparent support, only sharpened officers’ belief that they were all that stood in the way of a descent to barbarism.


When the armed forces launched their 1976 coup, arresting, torturing, and killing thousands, Hill initially responded with the same enthusiasm as the rest of the Ford Administration. The sheer brutality and scope of the regime’s efforts, however, increasingly disturbed the Ambassador, to the point that he gradually became a fervent critic of the armed forces, even finding common cause with newly appointed Assistant Secretary State for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs Pat Derian. Schmidli treats Hill’s conversion from fervent anticommunist to human rights supporter as something of a parable, vividly demonstrating how even hardened cold warriors were being forced to confront the consequences of U.S. support for authoritarian regimes and the growing prominence of human rights as an alternative frame for apprehending U.S. relations with Latin America.

Over the course of the next two years, the incoming Carter Administration made Argentina the symbol of its professed commitment to human rights. The State Department, with White House support, in February 1977 reduced foreign military sales credits to Argentina, gradually cut off military assistance, and used its voice in multilateral development banks to block hundreds of millions of dollars in loans to Buenos Aires. These efforts culminated in the Junta’s July 1978 decision to invite the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

The Administration’s partial embrace of human rights institutionalized the efforts of a small but potent human rights bloc in Congress, who were in turn forging symbiotic ties with a growing coterie of Washington, DC-based human rights groups, mostly focused on Latin America (58-64). Schmidli echoes Barbara Keys in arguing that Congressional activism was in many ways a result of the Ford Administration’s stonewalling of even
modest efforts to condition US economic and military assistance to human rights concerns (66).¹

This is an oft-told story about human rights vying with national security for the attention of policymakers and politicians. But Schmidli widens the frame by centering his account on the remarkable story of the Mexican-American student activist Olga Talamante, who had been kidnapped while in Argentina in 1974. In response to her abduction, Talamante’s family and community, including labor and Chicano activists in Santa Cruz and Salinas, California, formed the Olga Talamante Defense Committee. They slowly and patiently built a grassroots network, pressuring Talamante’s Congressman and, by extension, the Ford Administration (58-63, 68-73). Following her release, Talamante moved to Washington DC to found the Argentine Human Rights Committee (AHRC), plugging in to a growing network of organizations such as the Washington Office on Latin America, which focused its efforts not on mobilizing members but on feeding information to and lobbying policymakers. This account alone is worth the price of the book – a richly textured biographical and organizational portrait that captures the feel of grassroots activism over a long period of time (74, 79-81).

Schmidli makes clear that the Carter Administration, having proclaimed its support for human rights in the 1976 election, now faced the difficult task in actually figuring out what this meant in practice, and what this would mean for its relations with Argentina. As Derian sought to define the scope of her mandate, she, along with Ambassador Hill and other supporters detonated a “bitter debate centering on which human rights the US should promote, where policy should be deployed, what policy most effectively promotes human rights.” (84)

Since there was no precedent for what Derian was trying to do, the former civil rights activist improvised policy as she went along, seeking bureaucratic allies in sympathetic embassies, on Capitol Hill and in the NGO community, circumventing opponents by visiting unannounced, and challenging the unspoken presumption that the State Department should prioritize cordial relations with host nations such as Argentina above all else.

In part because of the hostile response Derian’s efforts provoked, the White House was forced to develop a more systematic approach. The policy debate resulting in NSC-30 (the Administration’s first official policy statement on human rights), Schmidli argues, reflected both the weakness of the human rights coalition within the administration and the fierce backlash their efforts engendered – across the bureaucracy, among foreign governments, and in the business community (98-102). Rather than promoting a wide range of political/civil and social/economic rights around the world, across various aid bureaucracies, and within international institutions, the NSC-30 process produced a whittled down vision that was focused on torture and political imprisonment, targeted Latin American countries, operated on an ad hoc basis, and primarily utilized U.S. votes in

multilateral development banks as its preferred tool (111).

The case-by-case approach that resulted, in which specific arms sales, votes on multilateral loans, and the like were hashed out in contentious meetings “failed to establish precedents and policies” (112), though it did lead to the denial of many foreign military sales, credits and loans to Argentina (138). Perhaps more important were the bureaucratic routines established by Congressional reporting requirements, which forced lower-level officials such as Tex Harris, who arrived in Buenos Aries in the fall 1977 to serve as External Affairs officer, to gather information about human rights abuses.

Harris, as Schmidli vividly illustrates, established a broad base of contacts with Argentinian human rights advocates, opened his office to victims and supporters, gathered voluminous real-time information on abuses, and ceaselessly reported his findings. His efforts set off a “pitched bureaucratic battle” with Ambassador Raul Castro, who sought to perpetuate “the fiction of the moderate Videlo” and downplay or simply censor Harris’ detailed cables (144-147). Harris’ efforts led to the cancellation of a major Export-Import Bank loan to the U.S.-based Allis Chalmers Corporation which would have directly benefitted the Argentine Navy, causing a firestorm in Buenos Aries and prompting Argentine leaders to conclude that they must make some gestures on human rights to appease foreign concern (151).

