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# Human Rights Day, 1989

By

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*Ten Days that Shook the World* was the title which John Reed gave to his account of the Bolshevik Revolution. There were those who thought the title was overblown, that the events described did not have the significance which John Reed attributed to them. From the vantage point of 1989, we can say that Reed was right. The events in Petrograd in the Fall of 1917 were destined, in due time, to have a profound impact on world developments for most of the Twentieth Century.

And now, on Human Rights Day of 1989, we can surely say that the world has once again been shaken and we can then argue the length of this most recent seismic disturbance. I would argue that it has been roughly 1,000 days, that these truly earthshaking events started rather inconspicuously about three years ago, in December 1986, with a knock on the door of an apartment in the city of Gorky. When the residents opened up, before them stood some workmen who explained their instructions for the installation of a telephone. A few days later came the famous phone call from Mikhail Gorbachev, inviting Andrei Sakharov to move back to Moscow.

Shortly thereafter followed the return of gaunt, yet spirited prisoners of conscience from the GULAG and the gradual, initially almost imperceptible, relaxation of repressive controls in the Soviet Union. As time passed, we saw the momentum of the forces of change accelerate to the point, in recent months, of leaving us almost breathless. With Romania and Albania the only old-line dictatorships left in Eastern Europe, it is fair to say that never in the history of nation-states has the European continent been so close to the brink of true freedom. [Since this address was originally presented, of course, Romania has joined its other East European neighbors in overthrowing a dictatorial regime.]

The question has been posed as to precisely what our response should be to the drama which is now playing before our own eyes. Let me suggest that it be, in the first instance, awe and humility. It is either the accident of birth or the good fortune of having been able to immigrate that has enabled us to live in this blessed country, a country which has given each of us the opportunity to frame our own individual destiny rather than be tossed by the waves of history. It is to the founders of this country, to the framers of our Constitution that we need to give special thanks for the creation of a system of government and a social order which has served us so well.

Thus, rather than declaring our ideological triumph, let us reach out to those in Eastern Europe who themselves have discovered the validity of the propositions on which this country was founded and which were handed down to us. Let us recognize that we now have a truly unprecedented opportunity to advance the cause of democracy and human rights internationally and thereby, as this tortured century reaches its end, offer the world a chance for peace and tranquility.

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There is only a change of that, by no means a certainty. In recent times there have been so many events, totally without expectation, that can engender euphoria that there is indeed a danger for us to assess the future too optimistically. It would be, at the same time, a serious mistake for us not to recognize that there are opportunities for us now to advance the cause of human rights which were simply not there three years ago.

We have all been deeply moved this year by events in Budapest and Warsaw, in Berlin, in Sofia, and finally by the return, after 21 years of eclipse, of the Prague Spring. But we need to recognize that the popular sentiments that have been expressed in these five capitals have been there all along. The reason why these sentiments could now affect the nature of government and society lies in changes which have taken place in Moscow. The developments in Moscow will continue to play the most critical role in the period immediately ahead.

My good friend and colleague, Ambassador Lehman, Director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, has on a number of occasions made the point that it is progress in the field of human rights in the Soviet Union that will do far more to assure our security than any arms control and inspection measures. There is good reason to agree with this observation. Our conflict with the Soviet Union since 1945 was not driven by such traditional reasons for international disputes as competition for markets and spheres of influence. It was driven by an ideology, an ideology which claimed to have all the answers to humanity's social and economic problems and whose adherents used all possible means, including force and subversion, to bring their millennial program to those who had not seen the light. That is the force, and the ideology behind the force, which we resisted.

The rationale for the use of force on the international level was also the reason for the use of force domestically. Those who believed they had found the road to that better world engaged in a struggle against all who stood in the way—whether at home or abroad. At home, this struggle was reflected in the brutal repression of human rights. Abroad, it was reflected in a massive build-up of arms and in bullying, expansionism, and subversion.

It is indeed the issue of human rights which provides the litmus test for all aspects of the political and social development of any country and its behavior on the international scene. An assessment of human rights trends in the Soviet Union, consequently, has high relevance to our assessment of the international scene.

