Human Rights

By

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[The following are excerpts of Secretary Albright's remarks before Rosalynn Carter Distinguished Lecture Series held in Atlanta, Georgia. December 3. 1998]

Fifty years ago this month, representatives from nations around the world came together under the leadership of another great American First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt, to sign the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Since its unveiling, that Declaration has been included or referred to in dozens of national constitutions and reaffirmed many times. It is a centerpiece of the argument that we make that respect for human rights is the obligation not just of some, but of every government. Atlantans should be proud that President Jimmy Carter did so much to ensure that the Declaration's principles would be at the core of the foreign policy of the United States.

For reasons both strategic and personal, President Carter placed far greater emphasis on human rights than did his predecessors. And by so doing, he strengthened America's claim to moral leadership, spurred growth in the global human rights movement, and, directly or indirectly, freed many political prisoners and saved many lives. President Carter's determination to advance human rights helped make this a better world.

But it remains very far from perfect. There are many today who point to the gap between the ideals set out in the Universal Declaration and the violations that persist 50 years after that document was signed. These skeptics conclude that we might as well give up, that no matter what we say or do, there will always be repression and discrimination. In this view, the violation of human rights is just another sad reflection on the limits of human nature. To that, I would reply as Katharine Hepburn did to Humphrey Bogart in the movie *African Queen*: "Nature, Mr. Allnut, is what we were put into this world to rise above."

The Clinton Administration believes that if we are to build the kind of future we want, we must insist that there is nothing inevitable, and certainly nothing natural, about gross violations of human rights. We must point out that, for the torturer, cruelty is a choice. For the abuser, violence is a choice. For the bigot, intolerance is a choice. And what we have the power to choose, we have the power to change.

Moreover, support for human rights is not just some kind of international social work. It is vital to our security and well-being, for governments that disregard the rights of their own citizens are not likely to respect the rights of anyone else. In this century, virtually every major act of international aggression has been perpetrated by a regime that repressed political rights. Such regimes are also more likely to spark unrest by persecuting minorities, sheltering terrorists, running drugs, or secretly building weapons of mass destruction. And they are enemies not only of political freedom, but also of social and economic development.

In any society, people who are free to express their ideas, organize their labor and invest their capital, will contribute far more than those stunted by repression. This is true of men; it is true also of women. It is obvious in our era that no country can reach its potential if it denies itself the full contributions of half its people. Unfortunately, in too many places today, women remain an undervalued resource.

This is not to say that women have trouble finding work. In many societies, in addition to bearing and nurturing the children, women do most of the non-child-related work. Yet, women are

often barred from owning land and permitted little, if any, say in government, while girls are excluded from schools and provided less nourishment than boys.

In our diplomacy, we are working with others to change that because we know from experience that, when women have the power to make their own choices, societies are better able to break the chains of poverty: birth rates stabilize: the spread of AIDS and other sexually transmitted disease slows: environmental awareness increases: and socially constructive values are more likely to be passed on to the young. Accordingly, our overseas aid programs are designed to help women succeed through legal reform and access to education, credit, and health care.

And with the leadership and active participation of yet another great First Lady, Hillary Clinton, we have launched the Vital Voices Initiative. This project is bringing women together from around the world to build public-private partnerships, and to help women participate fully in the economic and political lives of our nations.

In recent years, we have made great progress, but despite that, in many countries, appalling abuses are still being committed against women. These include coerced abortions and sterilizations, children sold into prostitution, ritual mutilations, dowry murders, and domestic violence. There are those who suggest that all this is cultural, and there's nothing we can do about it. I say it's criminal, and we each have a responsibility to stop it.

That is why the United States expressed outrage about the abuses committed against ethnic Chinese women in Indonesia during the riots last May. It's why America has been the strongest backer of the International War Crimes Tribunals for Rwanda and the Balkans. Because we are determined that the authors of ethnic cleansing should be held accountable, and those who consider rape just another tactic of war must answer for their crimes.

It is why we have undertaken a major diplomatic and law enforcement initiative to halt trafficking in women and girls. After all, we believe in zero tolerance for those who sell illegal drugs; we should feel even more strongly about finding, stopping and jailing those who buy and sell human beings.

