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Plains Justice South of the Border: The Carter Human Rights Policy in Latin America

Since the Monroe Doctrine of 1823, the United States has repeatedly intervened in Latin America to keep other powers outside America's "backyard" and to maintain regimes friendly to US interests. As a result of Franklin Roosevelt's Good Neighbor Policy, US interventions in Latin America decreased until the Cold War started and the United States began intervening once again to assert its power to prevent any Soviet influence in the region. American intervention in the region was at one of its highest points during the Cold War of the late 1960s and early 1970s when the United States supported many undemocratic, authoritarian regimes as bulwarks against Soviet influence and the spread of communism. However, the election of Jimmy Carter in 1976 led to a dramatic change in US involvement in Latin America that became centered on issues of human rights. In his inaugural address, Carter stressed a new philosophy, "Our commitment to human rights must be absolute...We will not behave in foreign places so as to violate our rules and standards here at home."¹ Although some would contend that the Carter human rights policy did not change much at all, that the changes were only temporary, or that the policy undermined US national security, Carter's inaugural address seemed to signal an end to the US practice of overthrowing unfriendly governments and replacing them with friendly puppets as well as the beginning of an emphasis on human rights aimed at repressive governments.

After a review of the background of the development of the human rights policy, this paper will examine the following questions: Why was the human rights policy applied most frequently in Latin America? How was the policy applied? What were the immediate consequences and long-term implications of Carter's policy in Latin America? Through the use of archival sources from the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, newspapers, speeches, and

appropriate secondary literature, I will demonstrate that although the Carter human rights policy was confused and inconsistent at times, the policy actually produced real, lasting human rights improvements in Latin America and contributed to the end to the era of “the disappearances” and abuses of the Dirty Wars, and the increasing prominence of human rights and Latin American issues in the United States in both policymaking and the public in general.

There is no better place to begin to understand Jimmy Carter’s human rights policy than in a brief background of the man himself. Carter was a strong Christian who had taught Sunday school in his rural hometown of Plains, Georgia since his late teenage years. Living in racially segregated Georgia, Carter had frequently stood up for the civil rights of African-Americans in his community.² Carter’s personal vision of human rights was thus shaped by his Baptist background and personal experiences with civil rights, with some influences from theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, Martin Luther King Jr., and Mohandas Gandhi.³ This background influenced Carter’s decision to broaden the scope of American foreign policy from fighting communism at all costs to protecting human rights and improving the conditions in Third World countries. He did not want to continue policies that would, as political scientist Dr. Robert Strong said, “ally the United States with dictators whose only virtue was the fact they did not abuse their citizens in the name of Karl Marx.”⁴

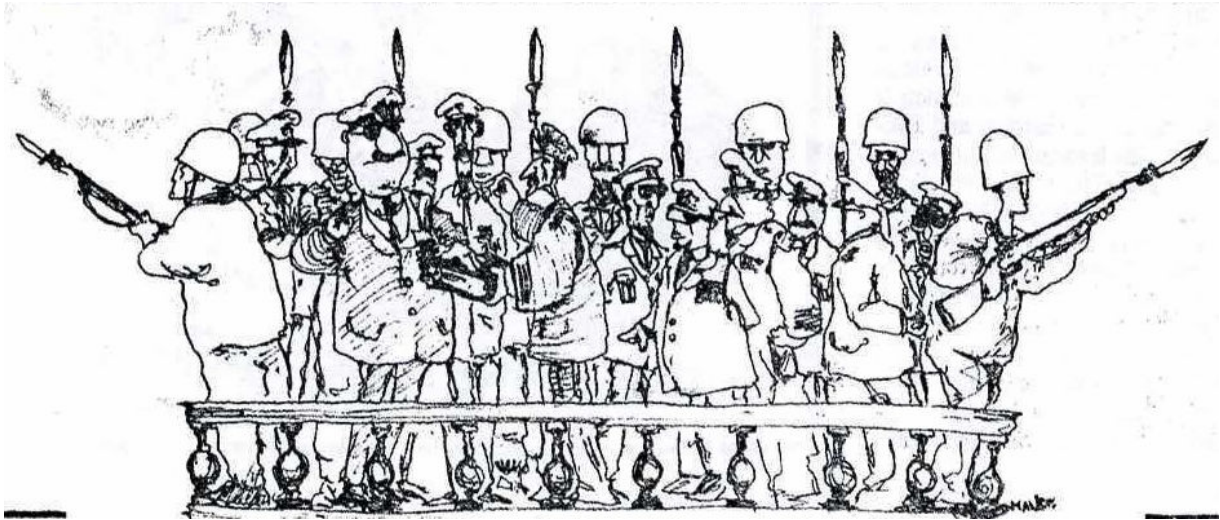
Shifting the focus from anticommunism to global human rights, Carter and his foreign policy team articulated a policy that would protect three groups of human rights that they had developed specifically for this policy. They classified the first group of rights as rights of the integrity of the person, such as the freedom from “torture; cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment and punishment; arbitrary arrest or imprisonment; denial of fair public trial; and invasion of the home.” The second group of rights was classified as social and economic rights including “vital

needs for food, shelter, health care, and education.” The third group of rights was classified as political and civil rights including “freedom of thought, of religion, of assembly, of speech, of the press; freedom of movement both within and outside one’s own country; freedom to take part in government.”⁵ To encourage other nations to make improvements in one or all of these groups, Carter planned to use “the full range of [America’s] diplomatic tools.”⁶ However, his team recognized that national security needs dictated by the Cold War necessitated a degree of flexibility in the policy, and as Carter himself stated, “This does not mean that we can conduct our foreign policy by rigid moral maxims. We live in a world that is imperfect and which will always be imperfect.”⁷ The flexibility of this policy would have major implications in the conduct of US foreign policy with respect to Latin America as some countries were the subject of more human rights attention than others according to their relative geopolitical importance.

