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## Reclaiming American Virtue: The Human Rights Revolution of the 1970s

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**Author:**

Barbara Keys

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Umberto Tulli

Much has been written on the emergence of human rights in international relations and in American foreign policy during the 1970s. Especially in the last five years there has been a real explosion of scholarly works on these issues.<sup>(1)</sup> Yet Barbara Keys' recent *Reclaiming American Virtue* adds considerably to this literature in both details and interpretation.

At first glance, this book seems to tell a familiar story: during the 1970s, human rights moved to the centre of American foreign policy as a reaction to a number of radical changes, such as the civil rights experience and the Vietnam War, the rising militarism in American Cold War foreign policy, a congressional surge against Kissinger's realpolitik, the growing global interdependence, the explosion of transnational activism and the erosion of previous ideologies which made human rights a 'last Utopia', as Samuel Moyn wrote.<sup>(2)</sup> Like many other scholars, Keys argues that the split the war produced within the United States led to the emergence of two strands of human rights thinking in the 1970s. On the one side, Soviet violations of human rights became a favorite cause for those conservatives (like Henry 'Scoop' Jackson and Daniel Patrick Moynihan) who feared the United States might retreat from their anticommunist crusade. To them, human

rights offered a tool to renew containment and to fight communism. On the other side, many liberals found in the promotion of human rights a clear path for distancing the United States from the Vietnam experience and the many unacceptable authoritarian regimes the United States was supporting across the world.

Yet Keys offers a brand new interpretation of these evolutions, with many strong and original points. For the sake of clarity and synthesis, I will focus on the four major ones.

Firstly, Keys zooms in on the evolution of the human rights discourse among liberals. She argues that until the early 1970s the expression "human rights" was rarely found in the American political debate and always in connection with civil liberties and civil rights in the domestic arena. Two transformations moved human rights into the foreign policy agenda: the evolution of the civil rights movement and the "trauma of the Vietnam War" (as she titles her third chapter). In a challenging and likely controversial interpretation, Keys maintains that the civil rights movement was not an incubator for the human rights movement, although many human rights activists and practitioners came from the civil rights experience. On the contrary, she suggests that the human rights movement could emerge in the 1970s because civil rights issues were no longer a priority: "Only as civil rights problems faded from the national agenda could Americans credibly invest human rights with a different meaning" (p. 47). To make her case, she emphasizes discontinuities between the two, rather than continuities. A major one was the shift in focus from domestic concerns to international and transnational problems. It is true, as she recalls, that the civil rights movement had "international concerns" but "the primary focus of the movement was the effort to wring greater protection from the federal government. It was above all about seeking American remedies to American injustice" (p. 34). Another discontinuity was the fact that the opposition to the Vietnam War was not framed in human rights language. A third one is that human rights activism was "more diffuse, less radical and more practical" (p. 178). It was also more politically diverse, given conservatives' framing of the human rights cause in a Cold War horizon. This brings us to the importance of the Vietnam War for the affirmation of human rights in American foreign policy. With the War going on, the United States not only could not credibly discuss other governments' abuses of human rights; but also experienced a profound split in what until that moment was a consensual foreign policy. The political divergence over the lessons from the Vietnam War played a major role in the affirmation of two political discourses on human rights: it created "a rupture that made possible, intellectually and emotionally, a new organizing principle for U.S. foreign relations that became thinkable only after the war was over" (p. 49). This new organizing principle "human rights" could become the foundation for a new consensual policy, as tried by President Carter. Yet, as the new President would discover during his tenure, the different political meanings conservatives and liberals attributed to human rights were not reconcilable.

A second strength of the book is Keys' attention to emotions and feelings and their influence in triggering both grassroots activism and political attention in Congress and, later, within the State Department. As Keys writes, the War produced revulsion, guilt and shame but "again" these emotions had a different meaning for liberals and conservatives. To the former, the War demonstrated that their government was responsible for human rights abuses across the world. To the latter, the greatest shame and fear was the loss of faith in containment and anticommunism the war had produced. During the 1972 presidential campaign, when human rights weren't yet at the core of the US political debate, Democratic candidate George McGovern told Americans they should feel guilty for the war and its brutality. This message contributed to his disastrous loss to Richard Nixon because "most American did not want to feel guilty" (p. 72). Jimmy Carter learned this lesson and espoused human rights during the 1976 electoral campaign: in his political message "human rights were about being proud again, standing tall, feeling good" (p. 267). They were an "antidote to shame and guilt" (p. 3) and offered a means to move beyond the "deep sense of shame and embarrassment" (p. 9).

