
The 1968 International Year for Human Rights: A Missed Opportunity in the United States

In honor of the twentieth anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the United Nations (UN) General Assembly (GA) unanimously decided to designate 1968 the International Year for Human Rights (IYHR). The UN encouraged its member states to observe the year with postage stamps, pamphlets on the declaration, radio programming, and human rights prizes, hoping that such celebrations of the UDHR would bring greater adherence to its articles. Within the United States, efforts to mark the year had limited impact, reflecting the UN's lack of salience within the United States in these years. Examining U.S. commemoration of the twentieth anniversary of the UDHR, which has not yet received sufficient attention, illuminates the complicated politics of 1968 in the United States and offers a window into the evolution of human rights activism in the United States between the late 1940s and late 1970s. In 1968, attention to human rights was still episodic rather than sustained, as it would come to be in later years through the efforts of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), members of Congress, and State Department officials.

U.S. observance activities of the IYHR represented the tail end of 1940s-inspired activism. When an IYHR was first proposed in 1963, U.S. human rights activism remained shaped by the personalities, institutions, and approaches that were prominent in debates over the UN and international protection of human rights in the late 1940s. U.S. advocacy was geographically rooted in New York, focused on influencing UN institutions, and the purview of a small group of elite activists. By the mid-1960s human rights activism was beginning to shift to broader-based movements that criticized U.S. support for repressive regimes, such as the campaign against the

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military dictatorship in Brazil.¹ However, U.S. observance of the IYHR did not engage with this new agenda.

Within the United States, the year did not live up to its potential for a number of reasons. First, the Presidential Commission for the Observance of Human Rights Year began its work two months into 1968, leaving it with little time to develop and implement a broad program. Furthermore, those in the White House and the State Department who had been considering the issue over a longer period had more pressing concerns such as the presidential election and the war in Vietnam. In a tumultuous and momentous year in terms of domestic politics and international events, U.S. activities to commemorate the UDHR's twentieth anniversary gained minimal traction. There is little evidence to suggest that U.S. initiatives in the IYHR registered beyond those already committed to the cause. The year's mixed record demonstrates the limited appeal of an UN-centered vision of human rights to Americans in 1968. The failure to broaden the actors and organizations involved in the U.S. observance of the IYHR meant that related activities remained a largely elite affair.

The U.S. government began planning for the human rights year as early as October 1964 but remained cautious, suggesting it was "premature" to make recommendations for a conference at that time.² Somewhat presciently, the State Department was also skeptical about the extent to which a conference would promote greater implementation of existing commitments versus produce new, potentially empty promises.³ Similarly, officials within the State Department's Bureau of International Organizations expressed concern that a conference could lead to an "irresponsible use [of] conference platform for race and other propaganda issues."⁴ As detailed in works by Mary Dudziak and Thomas Borstelmann, the United States had found itself on the defensive internationally for much of the 1950s and early 1960s because of its record on race. Therefore, officials feared a conference on human rights would further entrench this dynamic and recognized that such a focus could potentially harm U.S. interests.⁵

Considerable scholarship has explored the IYHR in an international context by looking at the contributions of newly independent governments to the year,

1. James N. Green, *We Cannot Remain Silent: Opposition to the Brazilian Military Dictatorship in the United States* (Durham, NC, 2010).

2. USUN to State, October 7, 1964, SOC 14 Human Rights/Race Relations 1/1/64, Central Foreign Policy Files, 1964-6 (hereafter CFPF 1964-6), box 3200, Record Group 59 (hereafter RG 59), National Archives and Record Administration, College Park, Maryland (hereafter USNA).

3. State to USUN, October 14, 1964 and October 19, 1964, SOC 14 Human Rights/Race Relations 1/1/64, CFPF, 1964-6, box 3200, RG 59, USNA.

4. State to USUN, December 9, 1964, SOC 14 Human Rights/Race Relations 1/1/64, CFPF, 1964-6, box 3200, RG 59, USNA.

5. Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ, 2000); Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (London, 2001).

and by analyzing the event's significance to those states that had recently joined the UN. In addition, scholars have paid particular attention to the international conference in Tehran held in celebration of the IYHR. Roland Burke and Samuel Moyn, for instance, have been highly critical of the definition of human rights utilized in Tehran. In Moyn's telling, the conference advanced a unique, and deeply flawed, interpretation of human rights that touted liberation from colonialism as the most important right to be achieved. Burke has a similarly dismal view of the conference, which he argues symbolized "the diminished status of [the UDHR] and the declining respect for traditional human rights across the developing world."⁶ The Shah and many delegates clearly prioritized economic development over civil and political rights.⁷ Burke has criticized this focus on economic rather than political rights as potentially enabling the replacement of one repressive regime with another. In their statements, according to Burke, "Several Third World delegations sharply questioned the Universal Declaration's validity."⁸ Such prioritization undermined the universality and indivisibility of the UDHR. Burke's criticism of the Tehran conference fits into his broader appraisal of how the UN's attention to human rights from 1963 to 1968 became less universal and less indivisible.⁹ In contrast, Steven Jensen focuses on the increase in signatories of the two human rights covenants in 1968 rather than the rhetoric in Tehran, thereby rendering the initiative and its achievements in a more positive light.¹⁰ However, scholars have yet to examine U.S. participation in the year or the initiative's impact on U.S. foreign policy or domestic politics.

As I began a broader project about U.S. human rights activism in the 1960s, I assumed that the UN's IYHR was one of a number of factors driving those efforts. My research shows, however, that activity surrounding the IYHR in the United States and elsewhere had little impact on American activism. Such a null finding was surprising given American engagement with human rights violations in Greece, Southern Rhodesia, and Brazil in the surrounding years.¹¹

6. Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, MA, 2010), 2; Roland Burke, *Decolonization and the Evolution of International Human Rights* (Philadelphia, 2010), 92–93.

7. Burke, *Decolonization and the Evolution of International Human Rights*, 96–97.

8. *Ibid.*, 93.

9. Roland Burke, "How Time Flies': Celebrating the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in the 1960s," *International History Review* 38, no. 3 (2016): 406.

10. Steven L. B. Jensen, "Universality Should Govern the Small World of Today: The Cold War and UN Human Rights Diplomacy, 1960–1968," in *Human Rights During the Cold War*, ed. Rasmus Mariager et al. (London, 2014), 56–72; Steven L. B. Jensen, *The Making of International Human Rights: The 1960s, Decolonization, and the Reconstruction of Global Values* (New York, 2016), 174–208.

11. Sarah B. Snyder, "The Rise of Human Rights during the Johnson Years," in *Beyond the Cold War: Lyndon Johnson and the New Global Challenges of the 1960s*, ed. Francis J. Gavin and Mark Atwood Lawrence (New York, 2014), 237–60; Sarah B. Snyder, *From Selma to Moscow: How Human Rights Activists Transformed U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York, forthcoming 2018); Green, *We Cannot Remain Silent*, 74.

Reasons for this seeming contradiction lie in the changing nature of U.S. human rights activism in this period. Americans saw diminishing value in focusing their efforts on the UN and therefore shifted their attention to influencing different U.S. government actors in Washington. So, while Americans were interested in human rights in 1968, they were not animated by UN efforts to celebrate the UDHR.

During negotiations over the conference, State Department officials lamented the limited range of the UN agenda; one noted, "At the moment little or no concern is shown in the UN on the human rights issues other than racial discrimination. Thus, there is little consideration of such questions as anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union, and little concern is paid to security of life, public order, and the rights of labor and of political dissent in the newly independent countries."¹² The conference seemed unlikely to address the human rights violations most often of concern to U.S. policymakers—i.e. those of communist governments—and very likely to demonize U.S. practices and alliances. State Department officials were also frustrated by the fact that the UN had largely overlooked improvements in the U.S. record on race.¹³ As the conference drew closer, U.S. officials remained worried that discussions in Tehran could "drift into political controversy," which might be uncomfortable for the United States and its allies.¹⁴

In addition to the international level of IYHR observance, UN organizers expected an equally active domestic component as well. However, the U.S. government devoted few resources or attention to planning this aspect of the year, and congressional interest was limited. A notable exception was Representative Paul Findley (R-IL) who introduced House legislation in 1966 to establish a United States Committee on Human Rights that would facilitate U.S. involvement in the IYHR.¹⁵ In addition, the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on International Organizations and Social Movements held hearings on U.S. efforts to contribute to the IYHR. Supporting a formal committee for human rights, Representative Seymour Halpern (R-NY) said, "Its approval by the Congress will convince the nations of the world that this country stands fully behind the concept of human rights."¹⁶ Findley's initiative, however, was not successful.

12. Proposal for a UN Commissioner for Human Rights, United Nations, International Year of Human Rights, 1/65-10/65, box 293, National Security File (hereafter NSF), Country File (hereafter CF), Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, Texas (hereafter LBJL).