When utilizing the flexibility of the policy in choosing countries that were to receive US attention on their human rights problems, the Carter team frequently chose the countries of Latin America above all others. The human rights policy was applied most frequently in Latin America due to both international and domestic considerations. The long alliance between the United States military and the militaries of Latin America in the name of anticommunism had produced many repressive military dictatorships throughout the region. These regimes routinely used torture as a method of interrogation, abducted dissidents and made them “disappear,” held sham elections or no elections at all, and gave little respect to rights of due process.⁸ Practices such as these were considered the norm in the era known as the Dirty Wars that lasted from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s in which Latin America suffered “from a plague of repression...[during which] the incidence of military rule had been so high, the gross violations of political and individual rights so widespread, and the use of officially sponsored assassination, torture, and

brutality so systematic.”⁹ All these abuses had been justified or overlooked in the name of national security to prevent leftist subversion in their governments.¹⁰

President Carter focused much of his policy’s attention on the rampant human rights violations in Latin America because his moralism convinced him that he needed to rectify the American contribution to the repression and lack of real democracy in the region. The most egregious example of US involvement in the region was the CIA’s heavy involvement in the overthrow of the democratically-elected government of socialist President Salvador Allende in Chile in 1973 and the ascent of the dictator General Augusto Pinochet. Therefore, Carter perceived Chile as a “test case” for the new human rights policy.¹¹ Other examples of US involvement in Latin American military regimes included security advisors supplying equipment that would be later used for torture and suppressing dissent and the training given to Latin American military officers from countries such as Panama, Nicaragua, Argentina, and Bolivia at the School of the Americas.¹² Even the United States business community helped perpetuate the repression in Latin America in order to protect their investments. IBM, for example, supplied computers used for police interrogations in Brazil and Chile. American arms manufacturers supplied “50,000 handguns, 10,000 machine guns and rifles, 296 armored cars, 155,000 gas grenades, and 6,600 canisters of Mace to police organizations in the third world.”¹³ This assistance from the federal government and American businesses gave authoritarian regimes the means in which to repress their people. In short, the human rights policy would redeem the past transgressions of the US and make it a force for positive change in the region.



A cartoonist's depiction of the type of dictators that the US had propped up in the past.

Source: Barnet, Richard J. "US Needs Modest, Uniform Stand on Human Rights," *Los Angeles Times*, March 13, 1977. "Human Rights & Foreign Policy," Box 74, Records of the Office of the Assistant for Public Liaison 1977-1981, Jimmy Carter Library.

Carter's commitment to pursuing a policy to make things right in Latin America and improve human rights conditions was further motivated by the small number of strategic interests in the region. Initially, the new human rights policy focused on the abuses of the Soviet Union, but interests in preserving détente and pursuing arms control treaties with the Soviets led to a quick shift in emphasis of the human rights policy to Latin America.¹⁴ Human rights was further emphasized in Latin America because strategic interests in containment trumped human rights in Saudi Arabia, South Korea, and the Philippines where American interests were more readily threatened by communist expansion.¹⁵ With the exceptions of Brazil and Mexico, the two largest countries and economies in Latin America, the countries of Latin America lacked the strategic importance that afforded other countries exemption from the human rights policy because these other countries were in closer proximity to the Soviet sphere of influence or had vast petroleum reserves or other valuable resources near this Soviet sphere.¹⁶ This absence of strategic significance was attributed to the minimal Soviet influence and success in increasing their influence in the region (although that influence was growing because of increasing anti-

Americanism and the rise of communist Cuba).¹⁷ The relative strategic unimportance of Latin America because of its proximity to the United States and the lack of Soviet influence there made the region more appealing for the application of the policy.

Domestic politics also played a significant role in the choice of Latin America as the region of emphasis in terms of human rights. The growing influence of interest groups like Amnesty International, Congressional interest in human rights legislation, and the evolution of a human rights bureaucracy in the State Department by Congressional legislation as well as recent events such as the Vietnam War, Watergate, and the Chilean coup that shattered American trust in government all contributed to the growing support for human rights as a tool of foreign policy. Without a credible threat to US security in Latin America, the public supported the implementation of the human rights policy in the region according to polls studied by political scientist Dr. Lars Schoultz.¹⁸

Latin America was also a natural choice for the Carter Administration's human rights policy because compared to public opinion of foreign policymaking in Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Europe, the American people had very few opinions on how a Latin American policy should be pursued. In his study of public opinion about Latin American policy, Professor Lars Schoultz states, "No survey has been able to demonstrate that the public has a consistent, coherent opinion regarding any aspect of inter-American relations."¹⁹ Carter was also able to pursue his human rights policy in Latin America with little resistance from Congress because members of Congress received little constituent correspondence on inter-American relations issues and were able to make decisions without fear of backlash from their voters.²⁰ With the exception of Cuba, which had long been an obsession of the American public, the ignorance or apathy of the American public regarding Latin American issues enabled Carter to pursue human

rights in Latin America without as much scrutiny as he would have faced by the policy's application in South Korea, Iran, or Saudi Arabia, areas that were much more prominent Cold War battlegrounds.

In formulating how the human rights policy would be applied in Latin America, the Carter administration encountered many practical difficulties in how to pursue the ambitious goals of this new policy. As the Latin Americanist on UN Ambassador Andrew Young's staff said, "those of us who had been outside came in with lots of ideas about what was wrong and about what ought to be, but not many ideas of how to go about it."²¹ Nonetheless, the National Security Council (NSC) wasted no time in beginning to develop a framework to guide Carter's Latin America policy. A day after Carter's inauguration on January 21, 1977, National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski circulated Presidential Review Memorandum 1 (PRM-1) concerning a review of the existing Panama Canal Treaty and an assessment of negotiating a new treaty.²² Five days later on January 26, as an extension of PRM-1, the NSC issued PRM-17 which called for "a broad review of our overall policy toward Latin America and the Caribbean."²³ The early priority in developing these memoranda indicates Carter's interest in revising the Latin America policy.

