

## From Selma to Moscow: *how human rights activists transformed U.S. foreign policy*

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## BOOK REVIEW

Sarah B. Snyder, *From Selma to Moscow: how human rights activists transformed U.S. foreign policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 320 pp.

Sarah B. Snyder's *From Selma to Moscow* is a fine piece of scholarship with a somewhat misleading title and Introduction. At first glance, it appears to be about the confluence of human rights activism and foreign policy in 'the long 1960s', which she defines as the period between John F. Kennedy's inauguration in 1961 and Jimmy Carter's in 1977. The titular invocation of Selma further suggests that the book will connect the African-American civil rights struggle to the global human rights movement. In reality, this is a stylistically traditional diplomatic history account of how human rights advocates – most of them in the US government – influenced American foreign policy, and most of the action takes place in the 1970s. As such, it is a solid addition to the literature on Cold War-era human rights and American diplomacy, though with a few organisational quirks of which readers should be aware.

In recent years, a few questions have preoccupied historians of human rights and diplomacy.<sup>1</sup> First, where did all of this human rights interest come from? (In other words, what social, cultural, economic, and technological factors converged to bring about the modern human rights movement?) Second, how and when did it happen? (That is, by what combination of processes – activist lobbying, bureaucratic intercession, executive negotiation, and otherwise – did governments actually take up human rights causes?) Third, what difference did it all make? Did governments' attention to human rights have any real effects in oppressive states?

Snyder is primarily interested in the second question, somewhat interested in the first, and only marginally interested in the third. She takes a case-study approach through six chapters in an effort to illuminate the complex process by which the US government began to take up international human rights causes. She begins by exploring human rights activism aimed at the USSR, with special attention to the plight of Soviet Jews. She then transitions to a succinct treatment of US debates over Rhodesia. In this case, policy-makers had to consider the ramifications of extending or withholding support to Ian Smith's white-minority regime. Next, Snyder takes up the internal US political debate over Greece, a NATO ally whose military government of 1967–74 created a thorny problem for Washington. This chapter generally confirms what others have argued about the overwhelming caution of US policy, though Snyder does a good job of showing that even supporters of the bilateral status quo were careful with their words for fear of provoking Congress (pp. 62, 86).

I really enjoyed Chapter four on South Korea. Here, much like the Greek case, the US interest in a strong, stable ally ran up against the excesses of the military government of

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<sup>1</sup>See, for example, Roland Burke, *Decolonization and the Evolution of International Human Rights* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010); Barbara J. Keys, *Reclaiming American Virtue: The Human Rights Revolution of the 1970s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); Niall Ferguson, Charles S. Maier, Erez Manela, and Daniel J. Sargent, eds., *The Shock of the Global: The 1970s in Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); and Akira Iriye, Petra Goedde, and William I. Hitchcock, eds., *The Human Rights Revolution: An International History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

Park Chung-hee. The White House predictably overlooked the lack of democracy except as it affected US interests, while some legislators and foreign service officers succeeded in raising awareness, intervening for the dissident Kim Dae-jung, and limiting US assistance. Meanwhile, few non-governmental organisations (NGOs) took up the cause of South Korean human rights, although some non-state actors got involved around the end of the Nixon years.

The most thoroughly researched chapter concerns Augusto Pinochet's Chile. It would be hard to overestimate the importance of the 1973 Chilean coup and the ensuing dictatorship to the global human rights movement. Not only did Pinochet galvanise a wide range of opponents, from exiles and reporters to foreign governments and NGOs, but the era culminated in a drastic reshaping of the US-Chile relationship. While much has been written about this subject, Snyder has uncovered some sources that shed further light on the workings of the US government and activists. These include letters from angry American citizens and the Chilean ambassador's upbraiding of then-Governor Jimmy Carter for his attacks on the junta (pp. 122, 143–4). She closes out the book with a look at legislative activity in the mid-1970s, a time when a more assertive Congress held dozens of hearings which collectively raised important questions about the goals and outcomes of American foreign policy.

The book has a few core strengths. First, it is the product of a prodigious amount of research. Snyder has taken a deep dive into her cases, and she has pieced together the policy-making process of these years in meticulous detail. Of necessity, then, the book highlights foreign policy makers much more than non-state actors, and it is based primarily on research in American political archives. Although international human rights as a scholarly subject can be overwhelming, Snyder does an admirable job of keeping the book focused. The text comes in at a relatively concise 170 pages, and its 80 pages of expository endnotes fill in many gaps for curious readers.

Second, Snyder does a superb job of showing how US government bureaucrats and some elected officials did much of the legwork for human rights causes, while the White House generally did its best to maintain traditional diplomatic relationships. In some instances, the State Department and congressional liberals had fundamentally different views of American foreign policy, while in others the State Department itself exhibited a high level of intra-agency disagreement. The chapter on Chile best demonstrates these dynamics (p. 136). A number of foreign service officers in far-flung embassies worked on behalf of dissidents and other victims, far from the prying eyes of their superiors in Washington (pp. 16, 93, 132). Among the standouts were Ambassador Philips Talbot (Greece), Philip Habib (South Korea), and Ambassador David Popper (Chile). Some non-state actors also influenced the perception of nominal American allies, including Joseph Eldridge (Chile) and James Becket (Greece). On their own, both government and non-government advocates were limited in their influence, but collectively they helped to expand the foreign policy conversation to include human rights questions. Meanwhile, as anyone familiar with American diplomacy in this era will attest, National Security Adviser and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger staunchly defended a narrow, realist variant of American national interests, much to the chagrin of activists.