13. Benjamin H. Read to McGeorge Bundy, April 20, 1965, United Nations International Year for Human Rights 1/65-10/65, box 293, NSF CF, LBJL.

14. State to USUN, January 26, 1967, SOC 14 ECOSOC 1/1/67, CFPF 1967-1969 Social, RG 59, USNA.

15. Paul Findley Statement, August 11, 1966, Publicity Statement 8/11/66 "International Human Rights Year," box 233, Paul Findley Papers, Illinois State Historical Society, Springfield, Illinois (hereafter Findley Papers).

16. "U.S. Observance of International Human Rights Year, 1968," Hearings Before the Subcommittee on International Organizations and Movements of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, 29th Cong., 2nd Sess., August 11 and 17, 1966.

The limited engagement by members of Congress is surprising in some respects, given increased congressional activism relating to international human rights violations in Brazil, Greece, and South Africa in these years.¹⁷ Congress apparently found participating in a UN-sponsored initiative less compelling.

Faced with insufficient congressional support for the committee, prominent human rights activist Bruno Bitker, who started working on human rights after a focus on local civil rights in the 1940s and 1950s, expressed concern that “no agency of the government and no private organization appears to have undertaken this obligation” to organize U.S. participation in the year.¹⁸ In early 1967, Bitker warned that the remaining eleven months before the international year began would be “barely sufficient to carry to fruition the [IYHR] program as contemplated.”¹⁹ Therefore, he led efforts to fill the void left by a largely apathetic U.S. government. Under his leadership, the United States National Commission for United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) initiated a number of activities to prepare for the upcoming human rights year. Perhaps the most important endeavor was the publication of the pamphlet “You in Human Rights,” which served as a blueprint for human rights activism at the state and local levels.²⁰ Subtitled “A Community Action Guide for International Human Rights Year,” the publication was a manual for those seeking to expand awareness and protection of human rights.²¹ Of all of the surviving human rights publications produced in the United States in connection with the year, “You in Human Rights” most explicitly sought to broaden individual Americans’ participation in the initiative by including “a step-by-step guide to expanding human rights activism at the local level.”²² In addition, the brochure was tactical and detailed in order to achieve a specific agenda rather than fulfill a vague commitment to raise awareness.

Other NGOs in the United States responded to the UN’s call to participate in the IYHR, offering suggestions for events and publicity.²³ Groups such as

17. David P. Forsythe, *Human Rights and World Politics*, 2nd ed. (Lincoln, NE, 1989), 142; Snyder, “The Rise of Human Rights during the Johnson Years,” 240; Ryan M. Irwin, *Gordian Knot: Apartheid and the Unmaking of the Liberal World Order* (New York, 2012), 124.

18. Memorandum, January 10, 1967, International Human Rights Year, 197, box 2076, Dante Fascell Papers, University of Miami, Coral Gables, Florida (hereafter Fascell Papers); Edward Lawson to Bruno Bitker, March 2, 1967, folder 4, box 1, Bruno Bitker Papers, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee, Wisconsin (hereafter Bitker Papers).

19. Memorandum, January 10, 1967, International Human Rights Year, 197, box 2076, Fascell Papers.

20. Bruno Bitker to Dante Fascell, October 12, 1967, IOM—International Human Rights Year, 1968, box 2076, Fascell Papers.

21. “You in Human Rights,” Subcommittee on International Organizations and Movements, box 126, Peter H. B. Frelinghuysen Papers, Public Policy Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library, Princeton, New Jersey.

22. *Ibid.*

23. Recommendations, n.d., folder 11, box 4, Ad Hoc Committee on the Human Rights and Genocide Treaties Records, Tamiment Library, New York University, New York, New York (hereafter Ad Hoc Committee Records).

the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) responded by affirming its “commitment to the principles of civil and political liberties set forth in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.”²⁴ Although the New York-based International League for the Rights of Man (ILRM) initially raised questions about the efficacy of some planned measures, such as the issuing of postal stamps, it eventually worked on developing a program for the IYHR.²⁵ In addition, the Jewish organization B’nai B’rith developed a program of activities to promote human rights and press for the ratification of outstanding human rights treaties.²⁶ For example, its chair William A. Wexler wrote to Johnson urging his administration to improve its human rights record, specifically by ratifying UN human rights treaties. Wexler argued ratification would “enable the United States to resume its traditional leadership role in advancing international human rights.”²⁷ Wexler’s letter demonstrates that impetus for greater U.S. activity in relation to the IYHR came not only from members of Congress but also from interested NGOs. These early, encouraging signals, however, did not lead to widespread NGO involvement. Similarly, although the eventual presidential commission could have worked with and/or capitalized on rights-conscious social movements in the United States at this time, such connections were not forged. Americans, shaped by the decade’s social movements, were increasingly thinking about human rights. But the elite actors selected for Johnson’s commission made minimal efforts to reach grassroots groups and even feared association with perceived radical activists in the black power movement and Students for a Democratic Society (SDS).

By the end of 1967, it was clear that Congress would not pass legislation creating a commission to coordinate U.S. participation in the IYHR. Therefore, State Department officials proposed that the president establish a commission on the IYHR by executive order, arguing it was necessary due to “domestic as well as international political reasons.”²⁸ An internal White House memorandum predicted the political gains from such a commission could be “significant,” in part because it might ease disillusionment with the Johnson

24. Memorandum, June 19, 1967, folder 15, box 1162, Organization Matters Series, American Civil Liberties Union Records, Public Policy Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library, Princeton, New Jersey (hereafter ACLU Records).

25. International League for the Rights of Man Working Paper, International Year for Human Rights (1968)-Correspondence, 1964-67, box 43, International League for Human Rights Collection (hereafter ILRM), New York Public Library, New York, New York (hereafter NYPL); Jan Papanek to Colleagues, April 15, 1968, International Year for Human Rights (1968)-Correspondence, 1968-69, box 43, ILRM, NYPL.

26. Raynard I. Jameson to Lodge Presidents, n.d., folder 6, box 1, Ad Hoc Committee Records; William Wexler to Editor, *New York Times*, January 14, 1968, E17.

27. William A. Wexler to President Johnson, January 8, 1968, GEN HU Human Rights 4/20/66, box 1, White House Central Files (hereafter WHCF), LBJL.

28. Philip B. Heymann to Harry McPherson, June 23, 1967, Human Rights Conventions (1), box 20, Office Files of Harry McPherson (hereafter McPherson Files), LBJL.

administration given mounting opposition to the war in Vietnam.²⁹ The administration created a list of possible commission members, divided it into professional and geographic categories, and made suggestions for such positions as “Grand Old Man” (the administration proposed ILRM founder Roger Baldwin).³⁰

Johnson finally announced a commission made up of members of the executive branch and private citizens on January 30, 1968.³¹ Making the announcement on this date was notable because it was Franklin Roosevelt’s birthday, and it was one of a number of ways the White House went out of its way to tie Johnson’s record to that of the liberal icon. However, it was also the day before the launching of the Tet Offensive in Vietnam and a week after North Korea seized the U.S.S. *Pueblo*; both events ultimately overshadowed the commission’s establishment and contributed to declining support for Johnson’s foreign policy.

Johnson named Ambassador-at-Large Averell Harriman—whose résumé included a distinguished career in business, elected office as governor of New York, and government service in Washington—as chair of the commission. By installing Harriman as chair, Johnson gave the commission considerable stature, although it is possible that Johnson’s appointment of Harriman signaled the commission’s low priority. Jonathan Colman points out that Johnson had earlier disparaged Harriman as “old and dead.”³²

Records indicate that Harriman had a good deal of sympathy for the cause of human rights. In a discussion with Johnson aide John Macy, Harriman reported he was “shocked” by some of the “positions which we (the U.S.) have failed to take a stand on as regards human rights.” Harriman expressed frustration with the U.S. record on UN treaty ratification, labeling it “among the worst countries in the world in this field.”³³ In persuading Harriman to take the appointment, Macy tried to play on the former governor’s compassion by saying, “It seems to me that this (human rights) was a lifetime commitment of yours and to have your name connected with this effort would give it tremendous stature.”³⁴

29. Philip B. Heymann to Harry McPherson, June 23, 1967, Human Rights Conventions (1), box 20, McPherson Files, LBJL; David F. Schmitz and Natalie Fousekis, “Frank Church, the Senate, and the Emergence of Dissent on the Vietnam War,” *Pacific Historical Review* 63, no. 4 (November 1994): 579.

30. Nicholas Katzenbach to President Johnson, October 26, 1967, Human Rights Year, box 21, Aides Files: Ben Wattenberg Files, LBJL.

31. Press Release, January 30, 1968, FG 791 President’s Commission for the Observance of Human Rights Year, 1968, box 417, WHCF, LBJL.