Finally, it's why we are speaking up on behalf of the women and girls of Afghanistan, who have been victimized by all factions in their country's bitter civil war. The most powerful of those factions, the Taliban, seems determined to drag Afghan women back from the dawn of the 21st century to roughly the 13th. The only female rights they appear to recognize are the rights to remain silent and invisible, uneducated and unemployed. Afghan women and girls have asked for our help, and we are providing it. We have increased our support for education and training, and we have made it clear that if the leaders of any Afghan faction want international acceptance, they must treat women not as chattel, but as people. And they must respect human rights.

One of the most basic human rights for both women and men is spelled out in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration, which provides that everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. From the earliest days, Americans have believed in this right, and it is our conviction, and it has been our experience, that nations are stronger, and the lives of their people far richer, when citizens have the freedom to choose, proclaim, and exercise their religious identity.

Under President Clinton, we have integrated the American commitment to religious liberty into our bilateral relationships. We raise the issue directly in discussions with foreign leaders, and we shine a spotlight upon it in regional organizations and at the United Nations. We take other governments' policies towards religious freedom into account when making judgments about whether to provide aid or other benefits. And we have made a special effort to help resolve disputes in areas, such as Northern Ireland, the Middle East and the Balkans, where religious divisions have combined with other factors to engender violence or endanger peace.

We do all this because religious liberty is fundamental to our own identity. because its denial can cause fear. flight. fighting, or even all-out war; and because intolerance. when not confronted in one area, can grow and spread until it becomes a wilderness of hate.

In all that we do. we stress that our policies are directed neither for nor against any particular religious faith. Over time, in one place or another. persons of virtually every faith have been persecuted. Each time it has diminished us all. So we all have a stake in seeing the precious right of religious liberty is protected for everyone, everywhere. every day.

Another area of emphasis in our human rights policy is freedom of expression. The Universal Declaration provides that everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and to impart and receive ideas through the media. The very importance of this right is what causes dictators to want to suppress it. for to a dictator the truth is often inconvenient, and sometimes a mortal threat.

And that's why leaders of nations such as North Korea. Libya, Iraq, Cuba. Burma and Serbia try to grab the truth and leash it like a dog. ration it like bread, or mold it like clay. Their goal is to create their own myths. conceal their own blunders. direct resentments elsewhere. and instill in their people a dread of change.

Atlanta. home to CNN. is the global information capital. That network's broadcasts have done much to reduce the ability of repressive governments to control what their people know and when they know it. The advance of information technology only adds to our faith here in the United States that truth will ultimately prove stronger than any dictator. But that will not happen if those who cherish their own freedoms remain silent when the freedoms of others are denied. Accordingly. we vigorously oppose efforts to suppress independent voices such as Serb President Milosevic's recent. inexcusable crackdown on journalists in his country.

We also sponsor independent broadcasting through the Voice of America and other outlets. We support regional initiatives such as the designation of a Special Rapporteur to monitor threats to reporters in this hemisphere. And around the world, we back the cause of free expression both diplomatically and through material support.

In addition. in a matter related to the flow of information. the Clinton Administration is now conducting a review of documents that may shed light on human rights abuses during the Pinochet era in Chile. As Secretary of State. I am determined that the State Department continue declassifying and making available documents in this area. And I am determined to continue to do so as rapidly as possible under the administration's guidelines.

Another fundamental right spelled out in the Universal Declaration is the right to take part in government. either directly or through freely chosen representatives. To the United States. this right is basic. and we are encouraged that in recent decades, the right to democratic governance has won increasing acceptance worldwide as the cornerstone for protecting the full range of human rights.

Of course. we know that each country must come to democracy at its own speed and by its own path. But countries that have already established such systems can help. First. by defending their own freedom and that of the entire democratic community, so that no nation that enters the democratic ranks is forced, either by internal or external foes, to leave it. And second, by helping nations in transition to develop durable democratic institutions.

And that's why today, from Asia to Africa to the Andes. U.S. agencies and non-governmental organizations are training judges. drafting commercial codes, aiding civil society, and otherwise helping to assemble the nuts and bolts of freedom.

In the months ahead, we can expect many important tests of democracy. In Indonesia, for example, leaders must heed their people's desire for far-reaching political reform, heal ethnic divisions, deal fairly with the aspirations of those in East Timor and Iryan Java, and prevent further violations of human rights. In Cambodia, the new coalition government must put aside past habits of confrontation and corruption and find a way to work together based on democratic principles. And in our own hemisphere, Colombia's promising new president is determined to overcome threats posed by drug cartels, guerrillas, paramilitary forces, and poverty, and we are determined to help.