This brings us to a third original (and probably more controversial) point: the human rights surge of the 1970s was above all an inward-looking phenomenon, not a crusade to redeem the world. Through this lens, Keys succeeds in offering a coherent framework to explain the timing and the forms of the rise of human rights in American foreign policy. In so doing, she also challenges a traditional, still dominant and, to some extent, teleological periodization of American human rights policy; a periodization which found in President F. D. Roosevelt a champion of human rights, then a 25-year deadlock imposed by the Cold War and, finally,

a new human rights boom in the 1970s.<sup>(3)</sup> Indeed, Keys argues that the history of human rights in American foreign policy is more complex and less linear. The most controversial example she gives concerns modernization, the dominant paradigm for American foreign policy in the 1960s. Again, while one can spot many continuities between modernization and human rights ? both were framed as universal doctrines and described as the key to solve the problems of Third World Countries and win the confrontation with the Soviet Union ? Keys also points out some discontinuities and differences. Modernization was an ?empowering vision? (p. 281) that promoted economic aid to assist Third World Countries in order to contain the spread of communism and *eventually* favoring their democratization: as Keys writes ?democratization came into the picture but only as an assumed by-product of economic development? (p. 81). The idea of human rights was, by contrast, ?a minimalist creed? (p. 281) based on the sense of limits that characterized the 1970s and the reality that America economic support could back and was backing a number of authoritarian regimes. For this reason, early human rights legislation came out from the idea that cutting economic aid to dictators (or linking economic and financial aid to progress in human rights) would trigger political reform. The tension between the modernization theory and the human rights doctrine will undoubtedly draw future historical discussions and studies, but Keys' inward-looking approach is helpful to understand that both the modernization theory and then the human rights banner were two ideological and cognitive frameworks through which American foreign policy elites and activists interpreted their actions and their country's role in the world.

Finally, Keys' book brings together grassroots activism, foreign policy and political infighting between Congress and the White House as well as between conservatives and liberals. She correctly identifies the importance of the American section of Amnesty International in inspiring human rights activism and in providing a fundamental input to congressional action on human rights legislation. Far from being an apologetic description of its genesis and evolution, Keys' analysis of Amnesty International argues that its American section was not a monolithic and apolitical NGO. Rather, it was a political subject that grew through tensions between the International Secretariat and its American section, as well as through the many differences between its West Coast branch and East Coast offices. In addition, she also focuses on the liberal bias Amnesty International had. This problem troubled the American section for a long time: it was perceived as (and indeed it was) a liberal organization, with a liberal set of priorities, liberal activists and sympathizers. Equally important, she discusses the creation of Human Rights Watch in 1978 (at the time Helsinki Watch) as a more conservative human rights NGO and, to some extent, a rival to Amnesty.

Key's main argument and narrative are convincing and breath-taking. Yet, there are three minor questions that deserve larger consideration and hopefully will inspire future historical works.

A first question this book raises concerns the relationship between American ?exceptionalism? and international law. Keys claims that human rights popularity in the 1970s was made possible ?to a considerable degree? (p. 5) by the international origins of human rights protection through international covenants and, at the same time, by the fact that human rights were consistent with traditional American values. While she is suggesting a sort of convergence between the norms promoted by international law and American traditional principles and values, the history of human rights in American foreign policy could also be seen as one of tension between ?exceptionalism? and international norms. It is true, as Keys recalls, that Congressional legislation on human rights was framed in a language that explicitly recalled international norms and internationally recognized human rights. But the explosion of human rights activism in the United States was not inspired by international legislation. Instead, it had much to do with the emotional idea that it was morally legitimate and appropriate to distance the United States from those regimes that did not respect human rights and to call foreign governments to respect the rights that were guaranteed (or that should be guaranteed) in the United States. Liberals' activism was indeed a moral crusade based on their sense of guilt and shame (to use Keys' language) for the fact that their government bore a large share of responsibility for human rights violations in the world ? not a campaign for the promotion of international human rights laws.