32. Jonathan Colman, “The ‘Most Distinguished Envoy of Peace’: Averell Harriman and the Vietnam War in the Johnson Years,” *International History Review* 38, no. 1 (2016): 72.

33. Notes on Telephone Conversation, January 26, 1968, folder 12, box 249, W. Averell Harriman Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC (hereafter Harriman Papers).

34. *Ibid.*

The White House put together a commission covering constituencies and groups most engaged with human rights in the domestic context. For instance, in another effort to link LBJ with FDR, the administration selected Anna Roosevelt Halsted, Eleanor and Franklin's daughter who had taken up causes important to her mother, as vice-chair. Other members of the commission included Bruno Bitker; former Supreme Court justice Tom Clark, who had expanded attention to civil rights when he was Attorney General; President of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) George Meany; businessperson Maurice Tempelman, who had fled Nazi aggression; and President of the Citizens' Committee for Children Elinor Gordon.³⁵ Like others appointed to the commission, Gordon had long been involved in racial issues, including as chair of the State Department's 1968 conference on racism. In addition, Ralph McGill brought to the commission the platform of his daily newspaper column, his status as the publisher of the *Atlanta Constitution*, and his prominent record on civil rights. The commission's objective was to "enlarge our people's understanding of the principles of human rights, as expressed in the Universal Declaration and the Constitution in the laws of the United States."³⁶ The commission, however, struggled throughout its tenure to make human rights principles known to a broader audience.

As Harriman prepared for the commission's first meeting, he reflected, "Can we pursue justice at home and neglect the same obligations toward our fellow countries? Can liberty in the long run survive here if we are not prepared to stand for it abroad?"³⁷ At the first commission meeting, Harriman said,

I believe history will record that it was President Johnson who first took the unequivocal stand that we could no longer only talk about these rights—they must be achieved, not some time in the future, but now. Congress has responded to his initiative by enacting the most far-reaching civil rights legislation in our history. Thus, this Commission, appointed by President Johnson, has the responsibility to help fulfill now the desire of our people for the full achievement of human rights in our Nation.³⁸

Harriman's remarks highlight the great irony of the IYHR. Although 1968 was intended to mark a movement beyond rhetoric to greater observance of human rights, the U.S. celebrations of the year were largely commemorated with

35. Tom C. Clark Oral History Interview, accessed March 2, 2017, <https://www.trumanlibrary.org/oralhist/clarktc.htm>; Susan Baer, "Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis," *Baltimore Sun*, May 24, 1994.

36. Goals of the Commission, June 26, 1968, Human Rights, box 8, Office Files of Ernest Goldstein (hereafter Goldstein Files), LBJL. Former Governor of New Jersey Robert Meyner and Dr. J. Willis Hurst also served as public members of the commission: Talking Points, folder 10, box 249, Harriman Papers.

37. President's Commission for the Observance of Human Rights Year 1968, First Meeting: Suggested Opening Remarks by Governor Harriman, folder 3, box 249, Harriman Papers.

38. "To Deepen Our Commitment: Interim Report for the President's Commission for the Observance of Human Rights Year 1968" (Washington, DC, 1968).

speeches, conferences, and seminars. Likely the greatest achievement the United States could point to on human rights in 1968 was rhetorical—Roy Wilkins’s speech in Tehran, which will be discussed at greater length below.

A key item on the presidential commission’s agenda—and an explicit aim of the year from the UN’s perspective—was the ratification of more human rights conventions. For over a decade, Senate approval of UN human rights treaties had been imperiled by the controversy following Senator John Bricker’s (R-OH) failed endeavor to amend the Constitution in an effort to ensure the president would not commit the United States to international treaties that would contravene the U.S. Constitution.³⁹ Ratification may also have been jeopardized by limited popular awareness of or support for UN human rights treaties. The *New York Times* and *Washington Post* contained almost no coverage of the United Nations human rights covenants in 1966 (the year the UN agreed upon them), 1967, or 1968. Furthermore, a July 1967 national Gallup poll of American adults showed that less than half (49.5%) thought the UN was doing a “good job.”⁴⁰

Johnson called for Senate ratification in two significant pronouncements: first, when he designated 1968 as Human Rights Year saying, “American ratification of these conventions is long overdue. The principles they embody are part of our own national heritage. The rights and freedoms they proclaim are those which America has defended—and fights to defend—around the world.”⁴¹ Similarly, in his January 30, 1968, remarks launching the commission, Johnson said, “It is my earnest hope that the Senate will complete the tasks before it by ratifying the remaining Human Rights Conventions.”⁴² Johnson’s rhetoric supported long-time efforts by human rights activists to secure ratification. Yet, despite Johnson’s stated commitment to their passage, there is no evidence that his White House considered spending political capital to press for their ratification.

The commission was aware of the challenges to getting congressional approval. At its first meeting on February 28, Assistant Secretary of State for International Organization Affairs Joe Sisco outlined the difficult situation with respect to the United States and UN human rights treaties. First, the treaties

39. Natalie Hevener Kaufman, *Human Rights Treaties and the Senate: A History of Opposition* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1990); Duane Tananbaum, *The Bricker Amendment Controversy: A Test of Eisenhower’s Political Leadership* (Ithaca, NY, 1988); Cathal J. Nolan, “The Last Hurrah of Conservative Isolationism: Eisenhower, Congress, and the Bricker Amendment,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 22, no. 2 (1992): 337–49; Mark Bradley, “The Ambiguities of Sovereignty: The United States and the Global Rights Cases of the 1940s,” in *Art of the State: Sovereignty Past and Present*, ed. Douglas Howland and Luise White (Bloomington, IN, 2008).

40. The Gallup Poll #748, 07/13/1967–07/18/1967.

41. Proclamation 3814, October 11, 1967, *The American Presidency Project*, accessed March 2, 2017, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=106050>.

42. “Statement by the President Upon Signing Order Establishing the President’s Commission for the Observance of Human Rights Year 1968,” *The American Presidency Project*, accessed March 6, 2017, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=29049>.



Figure 1: Johnson meets with the Presidential Commission for the Observance of Human Rights Year at its first meeting on February 28, 1968. LBJ Library Photo by Yoichi Okamoto.

guaranteed rights that Americans already largely enjoyed (at least *de jure* if not always *de facto*); therefore, domestic pressure for ratification was limited. Second, since the Bricker Amendment controversy, U.S. participation in UN human rights treaties had become far more politically fraught, and few members of Congress wanted to risk the political costs of supporting them. Sisco noted that the U.S. position was also harming its international reputation as a champion of human rights, but the potential damage to U.S. international prestige was not sufficient to sway members of the Senate.⁴³

Despite Johnson's rhetoric and Harriman's personal commitment, Senate ratification of the conventions proved a difficult goal to achieve. A key obstacle was the influential lobbying of the American Bar Association (ABA), which continued Bricker's campaign and inhibited Senate action. Therefore, Sisco proposed getting some "counterforce" against the ABA and having U.S. Ambassador to the UN Arthur J. Goldberg and Harriman work on members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.⁴⁴ Harriman was particularly focused on achieving ratification of the 1948 Genocide Convention, saying, "The fact we have not ratified it is a disgrace." Sisco cautioned Harriman that the Genocide Convention was "the most sensitive," although Harriman viewed the

43. Minutes of the First Meeting, Corrigendum, folder 3, box 249, Harriman Papers.

44. Notes, January 31, 1968, folder 3, box 249, Harriman Papers.

convention against racial discrimination as equally charged and highly likely to produce a filibuster in the Senate.⁴⁵

Harriman and the commission were in a difficult position. Not only was congressional intransigence an obstacle to achieving one of its key IYHR aims, but the commission began its work with only ten months remaining in the year. The late start may have inhibited its efforts to outline and achieve an ambitious plan for the year. For example, the commission was behind schedule in terms of publishing and planning activities as of August.⁴⁶ Furthermore, participants at an early strategy meeting for the commission struggled with how to build grassroots support for human rights, an objective that commission members seemed ill-equipped to achieve. In part, this was because despite its initiatives, the presidential commission garnered little press attention across the year.⁴⁷

When Harriman accepted the presidential appointment, he no doubt imagined influencing the two potential audiences for the commission's work—Congress and the American public. Attuned to the way Washington worked, Harriman wanted clear support from Cabinet members for the commission's efforts; however, most of the meeting attendees were at the under- or assistant secretary level.⁴⁸ Correspondence between Harriman and Dean Rusk, confirming that the secretary of state would attend the commission's meeting with the president, suggested minimal State Department investment in the commission.⁴⁹ Harriman wanted high-level attendance to ensure that federal agencies commemorated the year in coordination with the commission. The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), for instance, created national awards to “honor an outstanding contribution on behalf of human rights in housing or community development.”⁵⁰

The activities of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare—such as providing funding to local education bodies and conducting studies on poverty, insecurity, and health care—signaled engagement with a broad definition of human rights as officials demonstrated awareness of the degree to which race, income, and disability might impede the fulfillment of Americans' rights

45. *Ibid.*

46. James Frederick Green to Averell Harriman, August 12, 1968, Human Rights Commission: Correspondence Jan–Sept 1968, box 31, Anna Roosevelt Halsted Papers, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York (hereafter Halsted Papers).