Cancellation of the Allis Chalmers loan provoked a fierce response from the U.S. business community and conservative journalists, who strongly opposed the Carter Administration’s human rights initiatives. Schmidli offers the best – really the only – treatment in print of business sector mobilization against human rights, which effectively cut the Human Rights bureau out of the loop from policy decisions concerning foreign economic policy (161-170). The Argentine junta, meanwhile, astutely courted U.S. companies, public relations firms, and pro-business officials in the Carter Administration who sought to marginalize human rights concerns after a resurgence of Cold War tensions in 1979 and in the midst of a worsening domestic economic situation. Though it made small concessions to appease international criticism, the Junta maintained the infrastructure of its national security state and showed no signs of conceding significant ground on human rights.

The election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 effectively ended U.S. criticism of Buenos Aries. The White House eagerly turned to the Junta for support in waging war against Nicaragua’s Sandinista regime and supporting right-wing regimes throughout the region, though it could not entirely roll back the human rights gains of the 1970s. When the Junta fell, following the disastrous 1982 Falklands War, a mobilized Argentine population began a wrenching, divisive investigation of the previous decade and a half of state-sponsored violence, confirming many of the criticisms deployed against it by human rights activists.

Schmidli is careful not to claim too much credit for the Carter Administration. Ultimately it was a foreign policy disaster, not the efforts of the human rights community, that drove Argentina’s junta from power. But the efforts of myriad Argentine activists and their supporters, including allies in the U.S. Embassy in Buenos Aries, on Capitol Hill, and in the State Department helped progressively to undermine the regime’s legitimacy and its claims to be ruling in the national interest. The partial success of the Administration’s human
rights initiatives in Argentina do not reveal a deepening acceptance of human rights within the foreign policy bureaucracy, the business community, or among foreign policy elites more generally. What is remarkable is how fiercely and bitterly human rights supporters had to fight to achieve even limited success, even within an administration more open to human rights concerns than any before or since.

Schmidli’s research ranges widely, covering the range of presidential libraries and manuscript collections from the United Kingdom to Argentina. Though the author has covered well-trod archival ground, he makes creative use of existing sources to reveal truly novel dimensions of the story of human rights in the 1970s, in particular the counter-mobilization among business groups and conservative journalists and policymakers, a story that merits far greater attention. His use of interviews also points to the utility of biography as a way of telling the story of human rights ‘movement building,’ especially since so many important organizations and campaigns depended on the organizational skills or commitments of charismatic individuals such as Olga Talamante. This reader wishes that Schmidli had given greater voice to some of the many Argentine activists who undertook the dangerous task of reaching out to and working with their American and foreign interlocutors, but this is fundamentally a history of U.S. politics and policy, one of the small handful of truly important works on the history of U.S. human rights to have emerged in the last decade.
I am grateful to Professors Colby, Simpson, and Sheinin for taking the time to write such thoughtful and stimulating reviews of my book, and to the H-Diplo editors for organizing the roundtable. As a longtime reader of H-Diplo reviews and an occasional contributor, it is a distinct privilege to participate in a discussion of my own scholarship.

I am, of course, delighted that the reviewers all give *The Fate of Freedom Elsewhere* a positive review. *The Fate of Freedom Elsewhere* holds its own, I think, in a field increasingly defined by multiarchival, multilingual research; in the United States, I conducted research in five presidential libraries, the National Archives, and numerous online declassified document collections. I visited thirteen states in the process of researching non-governmental collections and activists’ personal papers, interviewed more than a dozen former policymakers and human rights activists, and worked through archival collections in Buenos Aires, Berlin, Paris, and London. Yet the book’s focus on U.S. state and non-state actors bucks the current trend in the field of U.S. foreign relations history toward international and transnational narratives that decenter the United States in favor of comparative analyses that give equal attention to foreign actors.

In this sense, I am pleased that the reviewers emphasize the contribution of *The Fate of Freedom Elsewhere* to our understanding of U.S. Cold War policy. Although an international history approach has many merits, situating the United States on an equal playing field with the rest of world, as Fredrik Logevall argued in a recent roundtable discussion, “is to risk being ahistorical, by assigning greater influence to some actors than they may in fact deserve.” The United States, Logevall continued, “is not merely one power among many and has not been for a long time.”1

This point is particularly relevant, I believe, for inter-American Cold War relations, and, as the reviews indicate, a key theme in *The Fate of Freedom Elsewhere* is that U.S. policy toward Latin America in the 1960s and early 1970s heightened regional military leaders’ political ambitions, accelerated the development of Latin American doctrines of national security, and increased the repressive capacities of armed forces in the region. In particular, I hope that my analysis illuminates the important role that the United States played in the formulation of the Argentine military’s national security doctrine—the blueprint facilitating the systematic use of extralegal tactics against perceived subversives following the 1976 coup d’état.