In his book *Whirlpool: US Foreign Policy Toward Latin America and the Caribbean*, Carter's National Security Advisor for Latin America, Robert Pastor, identifies six key issues that shaped the subsequent Carter policy toward Latin America, "the Canal treaties, human rights, democratization, North-South dialogue, nonproliferation, and arms control."²⁴ These issues were framed in the broader philosophy behind Carter's overall foreign policy, which was shaped by the promotion of what political scientist Dr. Robert Alexander Kraig referred to as "planetary humanism in a complex and interdependent world."²⁵ Carter realized that the world

was far more complex than just the relationship between East and West and diverged from his predecessors by including considerations of the relationship between North and South.²⁶ Since the end of World War II, foreign policy concerns were frequently viewed only through the lens of the American conflict with the Soviet Union and its attempt to spread communism across the globe. As a result, the issues of the interactions of the developed countries of the Global North and the developing countries of the Global South were ignored or viewed through the East-West lens which limited the ability of policymakers to comprehend the totality of the circumstances in Latin America. In his Pan-American Day speech, Carter stressed the importance of examining the regional problems within this North-South dialogue while emphasizing the need to protect human rights.²⁷

Furthermore, unlike its predecessors, the Carter administration refused to formulate policy by seeing Latin America as a single entity, but recognized it as a heterogeneous region that contains many unique countries.²⁸ In another departure from previous Cold War era administrations, Carter was committed to recognizing and respecting the sovereignty of Latin American countries and avoiding intervention in their internal affairs.²⁹ Human rights became one of the linchpins in this new Latin American policy as, in the words of historians David Schmitz and Vanessa Walker, “an alternative to the previous policies of military intervention and support for dictatorships that marred much of the US relations with Latin America.”³⁰ Carter and his staff planned to use a variety of methods to pursue human rights in Latin America ranging from rhetoric and symbolic acts and strengthening institutions to monitor human rights to punitive measures and positive inducements. By fostering a respect for human rights in Latin America through these methods, Carter hoped that American interests in the region would be protected as a result of the end of repression in the military regimes.

In implementing the human rights policy, the Carter administration employed a variety of tools, but of the tools used, none was more important than private diplomacy. In a 1977 poll by the Opinion Research Corporation cited by Brzezinski in a memo to Carter, in response to the question about what the US should do “if the country treated its citizens in a way that the US does not approve of, such as the existence of major problems with freedom of expression, freedom of movement, and political prisoners,” the American public preferred private diplomacy to public criticisms by approximately a two-to-one margin. In the cases of the Latin American countries of Brazil, Chile, Nicaragua, and Uruguay, at least fifty percent of Americans advocated private diplomacy in expressing human rights concerns versus approximately twenty percent who support public criticism.³¹ The Carter administration would take these poll numbers to heart in pursuing human rights in Latin America.

In accordance with this broader framework of nonintervention, Carter attempted to pursue human rights gains by “working through the existing military regimes, not against them.”³² During the ceremonies surrounding the signing of the Panama Canal Treaty in September 1977, for example, many Latin American heads of state including General Pinochet and Argentine dictator General Jorge Videla came to Washington to witness the treaty signing. Seizing this opportunity, Carter met with Pinochet and Videla separately to discuss the relations between their countries and the US and his concerns for human rights. After discussing Peruvian arms purchases and nuclear nonproliferation in his meeting with Pinochet, Carter opened a discussion on human rights by noting that it was the only significant problem between Chile and the United States. He expressed to Pinochet his desire to discuss human rights and “ventilate the matter in a frank and positive way.” General Pinochet agreed with Carter on the importance of human rights, but assured Carter his administration’s excesses had been responses to the threat of

Marxist revolutionaries. With conditions beginning to calm, Pinochet stated that he hoped to put Chile back on the road to democracy. He then agreed to Carter's request to admit two UN human rights observers to independently certify Chile's progress in human rights.³³

President Carter followed up his meeting with Pinochet on September 6 with a letter reiterating that human rights was the only obstacle to better relations with the United States as well as encouraging Pinochet's decision to admit UN human rights observers.³⁴ Carter's meetings with Pinochet and Videla aroused some opposition among members of Congress, but as a letter written by White House Press Secretary Jody Powell shows, the Carter Administration defended the policy by explaining, "even though we disagree with their human rights policy, it is always better to talk with them than to refuse to meet with them. Only by discussion can we hope to persuade them to change their actions."³⁵ This meeting and the subsequent letter were indicative of how private bilateral diplomacy was used as the main tool by the Carter administration in achieving its human rights goals.

In the early months of the Carter administration, there was considerable debate on how much public criticism would be used as a tool in the human rights policy. Public criticism of repressive Latin American regimes was often avoided because policy supporters such as Secretary of State Cyrus Vance's executive secretary, Peter Tarnoff, feared that such criticism would "make repressive regimes feel they are being cornered, thus leading them to take even harsher measures."³⁶ National Security Advisor for Latin America Robert Pastor summed up the decision whether or not to use public criticism in Chile in a memo to Brzezinski:

The policy which we set towards Chile in the months ahead will also have very serious and lasting implications for our policy on human rights. We could draw the line of "gross violators" around Chile, declare it a pariah, and seek support for such a policy among other democratic countries...The expectation would be that an alternative to Pinochet would emerge. An alternative policy would be to try to bargain with Pinochet, seeking specific and concrete signs of moderation and minimal respect for human rights.³⁷

The Carter administration chose the latter alternative recommended by Pastor and pursued human rights improvements through the existing regimes. Consequently, this decision reduced the frequency of instances of sharp public criticism toward the dictatorships in Latin America and put further emphasis on the importance of private diplomacy.