In Africa, there is an opportunity for historic progress in Nigeria, the continent's largest nation. During the past two decades, military governments plundered that country's natural resources, exploited ethnic divisions, and brutally abused human rights. The new interim leadership has promised a sharp break from this sad past, and local elections will be held this week and national elections next year. Independent political parties have been allowed to register, political prisoners have been released, and noted exiles, such as Emory University professor Wole Soyinka, have returned home. The United States strongly supports these developments. Nigerians deserve to live in freedom. But the road ahead will be difficult, and Nigerians have seen promises betrayed all too often.

Nigeria's course will be determined, as it must be, by its own people. But the international community must do all it can to reinforce the movement towards a political system in which all Nigerians may participate and the rights of all are protected. This is a top priority for the administration, and I know that it is for the Carter Center as well.

As we look ahead to the new century, we can expect that, perhaps, the greatest test of democracy, human rights and the rule of law will be in China, where more than one in five of the world's people live. America has a vital interest in nonproliferation, Asian security, and the regional economy that will be affected by the choices China makes. So, we are engaged in a dialogue with Chinese leaders to expand cooperation and narrow differences. Since that dialogue began, the issue of human rights has been among the most difficult. And the importance we attach to it has been reflected both in private discussions and in the very public endorsements of democratic values by President Clinton during the recent summits in Washington and Beijing.

We acknowledge that the Chinese people have far greater freedom now than their parents did to make economic choices, move around their country, and choose village committee leaders. Unfortunately, on the core issues of human rights, we still have grave concerns. We have welcomed the release of a number of prisoners of conscience in recent months, but are disturbed that others are regularly picked up for essentially the same offense. Nor is it a step forward when some avenues for debate are opened up, but individuals such as Xu Wenli and others are harassed, detained, and arrested for trying to exercise the rights of organized political expression.

Overall, the pace of progress towards full respect for human rights is disappointing. Nevertheless, China's indigenous democratic movement continues to test the limits of what is possible, and this in itself is a welcome sign. We may hope that, as time goes by and the connection between political openness and economic prosperity becomes even more apparent, the scope of allowable expression will expand further to the benefit both of China and the world.

Although the specifics of our approach to promoting democracy will vary from country to country, the fundamental goals are the same. We seek to encourage, where we can, the development of free institutions and practices. Some fault these efforts as unrealistic for presuming that democracy is possible in less developed nations. Others suggest we are being "hegemonic" by trying to impose democratic values.

In truth, we understand well that democracy must emerge from the desire of individuals to participate in the decisions that shape their lives. But we see this desire in all countries. And there is no better way for us to show respect for others than to support their right to shape their own futures and select their own leaders. Unlike dictatorship, democracy is never an imposition; it is, by definition, always a choice.

Years ago, not that far from here, a young schoolgirl first became fully aware of the outside world when her teacher told her that a war had broken out in Europe and that it was important for Americans to know about it. At the same time, on the other side of the ocean, a toddler, bundled in her parent's arms, left her home in Czechoslovakia to escape Hitler's army.

I am here today only because America understood, as that young schoolgirl, Rosalynn Smith, did in her classroom in Plains, that the freedom and security of the United States depend on the freedom and security of friends abroad.

Half a century ago, American leadership saved Europe from the greatest evil the world has known. Throughout this century, American leadership has made all the difference, not only in my life, but also in the lives of millions of others who have been protected by American soldiers, helped by American assistance, or inspired by American ideals. It is true today, as it was during the Carter Presidency, that America cannot end every conflict, right every wrong, or solve every problem. Others must do their part. Ultimately, the people of every country must determine their own destiny.

Still, the United States has the leading role to play, not because of our military power - although that is important—or because of our economic strength—although that matters—but because of what we stand for in the world. And that, at its heart, is the simple but powerful proposition that every individual counts. That is the philosophy of America at its best. That was the driving force behind the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. That is the conviction that inspires this Institute to promote women's studies. That is the foundation of the Carter Center's work in support of democracy and freedom against conflict and disease. And that is why Rosalynn Carter has devoted so much of her life to helping the mentally ill, bringing comfort to refugees, and spreading the gospel of education.

It is said that all work that is worth anything is done in faith. This afternoon, let us each vow to keep that faith, that every abuse of human rights prevented; every prisoner of conscience released; every barrier to justice brought down; and every country helped to emerge from darkness into the light of freedom, will enrich our own lives, inspire others, and explode outwards the boundaries of what is achievable on this earth. To this end, I pledge my own best efforts and, respectfully, solicit both your counsel and support.