47. Notes, January 31, 1968, folder 3, box 249, Harriman Papers; Notes on Telcon, February 6, 1968, folder 12, box 249, Harriman Papers.

48. Notes, January 31, 1968, folder 3, box 249, Harriman Papers; President's Commission for the Observance of Human Rights Year 1968, Suggested Activities to be Undertaken by Federal Agencies, folder 3, box 249, Harriman Papers; and Minutes of the First Meeting, February 28, 1968, folder 3, box 249, Harriman Papers.

49. Averell Harriman to Dean Rusk, February 26, 1968, folder 3, box 249, Harriman Papers.

50. Walter B. Lewis to President's Commission, November 8, 1968, folder 12, box 249, Harriman Papers; Press Release, November 4, 1968, folder 12, box 249, Harriman Papers.

to education, health care, and social security.⁵¹ Officials within the government may have been influenced by Martin Luther King Jr.'s expansion of the scope of the black freedom movement, which moved beyond civil and political rights to include social and economic rights as well.⁵² As Tom Clark noted during a commission meeting, "economic and social advancement" were necessary to the achievement of human rights.⁵³

The post office also seemed reluctant to participate in the IYHR, initially. After early signs that the post office might not issue a commemorative stamp (as the postmaster general's committee had not recommended it), Harriman suggested he would lean heavily on the postmaster and "make his displeasure known."⁵⁴ Indeed he exerted substantial pressure in a personal letter to Lawrence F. O'Brien, the postmaster general: "It seems to be almost unthinkable that the United States Government, with its record as a standard-bearer in the field of human rights and in the shaping of the Universal Declaration, would not join in the issuance of the commemorative stamp. Aside from the adverse effect in countries around the world, such neglect would be interpreted by the many hundreds of private organizations and their millions of members who are cooperating in this celebration as an indication of the Administration's lack of interest in the subject of human rights."⁵⁵ One month later, in honor of human rights year, the postal service issued its first ever commemorative aerogramme, marked by three globes traversed by flying birds.⁵⁶ Harriman's fixation on postal commemoration may seem disproportionate, but nearly all member states reporting to the UN Secretary General had issued a commemorative stamp in part because it was an affordable and easy way to note the year; Harriman did not want the United States to be an outlier on this trend.⁵⁷

51. Human Rights Year 1968, folder 1, box 59, Tom C. Clark Papers, Tarlton Law Library, University of Texas at Austin (hereafter Clark Papers).

52. Thomas F. Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Struggle for Economic Justice* (Philadelphia, PA, 2007), 340–41, 351.

53. Handwritten Notes, folder 1, box 59, Clark Papers.

54. Notes, January 31, 1968, folder 3, box 249, Harriman Papers.

55. Averell Harriman to Lawrence F. O'Brien, March 5, 1968, folder 7, box 468, Harriman Papers.

56. Lawrence F. O'Brien to Averell Harriman, April 1, 1968, Human Rights, box 8, Goldstein Files, LBJL; Talking Points, November 27, 1968, folder 7, box 468, Harriman Papers. Roland Burke has argued the stamps' abstract designs represent the abstraction of international human rights in these years: Roland Burke, "Premature Memorials to the United Nations Human Rights Program: International Postage Stamps and Commemoration of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights," *History and Memory* 28, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2016): 158.

57. David Lidman, "Two U.N. Issues on Human Rights," *New York Times*, September 22, 1968, 132. For more on stamp issuance in commemoration of the UDHR, see Burke, "Premature Memorials to the United Nations Human Rights Program," 152–81. On cultural commemoration of UN-designated "international years," see Jocelyn Olcott, *International Women's Year: The Greatest Consciousness-Raising Event in History* (New York, 2017), 26.

Although Americans increasingly demonstrated their concern for human rights by distributing information on human rights violations, writing letters to U.S. officials, and even participating in public demonstrations, the commission took few strong stands on human rights violations abroad.⁵⁸ For example, as the anniversary of the 1960 Sharpeville massacre approached, State Department officials considered supplementing its traditional statement in Geneva with a comment by the commission; however, the commission's executive director James Frederick Green was explicit that the commission should address racial discrimination more broadly and "not attack South Africa" directly.⁵⁹ Green's caution illustrated that even in the human rights year, sensitivity toward South Africa, a country with whom the United States collaborated in many ways, trumped a commitment to human rights.

Green's memorandum preceded by one day the first commission meeting at which its members discussed the question of publicly naming human rights abusers. At that meeting Sisco articulated his view that the commission should not make a "specific reference to South Africa" in any statement related to the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. His seemingly spurious rationalization was that the United States could not address only one human rights violator while remaining silent on others. Quite strikingly, his example was that the United States could not criticize South Africa and neglect to condemn Cuban and Soviet human rights abuses, suggesting it was communist human rights violations that necessitated denunciation.⁶⁰ Examining the commission's records shows how the Cold War lens shaped its work, although not all members of the commission were as sensitive to political concerns. Commission member Clifford Alexander, chair of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), disagreed with Green's position and argued the commission should devote itself to calling attention to human rights violations.⁶¹

Later, the commission would weigh in on human rights issues such as the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia, protesting "the invasion and flagrant violation of human rights committed against the people of Czechoslovakia by the Soviet Union, Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, and East Germany."⁶² The condemnation of the invasion of Czechoslovakia, one of a number of significant human rights violations that year, highlighted again how the Cold War influenced human rights policy—i.e. it was acceptable to defend human rights aggressively if such efforts aligned with anti-communist priorities.

58. Snyder, *From Selma to Moscow*.

59. James Frederick Green to Averell Harriman, February 27, 1968, folder 3, box 249, Harriman Papers.

60. *The President's Commission for the Observance of Human Rights Year—1968*, no. 2 (October 1968): 1, folder 13, box 249, Harriman Papers.

61. Minutes of the First Meeting, Corrigendum, folder 3, box 249, Harriman Papers.

62. Press Release, August 23, 1968, Human Rights-2, box 8, Goldstein Files, LBJL; Bruno Bitker, et al. to U Thant, August 23, 1968, folder 7, box 1, Bitker Papers.

Commission members, however, were frustrated that their condemnation garnered so little media attention.⁶³

One additional issue plaguing the commission may have been the continuing challenges of defining human rights. For example, the commission termed human rights as “a coherent, unified approach to the work of government covering the areas of civil rights, administration of justice, health, education, labor, housing, social security, etc.” Johnson, on the other hand, focused more on the individual than the role of the government when discussing his conception of human rights: “Indeed, men must be free above all else—free to be protected equally by the law, free to choose a career or a job or a neighborhood or a way of life or a religion, free to hold and have their property protected.”⁶⁴

Even Harriman sent conflicting messages. An outline for a report introduction to be authored by Harriman suggested: “A clear distinction would be drawn between the civil and political rights (Articles 3–21), which are relatively precise and enforceable, and the economic and social rights (Articles 22–28), which are more general statements of goals, not always immediately realizable.”⁶⁵ This language is somewhat surprising given Harriman’s remarks at the commission’s first meeting in which he discussed social and economic rights as “more and more . . . playing an important role in our country.” Specifically, he argued since Franklin Roosevelt’s presidency those rights had become more significant.⁶⁶

As the Tehran conference approached, the commission assisted in planning U.S. participation. State Department official David Popper warned that there could be considerable criticism of the U.S. record in Vietnam, on racial discrimination, and support for repressive regimes.⁶⁷ Perhaps due to his position at the EEOC or his race, Alexander urged that the U.S. delegation to Tehran not be all white as was planned. Alexander’s interjection, which came less than two weeks after Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination and race-related riots in the nation’s capital, prompted considerable discussion, including some resistance from Popper.⁶⁸ In this instance and at other points during the year, the habit of some of the commission members to reinforce existing power hierarchies potentially inhibited their efforts to promote human rights domestically. In contrast, the Justice Department and Housing and Urban Development representatives of the commission weighed in on Alexander’s side, and lay members such as

63. Minutes, September 17, 1968, Human Rights-2, box 8, Goldstein Files, LBJL.

64. Final Report: Statement of purpose and possible content, n.d., Human Rights-2, box 8, Goldstein Files, LBJL; *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents*, Monday, December 9, 1968, vol. 4, no. 49: 1666.

65. *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents*, Monday, December 9, 1968, vol. 4, no. 49: 1666.