Another strategy was to increase human rights awareness through symbolic action, President Carter himself or members of his administration would meet or communicate with dissidents within repressive countries. Carter himself initiated the trend in his correspondence with Soviet dissident Andrei Sakharov shortly after his inauguration in February 1977. Carter's correspondence with Sakharov was groundbreaking because former President Gerald Ford had refused to talk to Sakharov for fear of jeopardizing détente with the Soviet Union.³⁸ Vice-President Walter Mondale also met with former Chilean President Eduardo Frei, who had become part of the democratic opposition to the Pinochet regime. Frei expressed his support for the human rights policy, but he also pointed out that the Carter administration "should not look just at individual cases or countries...[but should also] look at the entire structural problem."³⁹ These meetings and correspondence gave hope to dissidents across Latin America that their voices could be heard despite government repression and encouraged their further dissent.

In addition to rhetorical and symbolic methods, President Carter set out to institutionalize human rights as a part of US foreign policy for years to come. To this end, he authorized the creation of the new Bureau of Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs with Patricia Derian as its head with the rank of Assistant Secretary of State. The new bureau was tasked with coordinating the human rights campaign and monitoring abuses in other countries.⁴⁰ Derian, a former Mississippi civil rights activist, was very committed to making her new bureau an integral part of the State Department. Unlike her colleagues in the regional bureaus who were

more concerned with maintaining smooth relationships, Derian and her staff were intent on investigating and attempting to remedy human rights abuses regardless of how much it would destabilize the smooth relationships so highly valued by the other bureaus.⁴¹ Early in Derian's tenure in the State Department she slightly unnerved the Argentine government and her colleagues in the Latin American regional bureau when she paid a visit to Argentine newspaper editor Jacobo Timerman to discuss human rights issues in March 1977; Timerman subsequently praised the Carter administration for taking the "ideological initiative."⁴² Timerman was detained fifteen days later for speaking out against the Videla government, held incommunicado and tortured for several months, and was transferred to house arrest before being released in 1979.⁴³ Nonetheless, Timerman later credited the pressure of the Carter human rights campaign with his release from house arrest. To coordinate meetings with dissidents as a component of the broader human rights policy, the Carter administration institutionalized this process of arranging these meetings through NSC staff member Jessica Tuchman (later Tuchman-Matthews) and through the Human Rights Bureau and Pat Derian.⁴⁴ Derian's zealous pursuit of human rights sometimes exceeded Carter's more moderate approach of working through regimes, which earned her not only scorn and disdain from the dictators of Latin America, but also, in the opinion of an Argentine editorial writer, gratitude from many of the repressed people in the region who appreciated Derian "carrying on with her self-appointed mission to change the rest [of the world]."⁴⁵

Although Carter created the Human Rights Bureau to make human rights a permanent institution in the United States, he wanted to strengthen the existing Inter-American Commission on Human Rights of the Organization of American States (OAS) to take over the role of human rights monitoring from the State Department in the future. Unfortunately, the OAS was far too

weak and perhaps even unwilling in the late 1970s to accomplish this task of monitoring human rights abuses. The OAS allocated less than 1% of its budget (roughly \$300,000) to the Commission which resulted in a staff that was far too small to perform the type of on-the-spot investigations necessary to improve human rights in Latin America.⁴⁶ In addition, some of the nations of Latin America did not want to see the OAS strengthened because they preferred bilateral talks with the United States. Since the US provided 66% of the OAS budget, it effectively dominated the organization and these Latin American governments were wary of the OAS becoming more powerful while remaining a rubber stamp for US policy as it was in the 1960s, particularly regarding Cuba.⁴⁷

To accomplish this goal of strengthening the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, Carter signed the American Convention on Human Rights on June 1, 1977 (although the treaty never ratified in the Senate). The president then used his influence to get Jamaica, Venezuela, Ecuador, and Peru to sign or pledge to sign and ratify the treaty.⁴⁸ At the first OAS summit of the Carter administration, he used his diplomatic skills to convince thirteen Latin American states to support a US human rights initiative despite an opposition bloc led by the Southern Cone countries such as Argentina, Brazil, and Chile.⁴⁹ Beginning with the first meeting, human rights remained a major issue at OAS summits even after Carter's defeat in the 1980 election in which the abuses of Argentina took center stage.⁵⁰ Despite the OAS not gaining as much influence in human rights as hoped by the Carter administration, his efforts to strengthen the Commission as well as other international institutions was important in making human rights an issue of multilateral concern.

Carter was also not above using more forceful measures when the other tools of the human rights policy were not working. To place more pressure on human rights violators when

diplomacy was not working, the Carter administration chose from a variety of punitive measures. Perhaps the most important punitive measure at Carter's disposal was the termination of economic aid, especially military assistance funds because many of these regimes depended on US aid to supply the armed forces and police that kept them in power. During the Carter administration, military assistance aid to Latin America dramatically decreased from \$210 million in 1977 to only \$54 million in 1979.⁵¹ In addition to aid cuts, the State Department recommended that Chile not be included as part of the UNITAS military exercise in 1980.⁵² Of the six countries that had bilateral economic aid withheld in 1977 and 1978, four were countries in Latin America (Chile, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Uruguay).⁵³ To save face when the US cut military assistance funds, Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Guatemala, and El Salvador rejected all offers of funding so their requests would not be denied by the US for human rights concerns.⁵⁴ In addition to some countries rejecting aid offers outright, sanctions were further weakened by the newfound abundance of petrodollars in the region, which eased the pain of these assistance cuts to Latin American dictatorships.⁵⁵

