

BOOK REVIEW

Human Rights in the Long 1960s

Sarah B. Snyder. *From Selma to Moscow: How Human Rights Activists Transformed U.S. Foreign Policy*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018. 320 pp. \$30.00 (paperback).

On August 8, 1973, South Korean agents seized a guest from a Tokyo hotel, bundled him to the coast, and put him on a boat. Their victim, Kim Dae Jung, waited to be thrown overboard. Two years earlier, he had lost South Korea's presidential election to the incumbent, Park Chung Hee, who had ruled the country for more than a decade after taking power in a military coup. Now, by kidnapping Kim, Park's government apparently hoped to silence its most prominent critic.

Contrary to Kim's expectations, however, his captors did not drown him in the sea. Instead, they took him back to South Korea, where he was placed under house arrest. Their precise reason for sparing his life remains unclear, but the swift intervention of the American ambassador in Seoul, Philip Habib, had something to do with it. When he learned that Kim had been abducted, Habib appealed to South Korean officials for his release. Japanese diplomats made similar representations. Without this advocacy, Kim—who went on to win South Korea's 1997 presidential election—might have suffered a grim fate.

In the wake of the kidnapping, as Park used even harsher methods to crush dissent, activists and politicians in the United States mobilized. Amnesty International investigated the torture of South Korean activists. Congress held hearings and curbed American aid to the country. But these initiatives could not shake Park's grip on power, nor did they derail an alliance on which both countries relied. Despite misgivings about South Korea's authoritarian regime, successive American presidents tolerated it in the name of regional stability and anti-communism. "I won't lecture you like some do on your internal affairs," President Richard Nixon told South Korea's prime minister a few months before Kim's kidnapping (95). Public outrage about the Park regime grew, but it changed few minds in the White House.

The case raised a host of familiar dilemmas about American foreign policy. Time and again during the 1960s and 1970s, activists, NGOs, and members of Congress demanded action to stop human rights abuses abroad. Time and again, officials in Washington hesitated to act for fear of alienating important

partners in the fight against communism or—in the case of the USSR—exacerbating international tensions. The logic of the Cold War gave American decision-makers a powerful incentive to downplay or ignore the imprisonment, torture, and murder of tens of thousands of civilians in Europe, Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Though the exact circumstances varied from one country to another, the questions that dogged U.S.-South Korean relations resurfaced elsewhere and sparked similar arguments.

Drawing on a staggering body of research in nearly forty archives and manuscript collections, Sarah B. Snyder's new book examines these problems in unprecedented detail. Her richly documented case studies on the USSR, Southern Rhodesia, Greece, South Korea, and Chile illustrate how the concept of human rights became an important consideration for—but not an all-powerful determinant of—U.S. foreign policy. She argues that the rights activism of the 1970s, which has received considerable scholarly attention in recent years, emerged out of the “transnational connections and social movements” of the “long 1960s,” a period stretching from the beginning of Kennedy's administration to the end of Gerald Ford's. In turn, these campaigns “ushered in the institutionalization of human rights in U.S. foreign policy, and the expansion of human rights activism in the United States during the late 1970s, the 1980s, and beyond” (1–2).

A loosely connected group of American activists stand at the center of Snyder's analysis. Although their backgrounds and sources of inspiration varied, they all wanted to stop the abuses committed by foreign governments, many of which had taken the American side in the Cold War. Prominent civil rights leaders, believing that their struggle could not be confined to the frontiers of the United States, called on the American government to break diplomatic and commercial ties with Ian Smith's Southern Rhodesia (42–47). An American lawyer led an Amnesty mission to investigate Greece's military junta because he felt “ashamed” that President Lyndon Johnson refused to criticize the colonels (63). An American businessman whose son was murdered by Chilean soldiers lobbied the State Department to hold Augusto Pinochet's government to account (123–124).

Members of Congress joined the fight. In some instances, civil society groups drew their attention to a particular case. In others, the politicians took up issues that the activists had largely ignored. They gave speeches, convened hearings, and proposed legislation to block abusive regimes from receiving American money or equipment. It was “morally wrong [and] practically unsound” to support Park's government, Rep. Donald Fraser (D-MN) insisted in 1974. His colleague Leo Ryan (D-CA) warned that, unless American policy changed, South Korean public opinion would turn against the United States over the long run (105–106). According to their analysis, principle and expediency pointed in the same direction.

These efforts yielded mixed results. American policy-makers often doubted that they could square the demands of the Cold War with the imperatives of human rights. In the case of Greece, officials in the Johnson administration

found themselves torn between their commitment to NATO solidarity and domestic pressure to punish the junta's crimes. In the case of Southern Rhodesia, they turned up the pressure on Ian Smith's government in the name of civil rights and self-determination. A few years later, however, Nixon turned it back down in the name of economic advantage and regional stability. The debates over South Korea and Chile followed a similar pattern.

These cases posed fundamental questions about the purpose of American diplomacy. One of Henry Kissinger's top aides, Winston Lord, saw both sides of the debate. In dealing with Rhodesia, he argued that being too friendly to Ian Smith could "raise doubts" about the administration's commitment to racial equality and thereby alienate American voters (54–55). But he also worried that taking too hard a line with the Greek colonels could produce "chaos or a government more harmful to our interests" than the one in power (85). Lord's boss had little patience for his ambivalence. The mission of the State Department was to deal "with any government—communist or non-communist—within the context of the foreign-policy objectives of the United States," Kissinger insisted. He fumed about Congressional meddling in foreign policy, and more than once, he ridiculed human rights advocates (some of whom occupied senior positions in the State Department) for showing more interest in "political science" than in solving real-world problems (85, 101, 116).

This is not a story of triumph, and none of these episodes yields easy lessons. The protests, investigations, and legislation of the 1960s and 1970s did force American decision-makers and diplomats to pay more attention to human rights and established new "patterns of U.S. foreign-policy making" (171). It is less clear, however, how this new activism affected the behavior of the foreign leaders it targeted. Similarly, arguments about the proper relationship between interests and values continued to rage in Washington, even after Jimmy Carter took office. Sarah Snyder's book illuminates the nuances and contradictions of American foreign policy in this era. It demonstrates that how the U.S. government defines its interests matters as much as how it pursues them.

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