While this is an excellent study, readers should be aware of a few organisational decisions. As noted earlier, despite the titular references to Selma and activists, at its core this is really a book about political actors – elected representatives, appointed officials, and bureaucrats – and far less a book about the wide array of non-state actors who may influence the policy-making process. *Nota bene*: Snyder defines the term 'activist' broadly to include US foreign policy makers, which raises the question of whether a government

official can really be considered an activist. She is on relatively firm ground, I think, in arguing that many unelected officials, especially US embassy officers, became de facto advocates for victims in host nations. Some of them even assumed adversarial postures against their Washington bosses. But the term may not so easily apply to elected officials who drew their paycheques from the US government and were expected to work on behalf of their home constituents. As Senator Bob Kerrey has suggested, politicians and activists are fundamentally different, for the former must compromise to get results, while the latter must be uncompromising.<sup>2</sup>

Another minor point: for everything that the book gains in its succinctness and in Snyder's meticulous reconstruction of internal US government discussions, it loses a bit in its ability to communicate bigger takeaways. And on a few occasions, she could do more to alert readers to some of the broader social and cultural background. For example, when she writes that journalists criticised South Korea and Chile policy, it is worth noting that this generation of reporters was generally more antagonistic toward Washington and not necessarily more keyed up about global human rights. Similarly, aid cuts to offending governments grew from many factors, including post-1960s budgetary constraints and, in the case of South Korea, the American public's wariness about East Asian commitments (pp. 109–15).

A somewhat more serious issue is Snyder's embrace of a 'long 1960s' framework and her assertion of firm connections between 1960s activism and 1970s foreign policy developments. As she states in the Introduction, 'Americans were engaged with a wide range of human rights issues across the long 1960s' (p. 1). Pointing to scholarship on domestic social movements and some concurrent global developments, she adds, '[i]n many ways, human rights activists were building on the successes of the civil rights movement in that white and black liberals sought to export the movement's victories abroad' (p. 8). In answer to those scholars who see no such clear connection between civil rights and human rights, Snyder writes, '[l]ooking at elite-level attention to human rights in the long 1960s, however, suggests a closer relationship between the movements' (p. 11).<sup>3</sup> These strong contentions suggest that the book will take on the difficult 'origins' question with a thorough probing of the ways in which 1960s-era social activism evolved into an embrace of global causes. But while she notes the overlap of some personnel from the protest days of the 1960s and occasionally refers to activists' initial motives (usually self-reported, and years after the fact), these tenuous connections remain marginal to the book's central goal of laying out a fairly traditional, policy-focused narrative.

While some scholars have adopted the long 1960s concept to illuminate the years between the early and late periods of the Cold War, the concept is not necessarily so useful for Snyder's subject (pp. 1–2). With respect to periodisation, I do not see the author identifying a set of criteria in the early and middle 1960s that comprise a broad and consistent American interest in international human rights. Indeed, at times it appears that she is trying a bit too hard to shift the paradigm away from the 1970s by shoehorning a smattering of early-to-mid-1960s activities into the story and inferring that these were indicative of something more profound. These attempts make for a jumpy chronology in the early chapters, as readers are introduced to a few 1960s-era statements and actions before the story shifts abruptly to the far more robust activity of the 1970s (pp. 26–9, 43–7,

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<sup>2</sup>Robert Kerry, 'Activists and Politicians Represent Two Different and Important Roles,' *New York Times*, 9 February 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2016/02/08/can-activists-be-politicians/activists-and-politicians-represent-two-different-and-important-roles>.

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, Moyn, *The Last Utopia*, and Stephen Hopgood, *The Endtimes of Human Rights* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013).


70–1). This chronological caprice hinders what is otherwise a thorough, thoughtful analysis of human rights in American foreign policy during the Nixon and Ford presidencies. Snyder tacitly acknowledges the overwhelming importance of the 1970s in that the vast majority of her content concerns post-1970 events: Chile; the Soviet Jewry movement; congressional hearings and so on. Chapter four makes it quite clear that almost nobody in Washington expressed an interest in South Korean human rights in the 1960s, and that it was not until the mid-1970s that US policy shifted, and even then only slightly (pp. 92, 114–15).

I don't mean to nitpick over what is, *in toto*, a very strong study. History is certainly about much more than origin points, and our scholarly debates over the true beginnings of American human rights diplomacy could easily devolve into a farcical 'angels dancing on the head of a pin' exercise. But periodisation matters because it is connected to causation. Simply put, I don't think that this book will do much to change the common scholarly perception that a humanrights consciousness coalesced in Washington and elsewhere in the 1970s while decidedly less happened in the previous decade, save perhaps for its concluding years.

What this book certainly *does* do is greatly enhance our understanding of human rights diplomacy, American foreign policy, and world affairs during this crucial era of the Cold War. Sarah B. Snyder has given us much to contemplate, both with respect to her historical case studies and with respect to US foreign policy as a whole. *From Selma to Moscow* is an excellent addition to the literature.

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