66. Verbatim Text of Governor Harriman’s Remarks, February 28, 1968, folder 14, box 249, Harriman Papers.

67. Minutes, April 16, 1968, Human Rights, box 8, Goldstein Files, LBJL.

68. Ibid.

Halsted also echoed his concern about the delegation's lack of diversity. Harriman asserted that one member of the delegation should be African American.⁶⁹

Only one day later, in a turn of events not foretold in the commission's minutes, the White House announced that the U.S. delegation would be headed by Roy Wilkins, the executive director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).⁷⁰ The rest of the delegation was made up of commission members such as Bitker as well as State Department officials from Washington, New York, and Tehran.⁷¹ Wilkins's appointment, about which enough is not sufficiently known, dovetailed with the United States Information Agency (USIA)'s strategy for the conference—to highlight U.S. support for self-determination and disapproval of racial discrimination and apartheid.⁷² Regarding the U.S. record, a USIA memo argued, “We need not be defensive about the U.S. domestic record in human rights. The U.S. has made steady, cumulative progress toward implementation of equal rights granted by the U.S. Constitution.” In its confidential analysis, the USIA predicted the United States could be criticized for its “domestic racial policies; alleged economic support of South Africa; the war in Viet-nam; alleged bias in favor of Israel in the Middle East conflict; and on other issues.” In addition to warding off or defending itself from criticism in Tehran, the government also had an offensive strategy, which involved supporting proposals relating to the establishment of national human rights commissions, facilitating the free flow of information, expanding legal assistance, and curbing discrimination.⁷³

Wilkins's speech in Tehran served as a history of human rights violations and protections in the United States, outlining the “tortuous path” the country had taken.⁷⁴ He juxtaposed slavery and racial discrimination with the progress made under the Johnson administration on civil and political rights but acknowledged much work remained on economic and social rights domestically. Wilkins also outlined U.S. support for a proposed UN High Commissioner for

69. Ibid.

70. Ernest Goldstein to George Christian, April 17, 1968, Executive IT 47-9 Human Rights, Commission on, box 13, WHCF, LBJL; Minutes, April 16, 1968, Human Rights, box 8, Goldstein Files, LBJL.

71. Press Release, April 19, 1968, Human Rights, box 8, Goldstein Files, LBJL.

72. Yvonne Ryan's biography of Wilkins cites favorable State Department reviews of similar speeches he gave on race relations in Paris, Berlin, and London in 1965. Yvonne Ryan, *Roy Wilkins: The Quiet Revolutionary and the NAACP* (Lexington, KY, 2014), 152–53, 189. There is a longer history of the NAACP leadership serving as “a loyal black face” in refuting charges of racial discrimination for the State Department. See Carol Anderson, “Bleached Souls and Red Negroes: The NAACP and Black Communists in the Early Cold War, 1948–1952,” in *Window on Freedom: Race, Civil Rights, and Foreign Affairs, 1945–1988*, ed. Brenda Gayle Plummer (Chapel Hill, NC, 2003), 93–94, 98.

73. USIA News Policy Note, April 19, 1968, U.N. Conference on Human Rights, box 15, Goldstein Files, LBJL.

74. Press Release 81, April 26, 1968, Human Rights, box 8, Goldstein Files, LBJL; A/CONF.32/SR.4, United Nations Archives, New York (hereafter UNA).

Human Rights to ensure that the UN had mechanisms to execute its human rights standards.⁷⁵

That Wilkins, a prominent African American, chaired the U.S. delegation and delivered a speech that assessed the U.S. record on human rights with a considerable degree of candor, blunted the heavy criticism expected in Tehran. A U.S. embassy cable from Tehran reported “extraordinary applause and much congratulatory comment” in response to Wilkins’s speech. American officials there saw Wilkins’s turn as delegation head as a “major success,” writing, “We have been immensely helped by his presence.”⁷⁶ Writing to Johnson with this good news, Special Assistant to the President Ernest Goldstein cited a report from Tehran that said, “Major change from anticipated scenario, from our standpoint, has been virtually complete absence of criticism of U.S. over its racial problems and policies. We attribute this to Wilkins’ statement and presence.”⁷⁷ Harriman later said, “We had a lucky break that I could not head our delegation to Tehran. Roy Wilkins was a ten strike.”⁷⁸ Wilkins had detractors, however; the *Los Angeles Times* correspondent termed Wilkins’s speech one of the week’s “minor disappointments” because he did not address racial problems in southern Africa.⁷⁹ Yet, criticism of the United States focused on its foreign policy toward Vietnam and Africa, rather than its domestic record, suggesting Wilkins’s appointment was a success. Indicative of Washington’s pleasure with Wilkins’s speech was that he was received at the White House after his return.⁸⁰

Despite the apparent success of Wilkins’s speech, the conference’s otherwise limited achievements failed to satisfy many participants and observers, who recognized the opportunities lost at the conference and the limits of the Tehran Proclamation, which had sharply highlighted the blights of apartheid, racial discrimination, and colonialism as well as detailed other human rights violations internationally.⁸¹ Bitker, for example, wrote, “Matters that should have been thoroughly considered, such as the creation of a U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, or a possible international court patterned upon the European Court of Human Rights, were barely mentioned.”⁸² Sidney Liskofsky reported

75. Ibid. See also Burke, “From Individual Rights to National Development,” 288–91.

76. AmEmbassy Tehran to SecState, April 25, 1968, Human Rights, box 8, Goldstein Files, LBJL.

77. Ernest Goldstein to President Johnson, April 26, 1968, box 15, Goldstein Files, LBJL.

78. Minutes, September 17, 1968, Human Rights-2, box 8, Goldstein Files, LBJL.

79. Joe Alex Morris, Jr., “Delegates Dubious About Rights Conference,” *Washington Post*, April 28, 1968, F9.

80. UPI, “Wilkins Says Most Negroes Won’t Riot Now,” *Washington Post*, May 1968, A8.

81. Proclamation of Tehran, May 13, 1968, accessed October 30, 2008, www.unhcr.ch/html/menu3/b/b:tehran.html.

82. To Continue Action for Human Rights: Human Rights Year 1968, Executive FG 194 President’s Commission for the Observance of Human Rights Year, 1968, box 1, Subject Files, White House Central Files (hereafter WHCF), Richard Nixon Presidential Materials Project, College Park, Maryland (hereafter NPMP).

the meeting provoked a mixed response of frustration and encouragement in him.⁸³ U.S. Representative to the UN Human Rights Commission Morris Abram characterized the conference as one of “the more disappointing exercises” of U.S. human rights efforts.⁸⁴ With the UN conference behind them, commission members sought to build awareness domestically throughout 1968, although they competed with the presidential election, the war in Vietnam, and other captivating events. At the commission’s third meeting in June, its members strategized how they might best influence the Senate to ratify outstanding human rights conventions, one of their top goals for the year.⁸⁵

At this point, there were two UN treaties signed by the United States and submitted to the Senate which had not been ratified: the Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide and the Convention on the Political Rights of Women. Additional UN treaties that the United States had signed but not yet submitted for Senate ratification were the Convention Against Discrimination in Education, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, and the Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages. U.S. ratification was still outstanding for various Organization of American States and International Labour Organization treaties as well.⁸⁶ As part of its efforts, the commission released a resolution supporting the president’s appeal for ratification, which was carefully calibrated to assuage some Senate fears: “By this participation the United States would not impose, or seek to impose, its laws or traditions upon any country; nor would any country impose its laws or traditions upon the United States.” Commission members also sought to argue that ratifying such treaties would demonstrate that the U.S. government supported internationally the rights it had fought for domestically, asserting, “The United States Senate should move forward on international human rights conventions, just as the Congress has moved forward on human rights legislation at home.”⁸⁷

The commission’s activities were not all high-level, however, and were designed to influence a range of constituencies including labor, the media, lawyers, NGOs, educators, business circles, and governments through a panoply of projects: publications, symposia, ceremonies, and speeches.⁸⁸ The commission planned nine different publications, including 152,000 copies of a poster highlighting key human rights texts such as the Universal Declaration and the

83. *The Rights of Man*, May–June 1968, folder 3, box 1163, Organizational Matters Series, ACLU Records.

84. United States and International Human Rights—Retrospect and Prospects, December 1968, Executive IT 47-9/A, box 13, WHCF, LBJL.