Carter administration votes to deny or defer loans of economic aid in international financial institutions (IFIs) to repressive regimes or abstentions from such votes were another concrete pressure applied to human rights abusers in Latin America. Of the five countries receiving no votes on loans by 1978, four were Latin American countries (Argentina, Chile, Paraguay, Uruguay); a loan for Argentina was also one of the seven on which the United States abstained, and five of six loan deferrals were from Latin America (Chile, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Uruguay).⁵⁶ Nevertheless, some of these loans were still approved because the United States was only one vote on the governing boards of these IFIs, but the Carter administration was still able to protest human rights abuses through this method. However, in accordance with the

guidelines set forth in PRM-28, the US continued to vote yes on economic aid that would provide for basic needs of the neediest countries even if they abused human rights because Carter did not want to punish the people of a country for their government's actions.⁵⁷

Of all the means at his disposal, Carter preferred using positive inducements most in pursuing human rights in Latin America, a preference that was stressed heavily in the frameworks set up by PRM-28 and PD-30. In the Latin American context, these positive inducements took many forms. The first two state visits to Washington by Latin American heads of state organized by the White House were from Mexico and Venezuela, two of the region's stronger democracies. First Lady Rosalynn Carter's tour of the region also reflected a preference for democracies.⁵⁸ The civilian regimes in Venezuela, Mexico, Costa Rica, and Colombia were rewarded for their endorsement of and participation in the US human rights policy⁵⁹ by being most often consulted on how Washington should handle human rights concerns in the regions.⁶⁰

The Carter administration also tried to transform the stick into a carrot by rewarding additional economic aid and military assistance to those countries that had good human rights records or made progress in reducing violations and promoting respect for human rights.⁶¹ In recognition of Argentine human rights progress, for example, the US abstained rather than voting against a non-basic human needs loan and reconsidered approval of pending Argentine applications for military training after voting against previous loans earlier in 1978.⁶² Likewise, when Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza announced plans to allow a visit by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and to grant amnesty to political prisoners, Jimmy Carter wrote him a personal letter on June 30, 1978 expressing his "great interest and appreciation" of these "heartening signs."⁶³ Although this letter was heavily criticized by the

public as an endorsement of the Somoza regime, it was a good example of how Carter used positive measures to encourage change in human rights abusers.

Carter's human rights policy yielded immediate results both in reducing violations of the integrity of individuals and increasing trends toward political freedoms and democracy. Although according to a 1977 memo sent from Peter Tarnoff to Brzezinski, these results are "difficult to identify and impossible to quantify [because] No government is likely to admit that it is pursuing a more civilized and humane policy towards its own citizens because of outside pressure," some positive outcomes in Latin American human rights could be observed.⁶⁴ As early as August 1977, there were improvements in human rights conditions in Latin America as a result of the new Carter policy. Argentina started publishing lists of the "disappeared" and released some political prisoners. Haiti, Jamaica, Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay, and Peru all released political prisoners or suspended legal proceedings against those charged with political crimes.⁶⁵ General Pinochet of Chile abolished the secret police, the National Intelligence Directorate (DINA), and transferred some of its personnel to the National Information Center which was not under his personal control.⁶⁶ By mid-1979, additional human rights improvements in Latin America could be seen. Brazilian President Ernesto Geisel issued an executive order prohibiting police from using torture against those charged with political crimes. Chile saw fewer disappearances (5-10 in 1977 compared to over 100 the previous year) and, in 1978, the end of the government's state of siege powers as well as a sweeping amnesty for the crimes committed by both opposition and government forces. The new government of the Dominican Republic granted amnesty and freed all political prisoners.⁶⁷ Panama ended summary administrative trials of those accused of terrorism. Bolivia welcomed all exiled persons back into the country. Honduras initiated a program of pardoning common criminals.⁶⁸ By the end of the Carter

administration, in a dramatic turnaround from the conditions of 1977 when Carter entered office, Paraguay, Uruguay, Argentina, Mexico, Bolivia, and Haiti had all released numerous political prisoners.⁶⁹ These improvements in reducing or eliminating violations of the integrity of the person that had been characteristic of the Dirty Wars period demonstrate the effectiveness of Carter's new focus on human rights.

Many gains were also made in civil rights and political freedoms in Latin America as a result of Carter's human rights policy. Peru, Panama, and Brazil expanded press freedoms, the rights of labor to organize, and political participation in terms of an individual being able to dissent.⁷⁰ Across the region, civil and political liberties were on the rise because as the level of physical repression decreased, the people of Latin America felt safer, and thus were more willing to criticize their governments.⁷¹ Furthermore, elections and transitions to democracy flowed from these new policies and helped develop more long-term respect of human rights. In 1977, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia all announced their return to civilian rule in the near future.⁷² In addition, Panamanian dictator General Omar Torrijos loosened his grip on the country and agreed to elections for a new government.⁷³ Bolivian dictator General Hugo Banzer, who finally assented to free elections in 1978, stated, "Mr. Carter didn't send me a letter ordering elections, but we could feel the pressure."⁷⁴ Similarly, Ecuadorian Vice-President-Elect Dr. Oswaldo Hurtado expressed in 1979 that Carter's "firm and vocal stance on these issues [human rights and freedom] was directly responsible for the return to democracy and civilian rule in Ecuador,"⁷⁵ testifying to the power of private diplomacy and raising awareness of human rights. The fact that both deposed leaders and newly elected officials agreed that the Carter human rights policy had a clear effect on bringing about free elections in their countries was a significant indicator of the policy's effectiveness. Even Augusto Pinochet accelerated the timetable of a promised return to

constitutional democracy.⁷⁶ Judge Thomas Buergenthal of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights summed up the impact of Carter human rights policy on Latin American democratization: “[it has] strengthened the democratic opposition in different countries, weakened the totalitarian left, and laid the groundwork for an eventual transfer of power to more moderate political forces.”⁷⁷

