

George Lister

Current
Policy
No. 973

U.S. Human Rights Policy: Origins and Implementation



United States Department of State
Bureau of Public Affairs
Washington, D.C.

Following is an address by George Lister, Senior Policy Adviser, Bureau of Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs, before the Matias Romero Institute (Foreign Service Institute of Mexico), Mexico City, Mexico, May 26, 1987.

I welcome the opportunity to talk with you today, not for just the usual polite reasons of responding to an invitation but mainly because I feel the subject of our meeting, U.S. human rights policy, is very important. And certainly it is one which is close to my heart. The subject is also highly controversial and does not lend itself to easy generalizations, and since I am going to speak for only about 30 minutes, I suggest you consider these opening remarks as merely an introduction to our discussion. I anticipate that following my presentation, you will ask many questions, and I hope we can have a candid, vigorous exchange of views, which I am prepared to continue for as long as you wish.

Origins of Current Policy

First, how and when did our human rights policy begin? At the outset I should emphasize that my government does not perceive itself as the original defender of human rights. There were articulate supporters of human rights long before Columbus came to this hemisphere. And, of course, there have been many important human rights issues throughout history, e.g., slavery was a major cause of our Civil War over a century ago. So nothing that I am going to say here should be construed as

implying that we have a monopoly in the defense of human rights. We do not.

However, there did come a time when human rights advocates both inside and outside our government decided that human rights should be accorded a higher priority in the conduct of our foreign policy. This movement began to take shape some years prior to the Carter Administration. A leading role in this campaign was played by several Members of Congress from both major parties, Republicans and Democrats, and particularly by Congressman Don Fraser of Minnesota, who was Chairman of the Subcommittee on International Organizations and Movements. In the latter half of 1973, and in early 1974, Fraser's subcommittee held a series of public hearings on U.S. foreign policy and human rights, with witnesses including U.S. Government officials, jurists, scholars, representatives of nongovernmental organizations, etc. These hearings were followed by a subcommittee report on the subject in March 1974, including 29 specific recommendations. The first recommendation stated that: "The Department of State should treat human rights factors as a regular part of U.S. foreign policy decision-making." The report itself began with the following sentence: "The human rights factor is not accorded the high priority it deserves in our country's foreign policy."

The Fraser subcommittee report achieved considerable impact in our government, and some of the 29 recommendations were implemented fairly

soon. One of these called for the appointment of a human rights officer in each of the State Department's five geographic bureaus: for Europe, Latin America, Africa, the Near East, and East Asia. I was serving in our Latin American bureau at the time and became the first human rights officer for that area.

So the human rights cause was gaining impetus before Jimmy Carter won the 1976 elections. But, of course, soon after President Carter assumed office, human rights did begin to receive considerably more attention in the daily implementation of our foreign policy. A separate Bureau of Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs was created with a new Assistant Secretary. I will discuss how that policy was implemented, and with what results, in a few minutes, but first let me say a few words about what happened when the Reagan Administration replaced the Carter Administration, in early 1981.

At that time I recall there were some, in and out of government, who assumed that our human rights policy was finished. This assumption prevailed both among strong advocates of human rights and those who felt human rights considerations should have no place in our foreign policy. Some even expected the human rights bureau to be abolished. But fortunately, it soon became apparent that our human rights policy had been institutionalized, that it had strong bipartisan support in Congress, that human rights legislation passed in previous years was still in force, that our annual human rights reports to Congress were still required by law, etc. In short,