85. Minutes, June 11, 1968, Human Rights-2, box 8, Goldstein Files, LBJL.

86. Status of Human Rights Conventions, Human Rights, box 8, Goldstein Files, LBJL.

87. Ernest Goldstein to President Johnson, July 30, 1968, EX HU Human Rights, box 1, WHCF, LBJL.

88. Agenda, June 11, 1968, Human Rights, box 8, Goldstein Files, LBJL.

U.S. Constitution.⁸⁹ In addition, Harriman wrote to all fifty governors asking them to take steps to commemorate the year by issuing a proclamation, forming citizens' committees, and publicizing the issue of human rights.⁹⁰ He also spoke before the national conference of governors in March 1968, outlining ways for them to involve their governments, state legislatures, and citizenries in celebrating the UDHR's anniversary.⁹¹ Similarly, Halsted contacted a range of museums and cultural organizations in an effort to encourage human rights year programming.⁹² Members of the commission also reached out to teachers, print publication editors, television and radio station managers, as well as members of national trade associations and business councils to urge them to prioritize publicizing the IYHR.⁹³ Yet, the commission's subcommittee on nongovernmental organizations, which sought to foster NGO observance of the year, never fulfilled that objective to the degree that some on the commission hoped.⁹⁴

Correspondence between Harriman and the commission's executive director demonstrates extensive efforts to build deep lines of communication to transmit commission materials and to foster grassroots activism.⁹⁵ The commission sought to draw attention to its cause by encouraging the presidential candidates to comment on the issue and the parties' platform committees to address human rights.⁹⁶ In addition, the commission's education subcommittee compiled materials on human rights for use in elementary and secondary school classrooms.⁹⁷

In July, the commission hosted a conference on Martha's Vineyard about racism and American education.⁹⁸ By holding the event on a remote, resort island, the commission made a curious choice, suggesting it was not sufficiently focused on its stated goal of building broad-based grassroots support. The conference participants set a lengthy and activist agenda; their goal was "To develop an Agenda for Action whereby American education can play a primary role in shaping a non-racial society and deepening concern with problems of social justice." Fundamentally, they sought to reorganize education into a

89. Minutes, June 11, 1968, Human Rights-2, box 8, Goldstein Files, LBJL.

90. "To Deepen Our Commitment."

91. Averell Harriman Remarks before the Conference of Governors, March 1, 1968, folder 14, box 249, Harriman Papers.

92. Anna Halsted to Keith E. Melder, August 13, 1968, Human Rights Commission: Correspondence Jan–Sept 1968, box 31, Halsted Papers.

93. James Frederick Green to Averell Harriman, October 11, 1968, Human Rights Commission: Correspondence October 1968, box 32, Halsted Papers.

94. Stephen C. Schott to Anna Halsted, April 5, 1968, Human Rights Commission: Correspondence Jan–Sept 1968, box 31, Halsted Papers.

95. James Frederick Green to Averell Harriman, June 12, 1968, folder 13, box 249, Harriman Papers.

96. James Frederick Green to Averell Harriman, July 19, 1968, Human Rights, box 8, Goldstein Files, LBJL; Anna Halsted to Hubert Humphrey, July 29, 1968, Human Rights Commission: Correspondence January–September 1968, box 31, Halsted Papers.

97. Minutes, September 17, 1968, Human Rights-2, box 8, Goldstein Files, LBJL.

98. James Frederick Green to Averell Harriman, July 19, 1968, Human Rights, box 8, Goldstein Files, LBJL.

non-racial system.⁹⁹ Conference attendees developed twenty recommendations, including a call to revise school curricula with the aim of tackling racism and social inequality, a push to realize integration, and proposals to address differences in the quality of schools.¹⁰⁰

In addition to the conference on race and education, the commission also organized a session on peace and human rights, held in November 1968. At that conference, which key government officials, academics, and journalists attended, one of the principal topics under discussion was the “role of foreign policy in the advancement of human rights.”¹⁰¹ Airing concerns that plagued many of the commission’s efforts, Alexander and HUD Assistant Secretary for Equal Opportunity Walter Lewis expressed unease about participation, with Alexander saying that it sounded like a “closed club house meeting,” and Lewis warned that the commission needed to focus instead on grassroots involvement.¹⁰² Held at the Airlie House in Virginia, the conference produced a strongly-worded press release that termed the U.S. record on human rights convention ratification “deplorable.”¹⁰³ In addition, the Airlie House conference participants urged the White House to appoint a presidential assistant on human rights, arguing that “fulfilling national responsibility for human rights requires appropriate Government machinery.”¹⁰⁴ Unfortunately, attendees did not respond to Lewis’s call for more grassroots participation.

Despite its broad efforts, the presidential commission could not garner press attention for its activities, which complicated any efforts to reach a broader audience. Halsted attributed the lack of attention to the commission’s first meeting on February 28 to bad luck. She noted that the president fit his meeting with the commission in between a session with General Earle Wheeler to review the war in Vietnam and a departure ceremony for Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. As she put it: “How eclipsed can you get?”¹⁰⁵ Similarly, its third meeting was not mentioned by the *New York Times* or *Washington Post*.¹⁰⁶ Although this specific example might be attributable to the session getting lost amidst coverage of Robert Kennedy’s assassination, it is clear the commission and its work had limited resonance both in and outside of Washington. Bitker characterized the media as “uncooperative,” and numerous other commission

99. Conference on Racism and American Education: Imperatives for Change, n.d., Human Rights, box 8, Goldstein Files, LBJL. Emphasis in original.

100. To Continue Action for Human Rights, NPMP.

101. Human Rights and the Quest for Peace: National Responsibility (Preliminary Program), folder 9, box 249, Harriman Papers.

102. Minutes, October 24, 1968, Human Rights-2, box 8, Goldstein Files, LBJL.

103. Press Release, November 23, 1968, folder 10, box 249, Harriman Papers.

104. Final Report: Statement of purpose and possible content, n.d., Human Rights-2, box 8, Goldstein Files, LBJL.

105. Anna Roosevelt Halsted, “What’s Wrong with Human Rights?,” Human Rights Speeches 1968–1969, box 32, Halsted Papers.

106. James Frederick Green to Averell Harriman, June 12, 1968, folder 13, box 249, Harriman Papers.

members expressed frustration with the news “blackout,” which they seemed unable to lift.¹⁰⁷

In addition, the commission’s committee of lawyers tried yet again to press ratification of human rights treaties, arguing, “No other single action which the Government could take would more clearly demonstrate our intention to participate in the international promotion of human rights than the ratification of major human rights conventions.”¹⁰⁸ The commission’s lawyers’ subcommittee drafted a report intended to shift the legal community’s support for ratification of human rights conventions. Within the commission, there was awareness of the extent to which the ABA was an impediment to ratification of UN human rights conventions, with Clark strategizing about possible ways to influence the organization’s position.¹⁰⁹ The lawyers’ committee argued there was “substantial U.S. precedent” for ratifying human rights conventions and that such treaties would not supersede the Constitution.¹¹⁰ Despite such assertions, the commission achieved no incremental progress on ratifying the UN treaties.

In advance of the commission’s final report, some within the White House resisted suggestions that bureaucratic change was warranted. Echoing many arguments that would re-emerge in the Nixon and Kissinger years, Goldstein sought to prevent the creation of additional organizations, writing, “Certainly it is fallacious reasoning to assume that the creation of a new body will guarantee attention to human rights.”¹¹¹ Green, however, argued that those activists focused on human rights were almost exclusively linked to the UN and other international organizations.¹¹² In addition, AFL-CIO officials raised concerns about language in a draft of the final report that was reminiscent of “black power” and “SDS” rhetoric, highlighting the range of political positions on the left in the 1960s.¹¹³

The culmination of the IYHR domestically was a White House conference on human rights in December 1968.¹¹⁴ Halsted hoped that the conference, “if well planned and managed, could make a major contribution to the observance of Human Rights

107. Minutes, September 17, 1968, Human Rights-2, box 8, Goldstein Files, LBJL.

108. James Frederick Green to Ernest Goldstein, November 14, 1968, Human Rights-2, box 8, Goldstein Files, LBJL.

109. Minutes, April 16, 1968, Human Rights, box 8, Goldstein Files, LBJL.

110. A Report in Support of the Treaty-making Power of the United States in Human Rights Matters, folder 3, box 1163, Organizational Matters Series, ACLU Records.

111. Ernest Goldstein to James Frederick Green, October 22, 1968, FG 791 President’s Commission for the Observance of Human Rights Year, 1968, box 417, WHCF, LBJL.

112. James Frederick Green to Ernest Goldstein, November 14, 1968, Human Rights-2, box 8, Goldstein Files, LBJL.

113. Don Slaiman to Kirkland, January 27, 1969, folder 16, box 48, Series 7, George Meany Memorial AFL-CIO Archive, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland (hereafter Meany Archive)

114. Continuing Action for Human Rights, Human Rights Commission: Pamphlets 1968, box 32, Halsted Papers.

Year.”¹¹⁵ Plans for the conference highlight some of the issues that intersected most significantly with human rights—health, housing, welfare, and employment.