Perhaps the best example of the Carter human rights policy helping create democracy in Latin America was in the Dominican Republic. In 1978, Dominican President Joaquin Balaguer, the successor to and inheritor of the brutal legacy of Dominican President Rafael Leonidas Trujillo, ran for a fourth term against candidates from a dozen other political parties. He was defeated in the election, but attempted to ignore the election results. President Carter intervened with diplomatic warnings which forced Balaguer to concede victory to President-Elect Antonio Guzman of the Dominican Revolutionary Party. The transition of power went smoothly; Guzman assumed office, immediately granted amnesty to political prisoners, strengthened *habeas corpus* laws, and instituted measures to fight governmental corruption. Carter’s insistence on promoting the third group of political and civil rights such as elections and political freedoms transformed the Dominican Republic from a repressive regime into “one of the best examples in Latin America of respect for individual and political rights.”⁷⁸

Despite all the gains made in 1977-1978 and the gains that would be later made in 1979-1980, Carter’s foreign policy shifted its focus in 1979 from human rights to more traditional Cold War concerns in reaction to world events. Primarily this was a response to three events of 1979: the Islamic revolution in Iran, the subsequent hostage crisis that plagued Carter until the end of his term, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan that signaled that the era of détente was coming to a close. Although it did not have as much global impact on Carter’s foreign policy as

the Iranian revolution or the Soviet invasion, the Sandinista revolution and the overthrow of Somoza dictatorship in Nicaragua also prompted significant changes in the administration's Latin America policy. All these events had significant implications for the human rights policy in Latin America as Carter began to downplay the focus of his human rights campaign and return to the traditional Cold War concerns of his predecessors in containing the spread of communism. Carter's return to traditional Cold War concerns translated into a more uneven application of the human rights policy in Latin America for fear of alienating the countries of the region, losing American influence, and increasing Soviet influence in the region.

Trouble had been brewing for quite some time in Nicaragua between Somoza's National Guard and the Marxist-oriented Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN). In February 1979, in response to the continued human rights abuses precipitated by the civil war, the US reduced its diplomatic staff by half and ended its limited economic aid and military assistance programs. By July 1979, the secretly Cuban-supported Sandinistas had capitalized on the worsening conditions and toppled the Somoza regime. The Sandinista victory prompted fears of the rise of a new Cuba, and old Cold War security concerns in Latin America reemerged.⁷⁹ Human rights concerns became less important as Jimmy Carter reverted to a traditional cold warrior and abided by what US-Latin American relations expert Dr. Peter Smith called the "long-standing principle in US Cold War policy to oppose dictators in Latin America only if they (1) became a serious embarrassment to Washington, (2) ran a risk of being overthrown by radical or 'communist' movements, or (3) both."⁸⁰ The deteriorating situation in Nicaragua justified Carter's decision to withdraw support from the Somoza regime through both of these traditional cold warrior concerns. As Robert Pastor noted, "[Once] the United States approached Nicaragua as a political-security crisis,...the Human Rights Bureau was excluded from the central

deliberations...the frontier of US human rights policy had been reached.”⁸¹ The leftist revolution in Nicaragua changed American perceptions of Latin America to such a degree that they felt that Latin America was no longer safe from the subversive influence of Cuba and the Soviet Union. As a result of these new perceptions, human rights became less important in foreign policy decision making as traditional Cold War concerns assumed their importance once again.

Traditional Cold War containment concerns trumped human rights even further as the leftist revolution spread to nearby El Salvador, a regime infamous for its death squads. The Salvadoran civil war between the new military junta and the leftist guerrillas worsened after reformer Archbishop Oscar Romero was assassinated in March 1980 after speaking out against the Salvadoran government, a recipient of US military assistance. The US support for the junta in El Salvador was an attempt to prevent another Nicaragua.⁸² The Salvadoran leftist guerrillas enlisted the aid of the Sandinistas in launching a major offensive against the junta. Sandinista involvement in the Salvadoran civil war reaffirmed fears of the spread of communism in Latin America and made American perceptions of subversion in Latin America become a reality, thus decreasing the importance of human rights even further.⁸³ Handling the worsening conflict in El Salvador and deciding on how to deal with the Sandinistas was soon the problem of Ronald Reagan, who defeated President Carter in the 1980 presidential election.

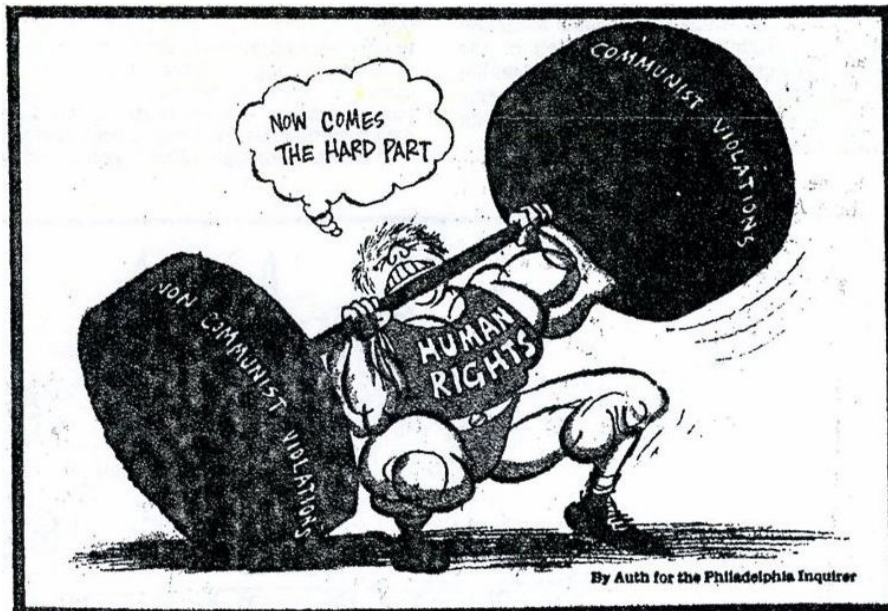
During the Carter administration, the human rights policy in general and its application in Latin America were subjects of both praise and criticism at home and abroad. In the United States, the general public was overwhelmingly supportive of the new human rights dialogue as were labor unions, ministers, and human rights interest groups such as Amnesty International.⁸⁴ Abroad, the perception held by the Latin American people that Washington would always support repressive regimes as long as they were anticommunist. Some of these people credited