The reviewers’ comments also point to a second key theme in *The Fate of Freedom Elsewhere*: the role of domestic politics in shaping U.S. foreign relations. Echoing the recent emphasis among historians identifying human rights as contingent and rooted in political contestation, rather than a natural expression of universal morality, the book attempts to use U.S. policy toward Argentina as a case study for understanding the diverse strains of

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activism as the human rights movement developed in the 1970s. The research for this component of the book led me far afield of traditional diplomatic history, and the end result—which Simpson generously describes as “a richly textured biographical and organizational portrait”—brings together a broad range of actors engaged in the struggle over human rights, including civil rights activists, second-wave feminists, chicano/a activists, religious progressives, members of the New Right, conservative cold warriors, and business leaders. Although it is far from a comprehensive analysis, I hope that the chapter succeeds in revealing how traditional boundaries between state policy and nonstate advocacy are blurred in actual contests over policy and power, advancing our understanding of the complex processes involved in the formulation and implementation of U.S. foreign policy.

Finally, I appreciate the reviewers’ positive comments regarding my analysis of the Carter administration’s human rights policy toward Argentina. Entering the Oval Office at the height of state-sanctioned violence in Argentina, the administration aimed to shift U.S. policy from subtle support for the military’s ‘dirty war’ to public condemnation of human rights violations. As the reviews accurately point out, I argue that the results were mixed; on the one hand, the Carter administration successfully used the backlog of pending U.S. sales to Argentina as leverage to pressure the Argentine military to accept a formal visit by the Inter-America Commission on Human Rights. In the months leading up to the September 1979 visit Argentine military leaders made substantial progress toward political normalization. On the other hand, the lack of a clear set of guidelines on the role human rights should play in U.S. foreign policy, coupled with intense bureaucratic opposition, dramatically limited the implementation of human rights initiatives. Moreover, the resurgence of Cold-War tension with the Soviet Union in the second-half of the Carter Presidency edged human rights to the back burner as a policy priority. By the time Ronald Reagan entered the White House in January 1981, I contend that the Carter administration’s idealism had largely been supplanted by a more traditional brand of Cold-War realism.

Obviously, Jimmy Carter played the lead role in making human rights a defining feature of his Presidency. Yet Carter was largely absent in translating human rights rhetoric into clear-cut policy, and a core goal of the book is to illuminate the importance of individuals operating on the political terrain below the top-level elites of the U.S. foreign policymaking process. Accordingly, The Fate of Freedom Elsewhere is especially attentive to the fierce battles in the State Department over whether and how to insert human rights into U.S. policy toward Argentina. Correspondingly, the book tracks the rising opposition to the human rights policy among pro-business U.S. government bureaucrats, conservative journalists, and business leaders. In this regard, I am pleased that the reviewers give high marks to my effort to balance an analysis of the importance of individual agency with an assessment of the shaping power of the Washington bureaucratic structure.

In addition to their positive remarks, I appreciate the reviewers’ insightful criticism. Colby writes that The Fate of Freedom Elsewhere “fails to engage more deeply with domestic currents within Argentina,” particularly regarding nationalism and anti-Americanism. Both Colby and Simpson also criticize The Fate of Freedom Elsewhere for not giving more voice to Argentine human rights activists. These are fair critiques. In part, the attention dedicated to U.S. actors reflects my interest in U.S. political development during the Cold War; the
disparity between available archival materials in the United States compared to Argentina no doubt also influenced the narrative. Nonetheless, I hope my book’s emphasis on U.S. foreign policy in the late Cold War complements Latin Americanist scholarship—such as Sheinin’s fine recent study—that take Argentina as the primary focal point. More to the point, I believe The Fate of Freedom Elsewhere does analyze Argentine political development in a substantive manner; in particular, my analysis of the Carter administration’s effort to curtail state-sanctioned violence in Argentina clearly underscores the military junta’s agency vis-à-vis the United States, and emphasizes that the military was willing to sacrifice good relations with Washington rather than curtail the ‘dirty war’ against perceived subversives.

Colby also asserts that of The Fate of Freedom Elsewhere would have benefitted from greater regional perspective. The book, Colby writes, “offers relatively little discussion of political violence elsewhere, including nations such as Guatemala and El Salvador, whose relations with the United States took parallel turns during the Carter administration.” This too is a valid criticism; as Colby’s own scholarship on Guatemala has demonstrated, the Carter Administration’s human rights policy was by no means limited to Argentina. I have also written elsewhere on the Carter’s policy toward Nicaragua in the months leading-up to the 1979 revolution.

My decision to focus primarily on U.S.-Argentine relations in The Fate of Freedom Elsewhere rather than present a comparative regional analysis of the administration’s human rights policy was based on the signal importance of Argentina for Carter’s human rights policy. I hope that the book will nonetheless be of interest to scholars studying the Carter administration’s human rights policy toward other nations. In particular, my analysis of the struggle to transform Carter’s human rights rhetoric into actual policy over the course of 1977 and 1978 advances our understanding of the extent to which Carter’s human rights policy constituted a watershed moment in the evolution of the human rights movement as a whole. By tracking the erosion of the President’s support for human rights in the latter-half of his Administration, the book also shows that the human rights policy served as touchstone for Carter’s larger failures in the foreign policy arena.

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