In advance planning for the conference, special assistant to Averell Harriman, Howard Funk, was “struck by the absence of women participants” in the conference panels and invited women to join in four sessions. Funk’s memo, like Alexander’s intervention regarding the all-white makeup of the initial U.S. delegation to Tehran, demonstrates that even those tasked with considering questions such as racial and gender discrimination, needed to be prodded to ensure the U.S. commitment to human rights was expressed as fully as possible.¹¹⁶

The National Conference on Continuing Action for Human Rights brought together many leading figures in the field, including Chief Justice Earl Warren, who argued that the current administration “has probably done more than any other for human rights.”¹¹⁷ Warren, nonetheless, was critical of the U.S. record on human rights treaties, saying, “We as a nation should have been the first to ratify the Genocide Convention and the Race Discrimination Convention . . . This sad record and the responsibility for it lies squarely with those who have a parochial outlook on our world problems.”¹¹⁸ Warren’s participation was particularly appropriate given his court’s landmark ruling, *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), which struck down racial discrimination in accessing education facilities. Warren also laid out a clear argument for greater U.S. participation in the UN human rights project: “In accepting this very limited degree of supranationality we would do so in the confidence that others would be prepared to join us in the interest of maintaining those democratic institutions which alone offer a true hope of peace.”¹¹⁹

Harriman took a more moderate approach in his remarks. His talking points stressed the U.S. origins of the UDHR, citing the Bill of Rights and Declaration of Independence as key inspirations.¹²⁰ The domestic, rather than foreign or supranational, genesis of the Universal Declaration was a theme throughout 1968, perhaps as a tactic to make ratifying the UN conventions seem more patriotic and less threatening. In his remarks, Harriman also had high praise for Johnson’s human rights record.¹²¹ However, he pointed to past achievements rather than the accomplishments of 1968 because the administration had few human rights successes it could highlight.

At the urging of Goldstein and the State Department, Johnson took part in the December conference; Goldstein had emphasized the opportunity it would

115. Anna Halsted to Members, September 19, 1968, folder 25, box 78, Series 7, Meany Archive.

116. Howard Funk to Averell Harriman, November 14, 1968, folder 9, box 249, Harriman Papers.

117. Press Release, December 4, 1968, folder 9, box 107, William Proxmire Collection, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin. The conference was held less than a month after Nixon’s election over Humphrey.

118. *Ibid.*

119. *Ibid.*

120. Talking Points, folder 10, box 249, Harriman Papers.

121. Remarks, December 3, 1968, folder 14, box 249, Harriman Papers.

offer the president to articulate his vision for the future of human rights.¹²² The State Department argued that participating in the conference offered him “an unparalleled opportunity to voice his views on future needs and problems in the field of human rights.”¹²³ Yet, like so many other initiatives related to the IYHR, the conference led to limited tangible results. In assessing the commission’s efforts, Johnson characterized its work as having “helped to take human rights discussions out of the textbooks and . . . moved them into the classrooms, into the communities, into the State and local governments, into labor unions and businesses, into the press, radio, and television.”¹²⁴ He also contended, “Our greatest Presidents are remembered best for their successes in human rights, whether it was freeing an enslaved minority from bondage, or whether it was guaranteeing self-determination of a small and defenseless nation.”¹²⁵ Johnson brilliantly tied together what were seen at the time and in retrospect as his greatest achievements—the extension of civil and political rights to African Americans—and his greatest failure—the disastrous U.S. involvement in Vietnam. It was, in the final weeks of his presidency, an effort to cloak Vietnam in the language of human rights and self-determination. In reality, Johnson’s record in South Vietnam was condemned by many at home and abroad. Even his record on race was contradictory, as Whitney Young, the executive director of the National Urban League, would make clear in his comments at the conference.

In keeping with the theme of Wilkins’s address at Tehran, Young emphasized that the human rights agenda was still unfinished in the United States:

I am both embarrassed and challenged by this occasion because on this the twentieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights our country has not ratified most of the human rights conventions. It is understandable that we have a reluctance as a nation to do this, for we are in fact truly vulnerable. We are vulnerable not only because our nation continues to practice discrimination on the basis of color in domestic affairs, but there are those who would question obvious discrimination as evidenced through our immigration quotas, through our history of foreign aid, and our apparent inconsistency in coming to the support of suppressed people in Vietnam in a massive way, but being only mildly concerned with suppression in places like South Africa and Rhodesia.¹²⁶

Young was one of the few who analyzed U.S. foreign policy, highlighting the contradictions of the Johnson years and the broader Cold War.

122. Ernest Goldstein to President Johnson, July 31, 1968, Human Rights-2, box 8, Goldstein Files, LBJL.

123. Benjamin H. Read to Walt W. Rostow, July 25, 1968, Human Rights-2, box 8, Goldstein Files, LBJL.

124. Continuing Action for Human Rights, Human Rights Commission: Pamphlets 1968, box 32, Halsted Papers.

125. Press Release, December 4, 1968, folder 10, box 249, Harriman Papers.

126. To Continue Action for Human Rights, NPMP.

In addition to the December conference, the commission issued publications, including nearly 400,000 copies of two posters on human rights. The most significant publication was *For Free Men in a Free World: A Survey of Human Rights in the United States*, which was not published until after the IYHR had concluded. The publication outlined each article of the UDHR and assessed the record of the United States in securing those rights. The entries surveyed U.S. history since the colonial period and often emphasized the similarities between the articles in the UDHR and protections afforded by the U.S. Bill of Rights. The work of many authors, *For Free Men in a Free World* was frank about the continuing challenges the United States faced, particularly surrounding race as an impediment to the fulfillment of some rights and changing social norms regarding marriage, privacy, and other rights. The publication also addressed the extent to which Americans had access to employment, an adequate standard of living, and education. Of particular note is a discussion of Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1968 Poor People's Campaign, which U.S. officials noted "did not attain its maximum goals" but did secure some improvements.¹²⁷

At the end of the IYHR, commission members reflected on their activities, challenges, and accomplishments in a concluding report. The commission proposed establishing new institutions or re-organizing existing ones to ensure greater focus on human rights within the government and suggested that "stronger interdepartmental coordination and intradepartmental coordination" were needed. One way to address this need would be the designation of an assistant to the president for human rights.¹²⁸ The commission also suggested establishing a Citizens Advisory Committee on Human Rights to support the special assistant in efforts to reach the broader public. In addition, commission members envisioned the creation of an Interdepartmental Committee on Human Rights Relating to Foreign Policy, which would "have responsibility for coordinating a program of public education relating both to the principles of human rights and foreign policy affecting human rights." Fundamentally, the commission believed bureaucratic reorganization was necessary to address human rights sufficiently.¹²⁹ The U.S. government did not pursue most of the report's recommendations, and the proposed bureaucratic reorganization would not come for many years, and even then it was only in response to greater congressional activism.¹³⁰ When similar reforms did come about, they facilitated increased attention to human rights in U.S. foreign policymaking.

127. The President's Commission for the Observance of Human Rights Year 1968, *For Free Men in a Free World: A Survey of Human Rights in the United States* (Washington, DC, 1969).

128. Final Report: Statement of purpose and possible content, n.d., Human Rights-2, box 8, Goldstein Files, LBJL.

129. *Ibid.*

130. On the later reorganization, see Sarah B. Snyder, "A Call for U.S. Leadership: Congressional Activism on Human Rights," *Diplomatic History* 37, no. 2 (April 2013): 372-97; Barbara Keys, "Congress, Kissinger, and the Origins of Human Rights Diplomacy," *Diplomatic History* 34, no. 5 (November 2010): 823-51.



Figure 2: Meeting with Johnson on October 2, 1968, Vice Chair Halsted presents the president with an early commission publication on human rights. LBJ Library Photo by Yoichi Okamoto.

The commission's members recognized the significance of raising public consciousness about human rights. In its final report, the commission wrote, "It will be difficult for the United States to assume a role of leadership in human rights internationally unless it undertakes to increase awareness, knowledge, and expertise on this subject within the Government and in particular within the Department of State. Human Rights . . . must be practiced as an active conscious element of a strong foreign policy."¹³¹ Yet, it is difficult to gauge how

131. To Continue Action for Human Rights, NPMP.

deeply the commission's accomplishments penetrated. After Richard Nixon's inauguration, the new administration sought to minimize attention to the commission's work, and the distance Nixon's White House maintained toward the commission's report would characterize its attitude toward human rights in the years that followed.