Carter's human rights emphasis with helping them muster up the courage to protest human rights abuses within their own countries and to bring about democratic change.⁸⁵ Democratic opposition parties in repressive countries, the Catholic Church in Latin America, and existing democratic regimes in Venezuela, Colombia, and Costa Rica all praised the human rights policy.⁸⁶ Many of those policy supporters endorsed the general principles of human rights, but sometimes questioned the concrete applications of the policy of the Carter administration.

Yet there were critics as well. Not surprisingly, the most obvious critics of the human rights policy were those being affected most: the military generals, dictators, and junta members of the various repressive Latin American regimes. Their most pressing complaint was that the human rights policy directly interfered in the internal affairs of their countries and thus contradicted the Carter policy of nonintervention.⁸⁷ According to a 1977 CIA report, the regimes in the Southern Cone especially felt that "their countries' experiences with political disintegration, insurgency, and terrorism fully warrant tough internal security measures." The report also reveals that these regimes resented that they were not considered strategically important enough to merit exemption or special treatment from the human rights policy like Saudi Arabia or South Korea.⁸⁸ Many Latin American leaders also resented human rights concerns replacing concerns of trade and sorely needed economic development on the US-Latin American relations agenda.⁸⁹

Domestic critics ranged from those who disavowed the definition of human rights provided by Carter to those who strongly disagreed with the methods of implementation. The American business community, especially the American Association of Chambers of Commerce of Latin America, feared that human rights would interfere with their investments in the Western Hemisphere.⁹⁰ There were even critics in the State Department, for example, the Latin American

regional bureau was most at odds with the Human Rights Bureau of all the other State Department bureaus because it was concerned that the stability in the region would be upset, as



Although probably not intended to counter the critique of Jeanne Kirkpatrick, this cartoon certainly makes an argument that authoritarian regimes may be just as bad or worse than communist governments in terms of human rights violations. Source: Barnet, Richard J. "US Needs Modest, Uniform Stand on Human Rights," *Los Angeles Times*, March 13, 1977. "Human Rights & Foreign Policy," Box 74, Records of the Office of the Assistant for Public Liaison 1977-1981, Jimmy Carter Library.

evidenced earlier by Derian's visit to Argentina to meet with Jacobo Timerman.⁹¹

Neoconservative scholars such as future Reagan UN Ambassador Jeanne Kirkpatrick criticized the policy for making no distinction between totalitarian and authoritarian regimes. One of her many criticisms was that any human rights policy should be aimed at totalitarian communist governments, not authoritarian US allies that she contended would eventually reform themselves. She further argued that totalitarian regimes were worse because they sought to totally control the lives and decisions of their people while authoritarian regimes allowed people some freedom as long as it did not threaten their power.⁹² Kirkpatrick's critique was largely ignored, but her arguments did not go unnoticed: Ronald Reagan later built his Latin America policy around

making the distinction between totalitarian and authoritarian regimes in justifying support for repressive anticommunist regimes.

The arguments offered by the policy's supporters and critics opens debate on what exactly is the legacy of the Carter human rights policy. More specifically, the question is what the policy's legacy in Latin America is because as Dr. Smith points out, "Practically speaking, Carter's stance on human rights was a policy for Latin America, not the world as a whole."⁹³ Did Carter's human rights policy contribute to the end of the Dirty Wars? How did his human rights policy affect Latin American perceptions of the United States? Have issues of human rights and Latin America remained important to both policymakers and the American public?

The legacy of the Carter human rights policy is found in the policy's contribution in ending the Dirty Wars era of disappearances and repression and its longer-term impact of increasing awareness of human rights and Latin American issues in the United States and the world at large. In the context of Latin America, the new human rights policy contributed to the end of the Dirty Wars that was characterized by the repression of the regimes led by Pinochet, Videla, Somoza, and others. By raising awareness of human rights concerns and pushing these leaders to respect human rights, Carter helped pave a path toward a freer, more democratic Latin America. Latin American historian John Charles Chasteen concludes:

Although ridiculed as unrealistic by the cold warriors, Carter's [human rights] policy definitely inhibited the military blood fest in Chile and Argentina, and juntas all over Latin America heaved a sigh of relief when Ronald Reagan, a confirmed cold warrior, took office in 1980.⁹⁴

Some scholars disagree with Chasteen and doubt the causal link between the human rights policy and the end of the Dirty Wars later in the 1980s because Carter's human rights pressure coincided with internal developments in these countries "makes it difficult to attribute the effect to one cause or the other."⁹⁵ The Carter policy was so radically different from the Latin

American policies of his predecessors that it helped the people of Latin America dismiss the notion that “Washington is concerned only with the powerful while Moscow is the ‘natural ally’ of the powerless.”⁹⁶ This new perception encouraged people to resist repression and demonstrate for democracy against the weakened influence of their oppressive governments, both efforts that led to the creation of more democratic societies in Latin America.