A second reservation I have concerns the sources. Many of the strengths of Keys' work derive to a considerable degree from the impressive variety of primary sources (I have counted at least 35 different archival collections among the 1000 and more notes of the book). These primary sources ranges from

government documents to movements and NGOs archival collections and private papers. Yet, with only one exception (the international Secretariat of Amnesty International), all these collections are based in the United States. True, Keys' focus is on the United States, on American human rights activists and their impact on their nation's decision-making. Yet the human rights violations that activists and politicians referred to, and that were shaping the political debate within the US, were occurring in Latin America, Greece, and the USSR. The same is true for those protests coming from Europe (Western and Eastern alike), which contributed to Carter's failure. In this context, a multinational archival research would have considerably enriched Keys' analysis.

Finally, Keys' contribution to our understanding of Jimmy Carter's human rights policy is undoubtedly important and original. Far from those scholars who considered Carter's human rights campaign a flawed and naive moral crusade, Keys correctly argues that Carter's commitment to human rights was aimed at recreating a broad consensus on American foreign policy. Equally important, she maintains that the President's approach to human rights failed primarily in the domestic arena. Carter's human rights policy which was supposed to be a universal campaign (the president himself spoke about an absolute commitment to human rights) and, at the same time, a pragmatic, case-by-case policy (as the Presidential Directive on human rights defined the human rights policy) exacerbated the differences between liberals' and conservatives' conceptions of human rights – two conceptions that, even without Carter's flawed policy, could not be reconciled. These points are well founded and convincing. Nevertheless, there is one argument that troubles me. To Keys, after some hesitations, Carter defined his human rights policy in liberal terms, addressing his campaign mostly against friendly regimes. Yet many initiatives the President undertook in the first two years in office made human rights a priority in relations with the Soviets. Senators Jackson and Moynihan – the champions of the conservative approach to human rights – repeatedly commended Carter's human rights policy, while at the same time condemning his attempt to renew détente. The CSCE Congressional Commission, which unfortunately Keys does not mention, backed Carter's human rights policy until the end of his presidency. Even liberals in Congress believed that Carter's human rights policy was directly aimed at the Soviet Union and did not hesitate to display their dissatisfaction. Speaking at a congressional hearings on human rights and foreign policy in late 1977, for example, Congressman Leo J. Ryan (D. California), accused the administration of being "bold when it is safe and good politics" like criticizing the treatment of Soviet Jews – while expressing only mild disapproval? when criticizing traditional allies.<sup>(4)</sup> On this point, Keys recalls the well-known speech Carter gave to Notre Dame University and the negative reaction it triggered among conservative supporters of human rights. Yet, in the very same speech, Carter not only distanced himself from the Vietnam War experience and the militarization of Cold War policies, he also renewed the American strategy in order to ideologically engage and challenge the Soviet Union: "We've fought fire with fire" Carter clarified – never thinking that fire is better quenched with water?. At least in theory, human rights could provide the "water" to extinguish the Soviet fire.

These reservations aside, Keys' book is not only a thoroughly researched, engaging, and timely addition but it will also become one of the most important contributions to the history of American foreign relations and human rights, one which offers a new interpretation and will pave the way for future historical scholarship.

## Notes

1. Among many others: Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, 2010); Sarah Snyder, *Human Rights Activism and the End of the Cold War: A Transnational History of the Helsinki Network* (New York, NY, 2011); William Michael Schmidli, *The Fate of Freedom Elsewhere: Human Rights and U.S. Cold War Policy Toward Argentina* (Ithaca, NY, 2013).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia*.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. For example: *The Dynamics of Human Rights in United States Foreign Policy*, ed. N. Kaufman Hevener (New Brunswick, NJ, 1981); K. Sellars, *The Rise and Rise of Human Rights* (Thrupp, 2002); R. Normand and S. Zaidi, *Human Rights at the UN: The Political History of Universal Justice*

(Bloomington, IN, 2008).[Back to \(3\)](#)

4. Quoted in *The Dynamics of Human Rights*, p. 288.[Back to \(4\)](#)

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