

HUMAN RIGHTS - OUR WORLD'S BEST CHANCE

GEORGE LISTER

SENIOR POLICY ADVISOR
BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS AND LABOR

GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

FEBRUARY 5, 1998

I am very glad to be here with you today. Very few realize how important the human rights cause has become around the world. After my opening remarks I hope we can have a candid exchange of views, and make good use of our time. We don't have to agree on everything - that would be absurd. Candid dialogue is very important.

Just a word on my personal background. I am from the sidewalks of New York and most of my diplomatic experience has been in Eastern Europe and Latin America, including Moscow and Warsaw. After retiring from the diplomatic service I have stayed on in the State Department precisely because of our human rights policy, which I am convinced has given us a much better foreign policy, as I am going to explain.

Now, our human rights policy began before Jimmy Carter became President, in 1977. It began in 1973/74, when Congressman Don Fraser and Congressman (now Senator) Tom Harkin held a series of public hearings, urging that we give human rights a higher priority in our foreign policy. Looking back almost 25 years I simply cannot believe how far we have come. Of course when Carter took power in 1977, human rights took a quantum leap, and our Human Rights Bureau was formed.

You can imagine how difficult it was in the beginning. There was bureaucratic inexperience. There was also bureaucratic resistance. Some said human rights are fine, but they have nothing to do with foreign affairs. There was lack of information and reference material, etc. But year by year, it got better, because I soon discovered this work is like pushups - the more you do, the more you can do. Then when Ronald Reagan became President in 1981, many assumed the human rights policy was over and our Bureau would be closed down. But it soon became clear the human rights policy had become institutionalized. There was widespread support in Congress, and we were still required by law to get the annual Human Rights Reports up to Congress by January 31 of every year. So our performance continued to improve, like pushups. There was more information and experience, other governments began to help, etc. The human rights cause was injected into the State Department's bloodstream.

Now the Clinton Administration has given a higher priority to human rights. The Human Rights Bureau has been expanded and reorganized. It is now the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor. Our Assistant Secretary, John Shattuck, has

extensive human rights experience and is active all over the world, meeting with other governments, making speeches, implementing our policy, etc. I have brought along copies of some of his speeches, as well as other relevant documents.

Next I want to correct some widespread misconceptions regarding our human rights policy. First, the United States Government (USG) does not claim to have invented human rights. There were human rights activists in the world long before Columbus came to this part of the globe.. Second, our human rights policy does not imply any moral superiority on the part of the U.S. I am sure you know we have problems of race prejudice, sex discrimination, violations of minimum wage laws, etc. We have made much progress, but we still have many problems. We, the human race, are all in this together. All of us, no exceptions. Another misconception, we are not trying to impose U.S. standards on the rest of the world. We are guided by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations (UN) in 1948, 50 years ago. So this is not West vs. East, North vs. South, First World vs. Third World, etc., as some right-wing and left-wing governments argue in order to justify their human rights violations. These are universal rights. Another misconception, the USG does criticize violations by both the right and the left, and by both friendly and unfriendly governments. And finally, we do not feel our human rights policy is intervention in the internal affairs of other countries. We think we have a right to criticize violations in other countries, just as they have a right to criticize our country. And we feel we have a right to decide to whom we will give military and economic aid.

Now, what are some human rights achievements around the world over the past 20/25 years? Less torture, more elections, more freedom of press, more political prisoners released, etc. I feel the main credit for this amazing progress goes not to the USG, but to those heroes and heroines who stood up in their own countries without protection and defended human rights, like Andrei Sakharov and countless others, most of whom died in oblivion. We shall never know their names. I regret that one of those heroes is not with us today, Mihajlo Mihajlov, of the Elliott School. Mihajlo is over in Belgrade for a few days. He is an authentic human rights hero who spent seven years in

jail under the Tito dictatorship. These are the people who deserve our applause. But the USG can take quiet pride in our significant contribution.

Okay, now how is our human rights policy applied? For example, we express our concerns to other governments in private conversations. We also make public statements. And there are also our annual Human Rights Reports. In addition, we frequently cast votes on human rights in the UN, the Organization of American States (OAS), etc. And we sometimes curtail or expand economic and military aid.

Now most people do not realize how our human rights policy has given us a much better overall foreign policy. Let me give you two quick examples. For many years one of our foreign policy problems was something we in the State Department called "clientitis," a diplomatic disease. That is, if I am the U.S. Ambassador and you are the local dictator, I see you as my client. And if you like me, and you say I am doing a good job, then I can tell Washington everything is fine between our two countries. I believe our human rights policy has eliminated most of that problem. Now we realize that our relations with the people of a country are more important than with the government. Another long time problem has been leftism, and the failure to distinguish between the democratic left and the anti-democratic left. There are leftists who call for profound political, economic, and social change, but with full protection of human rights. And of course there is the anti-democratic left, those who would have you believe that all the problems of the human race can be solved under a one man dictatorship, such as Stalin in the USSR, Kim Il Sung in North Korea, or Fidel Castro, in Cuba. Our human rights policy has greatly increased and improved our dialogue with the democratic left, thereby reducing many mutual misconceptions, although problems remain.