Fundamentally, the presidential commission represented the final gasps of 1940s-era human rights organizing. The initiative's failure presaged human rights activists undertaking new approaches and identifying new targets in the years that followed. For example, Amnesty International USA (AIUSA) underwent a transformation in the early 1970s from a small group of New York-based activists to a nation-wide network of groups that adopted individual political prisoners. Demand increased so precipitously that everyone who wanted to join an adoption group could not be placed in one.¹³²

One of the most significant changes was a shift in focus away from the United Nations in New York to the federal government in Washington. Since the late 1940s, human rights groups such as the ILRM and the NAACP had been headquartered in New York City, where with UN observer status they could direct attention at UN bodies and diplomats. A number of like-minded institutions, including the NAACP, Freedom House, the Anti-Defamation League, the United States Committee for Refugees, and the Inter American Association for Democracy and Freedom, even shared office space in the Wilkie Memorial Building at 20 West 40th Street.¹³³ The letterheads of such organizations reveal personal connections to UN-focused liberals such as Eleanor Roosevelt and Adlai Stevenson, who was U.S. Ambassador to the UN during the Kennedy administration.

Thus it was notable when, in July 1967, the ILRM outlined a new approach to interventions in local human rights violations with the intention of local affiliates leading ILRM efforts on the ground and moving away from a focus on diplomats or UN officials in New York.¹³⁴ The ILRM's model had been to bring "violations to the attention of the particular government through its

132. Sarah B. Snyder, "Exporting Amnesty International to the United States: Transatlantic Human Rights Activism in the 1960s," *Human Rights Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (August 2012): 791. By 1969, Amnesty International had adopted 6,500 "prisoners of conscience" and the Washington office of AIUSA was tracking 1,200 prisoners. Paul Lyons to McGeorge Bundy, September 22, 1969, L 69-411, Reel L-294, Log Files, Ford Foundation Records, Rockefeller Archive Center, Sleepy Hollow, New York; Umberto Tulli, "Whose Rights are Human Rights?: The Ambiguous Emergence of Human Rights and the Demise of Kissingerism," *Cold War History* 12, no. 4 (November 2012): 579; and Laurie S. Wiseberg and Harry M. Scoble, "The International League for Human Rights: The Strategy of a Human Rights NGO," *Georgia Journal of International & Comparative Law* 7, Special Supplement (1977): 290.

133. Records relating to the building can be found in box 80, Freedom House Records, Public Policy Papers, Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey.

134. Policy Goals and Structure of the International League for the Rights of May, July 20, 1967, International Year for Human Rights (1968)-Correspondence, 1964-67, box 43, ILRM, NYPL.

Ambassador in Washington or its Mission to the U.N. If no reply is forthcoming or is inadequate, the matter is pressed further by bringing it to the attention of the Secretary General of the U.N. or to the press and the world community."¹³⁵ Later, when appealing to the Rockefeller Brothers Fund for money to expand beyond its \$40,000 annual budget, the ILRM proposed creating a lawyers committee in Washington to enhance the effectiveness of efforts to achieve the organization's agenda.¹³⁶ These shifts signaled efforts to seek broader audiences for human rights appeals. In a similar move, AIUSA opened a Washington office in 1976.¹³⁷ Moving the geographic focus of American human rights activism from New York to Washington also represented deep frustration with the effectiveness of the UN as a forum in which to address human rights violations, which led advocates in the United States, the Soviet Union, and elsewhere to lose faith in the United Nations as a means through which human rights could be protected.¹³⁸ To give just one measure of those attitudes, an October 1968 poll conducted among Minnesotans showed only 15.3 percent of respondents were "well satisfied" with the job the UN was doing.¹³⁹

At the end of the IYHR, which had been a Jamaican initiative, one of that country's diplomats expressed considerable disappointment with the year, arguing that human rights practices had not improved over the course of 1968.¹⁴⁰ The *New York Times* had a similarly dim view of the U.S. record, penning an editorial entitled "Negligence on Human Rights," which argued it should be characterized as one of "disappointment and frustration." According to the editorial board, "The United States has failed to make the kind of showing Mr. Johnson hoped for when he proclaimed 1968 Human Rights Year."¹⁴¹ A prominent religious publisher, the Rev. Dr. Stanley Stuber, characterized the year as "a dismal failure." He was particularly critical of the lack of press attention to the year. There were less than ten mentions of the IYHR, the Tehran

135. "Toward An Expanded Program," 1968, folder 3, box 1163, Organizational Matters Series, ACLU Records.

136. William S. Moody to Rockefeller Brothers Fund, January 8, 1975, folder 2812, box 461, Record Group 3, Rockefeller Brothers Fund Files, Rockefeller Archive Center, Sleepy Hollow, New York.

137. Barbara J. Keys, *Reclaiming American Virtue: The Human Rights Revolution of the 1970s* (Cambridge, MA, 2014), 184; Stephen Hopgood, *The Endtimes of Human Rights* (Ithaca, NY, 2013), xi.

138. Ludmilla Alexeyeva, *Soviet Dissent: Contemporary Movements for National, Religious, and Human Rights* (Middletown, CT, 1985), 291–92; Ludmilla Alexeyeva and Paul Goldberg, *The Thaw Generation: Coming of Age in the Post-Stalin Era* (Pittsburgh, PA, 1990), 254, 284; Robert Horvath, "Breaking the Totalitarian Ice: The Initiative Group for the Defense of Human Rights in the USSR," *Human Rights Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (February 2014): 163; Burke, "How Time Flies," 413. A similar shift can be seen among NGOs focused on women's rights: see Olcott, *International Women's Year*, 29, 230–31.

139. Minnesota Poll #281, October 3–6, 1968, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research.

140. Third Committee, December 2, 1968, A/C.3/SR.1626, UNA; Third Committee, December 2, 1968, A/C.3/SR.1625, UNA.

141. "Negligence on Human Rights," *New York Times*, December 15, 1968, E12.

conference, or the president's commission in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* combined in 1968. In Stuber's view, federal agencies and major churches largely neglected the year, which prevented its success. In terms of the year's objective—ratification of the human rights conventions—he ranked it “almost an utter failure.”¹⁴²

Examining the year in the U.S. context presents a disappointing picture in many respects. First, progress was not achieved on one of the year's stated goals—ratification of the UN conventions. Despite presidential and commission urging, congressional intransigence remained stiff. Second, the year gained almost no media attention, limiting wider awareness of the cause. 1968 was a key year in U.S. history, filled with an unrelenting sequence of newsworthy and even traumatic events. “What didn't happen in 1968?” political scientist Marc J. Hetherington has asked.¹⁴³ It is possible the IYHR could not find space in the press—and therefore the public's attention span—when competing with the Tet Offensive, the King and Kennedy assassinations, and a presidential election in which the incumbent withdrew from the race. As Baldwin wrote at the time, Americans were focused on issues other than human rights in 1968.¹⁴⁴ Third, any impact of the year on U.S. policy was minimal. It brought no bureaucratic reorganization in U.S. monitoring of human rights or changes in American policy priorities. The IYHR galvanized few Americans, and those who were energized had committed to the cause before 1968. The influence of the commission did not rise to the level that President Harry Truman's Committee on Civil Rights and its final report, *To Secure These Rights*, had on civil rights litigation.¹⁴⁵ Neither the UN nor its human rights efforts resonated with Americans in 1968.

Americans, motivated by social movements of the era and connections forged through travel and other means, increasingly advocated for international protections of human rights in the 1960s. These activists saw Washington, both the government and the space, rather than the UN as the appropriate forum and actor to influence. American activists' shifting focus from New York to Washington signaled a new approach to human rights activism, which would ultimately transform U.S. foreign policy in the coming years.¹⁴⁶

In contrast, the IYHR was a missed opportunity to heighten U.S. attention to human rights as a policy priority, despite the increased attention to human rights in the surrounding years as well as the degree of activity undertaken by the presidential commission. From this vantage point, the disillusionment with

142. Stanley I. Stuber, “Appraisal of the International Year for Human Rights (1968),” folder 13, box 249, Harriman Papers.

143. Marc J. Hetherington, Foreword to *Resilient America: Electing Nixon in 1968, Channeling Dissent, and Dividing Government*, by Michael Nelson (Lawrence, KS, 2014), ix.

144. Roger Baldwin to Bob Delson, February 1968, folder 4, box 8, Roger N. Baldwin Papers, Public Policy Papers, Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey.

145. Risa L. Goluboff, *The Lost Promise of Civil Rights* (Cambridge, MA, 2007), 254.

146. Snyder, *From Selma to Moscow*.

the war in Vietnam in the wake of the Tet Offensive, the erosion of the Cold War consensus, growing disenchantment with presidential leadership, and an increasing sense that the United States was tackling its domestic race problems, were all more influential in increasing concern for human rights than the UN's IYHR.¹⁴⁷ Thus those issues that were at the time distractions from the IYHR precipitated later fulfillment of some of its objectives—greater attention to human rights in U.S. foreign policymaking.

147. Rusk framed the domestic turmoil of 1968 as evidence that “this nation is on the move in the field of human rights.” AP, “Rusk Terms Unrest a sign of Movement,” *New York Times* December 4, 1968, 21.