The longest lasting implication of the Carter policy is that it created a permanent awareness of human rights and increased awareness of Latin American issues. In addition to creating a human rights bureaucracy to ensure the issue would remain institutionalized, Carter’s human rights policy galvanized groups such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch by providing new sources of funding. Although in the long run, these nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) may have been more important than the policy itself, their growth must be attributed in part to the increasing awareness of the human rights issue that result from President Carter’s initiative on human rights.⁹⁷ Through the influence of these NGOs and the human rights commitment of Jimmy Carter, the human rights movement was able to make some structural changes in the US Latin America policy as well as American foreign policy in general.⁹⁸ In later years, Carter’s genuine interest in promoting human rights and democracy across the globe and in Latin American affairs in particular motivated him to establish the Carter Center, a NGO that has pursued peace, human rights, and social justice throughout the world.⁹⁹

Carter’s policy also made a lasting impact on the media and its coverage of human rights and Latin America. In 1977 after Carter was inaugurated, most of the American media only had a single news bureau in Buenos Aires to provide all news coverage of events in Latin America. In the four years of the Carter administration, the American media opened new regional bureaus, ran more stories about the region, and assigned more correspondents to cover the area. The

human rights emphasis inspired American diplomats and local dissidents to go on the record and provide information as official sources. Awareness of the issue also legitimized NGOs concerned with human rights, such as Amnesty International, as credible sources of information. In short, as scholar Catherine Cassara points out, “Editors decided not only that human rights might be news, but also that Latin America itself demanded more attention.”¹⁰⁰ Consequently, newspaper coverage of stories involving human rights concerns began being written by in-house staff members rather than by wire services.¹⁰¹ Human rights news coverage peaked in 1977, but despite the decreased emphasis on human rights in Carter’s later years as a result of situations in Iran, Afghanistan, and Nicaragua, it never returned to its pre-Carter administration levels.¹⁰² Carter’s interest in Latin America has increased awareness of human rights and other issues in the region through the US news media, which has led to more activism and advocacy of solutions to problems of human rights, poverty, debt relief, and economic development in the hemisphere.

Despite increased human rights awareness and additional news coverage of Latin American affairs, the permanency of the gains made by the human rights initiative of the Carter administration was quickly tested by the Reagan administration. According to conservative policy analyst Tamar Jacoby, when Ronald Reagan took office in 1981, he was intent on rolling back the Carter human rights policy in favor of a traditional Cold War foreign policy. Fearing such an outcome, seventy ministers wrote an open letter to Reagan expressing their fears: “military governments in many countries are viewing your election as a green light for human rights abuses.”¹⁰³ This prediction seemed all too true when in 1980 Haiti re-arrested members of the opposition as political prisoners that they had released during the Carter administration.¹⁰⁴ Vehement Carter critic Jeanne Kirkpatrick, now US ambassador to the United Nations, made a

statement by making her first official act a meeting with the Argentine military junta followed up with a call to General Pinochet of Chile, a frequent subject of Carter's human rights efforts.¹⁰⁵ Yet Congress defended Carter's human rights emphasis. Reagan was surprised when his attempt to dramatically reduce human rights concerns in foreign policy was dashed when the Senate rejected the nomination of Ernest Lefever, a vocal opponent of an activist human rights policy, to the position of Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs. When he tried to eliminate the bureau by leaving the position vacant, members of Congress wrote him a letter expressing their "dismay" over his unwillingness to nominate a new candidate. The Senate later approved Reagan's nomination of Elliot Abrams for the position.¹⁰⁶

Later in his administration after the nomination battle over the head of the human rights bureau, Ronald Reagan recast human rights as democratization and as a rhetorical weapon in his war against the Soviets as he focused almost entirely on the third group of human rights defined by the Carter administration, practically denied the existence of the second group, and only acknowledged violations of the first group in Communist countries. Using the philosophical distinctions between authoritarian and totalitarian regimes that had been drawn by Jeanne Kirkpatrick, Reagan maintained that human rights and national security were not exclusive of one another because this distinction permitted him to continue supporting authoritarian anticommunist regimes without compromising the pursuit of the Cold War.¹⁰⁷ The refusal of Congress to accept Reagan's attempt to deemphasize the human rights issue and Reagan's resumed use of human rights rhetoric (although human rights had been heavily redefined) demonstrate that Jimmy Carter had succeeded in making human rights a permanent consideration in foreign affairs.

As the Dirty Wars came to a close and Latin America became more democratic, historian Lester Langley concludes that this “democratization that Ronald Reagan later lauded (and took credit for) owed its provenance not to Reagan primarily but to the human rights activism of Carter in Latin America.”¹⁰⁸ Carter’s policy reduced human rights violations and physical repression, increased political participation, and encouraged people to speak up against these abuses in Latin America. Henry Forde, the foreign minister of Barbados in the late 1970s, gave the following assessment of the Carter human rights policy:

It is our view that it has been the single most creative act of policy in the hemisphere in many a long year. It has raised the consciousness and stirred the consciences of many a leader in this region; it has given hope to many an oppressed citizen; it has helped, perhaps more than any other element of policy, to correct the image of the United States as an unfeeling giant, casting its shadow over its neighbors.¹⁰⁹

This assessment sums up the significance and accomplishments of the Carter human rights policy in Latin America. Despite its inherent contradictions and its decreased importance in the overall Carter foreign policy of 1979-1980, the Carter human rights policy made significant contributions in bringing an end to the Dirty Wars era and in raising awareness of human rights issues by not looking away from the human rights abuses in countries allied with the US. Today, as the United States faces increasing hostile left wing populism in Latin America from figures such as Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, perhaps the government can learn some lessons from the Carter administration in promoting human rights in the region, using carrots rather than sticks in dealing with these leaders, and expand upon the Carter legacy with an increased focus on issues of economic development that stand in the way of many Latin American people enjoying human rights.

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