For more than a quarter of a century, we have been aware of the existence of a human rights movement in the Soviet Union. We knew the names of the courageous men and women who sacrificed their careers, their standing in society, and often their freedom to assert their beliefs in the democratic way of life. What we did not know and what came as a great surprise to a good many of us was that the beliefs of these dissidents were shared by many Soviet citizens who did not dare to speak out. What was even more surprising was that among those who sought a more democratic system were people who occupied positions of leadership and responsibility within the system itself. As President Gorbachev began to lift the lid of oppression that had rested on the Soviet population for so long, these clandestine democrats in the establishment also came to the fore.

So, in place of the political monolith of yesteryear, we see today in the Soviet Union a wide spectrum of opinion, ranging from the most radical advocates of reform, to supporters of gradual reform, and, at the extreme, extending to those who long for a return to autocracy. In the latter group, we may see a strange fusion of Stalinists with those who are spiritually still monarchists. And then there is also the large group of Soviet citizens whose preoccupation, quite understandably, is with their daily life, their personal standard of living, rather than with the country's political structure.

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It is clear today that it is not only in the interest of the people of the Soviet Union, not only in the interest of the nations of Eastern Europe, but in the world's interest that the reformers succeed. Ultimately, their success will depend on their own actions and the reactions of their people and not anyone else's. However, to the extent to which cooperation between us and them will enhance their chances for success, we certainly must give it a try. There is so much at stake. That is the message which our President has so strongly underlined.

Eastern Europe is not the only place where progress in human rights has been registered during the past year. Another country moving inexorably toward democracy is Chile. And free elections have been held in Namibia. There is, in fact, even reason to hope for progress toward greater respect for human rights in South Africa.

A totally upbeat characterization of the events of the last year does not, sad to say, tell the whole story. While Leninism is being discarded in Eastern Europe, its lease on life has been extended in Latin America and Asia. Kim Il Soong and Fidel Castro, the world's longest-termed tyrants, still hold their respective countries in their totalitarian grip. And human rights violations not necessarily motivated by totalitarian ideology are reported daily from all parts of the world—it is clear that the time has not as yet arrived for those of us who are concerned with the cause of human rights to turn our attention to other issues.

In China, we have witnessed not only the tragic events of June 4, 1989, and the repression that followed. We have also noted in theoretical journals and other publications the reformulation, in attacks on our country, of the assertion that we in the United States are seeking to impose our human rights standards on China and are thus interfering in the democratic affairs of that country. What are characterized as United States standards are then dismissed in traditional Communist jargon, as *bourgeois* notions—out of touch with the present state of evolution of China's society.

Let me use this opportunity to restate the obvious. The standards by which China is now being judged and by which we judge all others are not American standards. They are universal standards. They are recognized as such throughout the world. And comment on a government's failure to live up to these standards is no longer viewed in the international community as interference. It is viewed as an appropriate response to those cases in which a government ignores the standards set forth in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. China's votes on United Nations resolutions involving South Africa suggest that in some instances the Government of the Peoples Republic of China (PRC), too, does believe that comment on human rights violations in foreign countries is appropriate and, therefore, does not constitute undue interference in the domestic affairs of that country.

To return to the positive theme with which I started, permit me to quote from the conclusion of a speech which I delivered on January 28, 1987, in Vienna, Austria.

We in the United States, rely on the fundamental principle that governments are instituted among men to secure the rights of the individual and that these governments must derive their just powers from the consent of the governed. These words reflect, I am sure, not only the point of view of the United States but of all the democratic participants in the CSCE [Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe] process. They also reflect, I am certain, the point of view of great numbers, perhaps even great majorities, of the citizens of countries whose governments have not lived up to these principles. It is to these people above all—to the Helsinki monitors, to the members of Charter '77, to the Solidarity movement, to all those who espouse the cause of freedom—that we must send the message not to despair, to ask them to remember the last stanza of a song of the 1930s, the song of the Peatbog Soldiers: "But for us there's no complaining,

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Winter will in time be past, One day we shall cry, rejoicing: 'Homeland, dear, you're mine at last'."

Few of us would have thought then that the end of Eastern Europe's winter was so near. Let us hope that those in Eastern Europe who are committed to democracy and human rights will in the months immediately ahead be able to consolidate their gains. If they do, there is every reason to believe that the trend which we have witnessed in recent years will continue worldwide and that respect for the Universal Declaration will become truly universal. It is to that goal that we must bend every effort.