Of course our human rights policy is not perfect, and it never will be. There are about 195 countries and only 24 hours a day, and you cannot do this work with computers. I suggest there are two main ways to judge our performance. One is our annual Human Rights Reports, and the other is what specific measures we take in response to human rights violations. Our Human Rights Reports have improved enormously over the years. If you compare the first one or two we did, in the 70s, with the one we just turned out for 1997, the difference is between a fifth grade composition

and a Ph.D. thesis. (And by the way I have brought along with me a copy of Assistant Secretary Shattuck's February 3 statement to Congress regarding our Human Rights Report for 1997.) I am not suggesting our Human Rights Reports are perfect. They never will be because they are produced by people like you and me, who are, and always will be, imperfect. The other way to judge our performance, what to do about human rights violations, is far more difficult and complicated. The continuing controversy over Most Favored Nation (MFN) status for China is just one example.

I personally feel there are two key human rights. The first is freedom of speech. I have worked for many administrations in the USG and I would not have trusted one of them without freedom of speech. Power corrupts men and women very quickly, and without freedom of speech you don't have democracy. I believe freedom of speech is more revolutionary than Marxism-Leninism. I feel the other key human right is women's rights. I don't see how you can be for human rights, if you do not support the rights of 51% of the human race. There has been encouraging progress in women's rights in recent years, but of course there is still a long, long way to go.

While on the subject of women's rights, let me make one more quick point. Many assume that women's rights is a struggle between men and women. That is not true. There are men and women who care about women's rights and there are other men and women who are totally oblivious to women's rights. As one example, about 15 years ago a U.S. Catholic feminist friend of mine delivered a talk comparing women's rights in the U.S. and Latin America. Her audience consisted of about 100 women from the U.S. and some 50 from Latin America. After my friend finished her opening presentation a well dressed woman from Latin America stood up and said: "Well thank you very much for your remarks, my dear. I found your speech very interesting and I hope you won't be offended if I tell you that you don't understand the difference between women's rights in the U.S. and Latin America. We women in Latin America are much better off than you are here. You see, my dear, we women in Latin America have servants." It never occurred to this upper class woman that we were discussing all women, not just the top 5% or 10%. Unfortunately, in Latin America this is a major problem, often identified as

marginalization. That is, the lower classes (men as well as women) have no significant role to play in the life of their country, and are simply ignored.

At any rate, the obvious answer to the problem of women's rights is that men and women who care about human rights should cooperate.

At this point, I believe I should also mention the growing support for religious freedom around the world. The State Department recently formed an Advisory Committee on Religious Freedom Abroad, and a few days ago the Committee submitted its Interim Report to the Secretary and the President. I have brought along a copy of that report for those of you who may be interested.

Of course there are many complicated problems in human rights work. Are poverty and illiteracy human rights violations? If I am the dictator of Country X, presumably I can stop torture in 48 hours. How do I eliminate poverty? And there are many other threatening issues, such as the population explosion, environmental crises, etc. We have made much progress, but we still have a long, long way to go.

One human rights problem we should keep in mind is the obvious fact that not all areas of the world receive the same attention. For example, in the past one of the most neglected regions has been so-called Black Africa, that area south of the Sahara and north of South Africa. Of course there has been much interest in South Africa, where Whites oppressed Blacks, but the media devoted less attention to Black Africa, where Blacks oppressed Blacks, although our Human Rights Reports on that area have been quite good. In recent years, however, Black Africa has been on the front pages, with all the tragedy of Rwanda, Congo, etc.

Before closing I should also mention the key role played by Congress and the Non Government Organizations (NGOs), such as Amnesty International, in the human rights effort. In the U.S. our Congress, both Democrats and Republicans, holds hearings, passes legislation, consults with the State Department, etc. Of course, just like the State Department, Congressional performance is far from perfect. But on balance it is very positive. As for the NGOs there has been a rapid rise in their number around the world. They are making a major contribution, but once again, they are all imperfect, like the

State Department. And sometimes their criticism of the Department is accurate, and sometimes inaccurate.

Now to conclude. As I have said earlier, I simply cannot believe how far we have come since 1973. Who would have thought, even a few years ago, that the Soviet Union would disappear without a war, that Blacks and Whites would shake hands in South Africa, and that we now receive human rights visitors from China? And Internet is all over the place. The world is much smaller and more open than ever before and the human rights cause is on the march around the world. Just one specific example. Last December Kim Dae Jung was elected President of South Korea, the first opposition candidate elected in free and fair elections since South Korea was founded in 1948. I first met Dr. Kim in 1983, when he came to the U.S. in political exile, after having been imprisoned in Seoul. And now, in a few days, he will be inaugurated as President of South Korea. Without exaggeration, I personally feel that human rights has become the authentic world revolution, democratic, peaceful and very effective so long as we keep it honest, the same policy for every person in the world, with no exceptions.

So I do hope that we can all work together on behalf of world human rights, regardless of whether you agree or disagree with one or another aspect of USG human rights policy. I am convinced this is the best chance the human race has ever had, and if you care enough you can make a difference. For those of you who would like the USG to pay more attention to the human rights problems of your country, the State Department is always available for relevant conversation. The same is true of Congress and the NGOs. And I would strongly recommend that many of you seriously consider making human rights work your life career. If you would like specific suggestions as to how to do that just give us a call at the State Department.

One final word. Many years ago I learned a slogan of the Russian human rights movement, under the Soviet dictatorship: To Our Hopeless Cause! By that the Russian human rights activists meant that even though they didn't think they were going to win, they were going to give human rights their best effort. But of course in the end they did win. I think their slogan should be the slogan of our peaceful world revolution of human rights.

To Our Hopeless Cause! Thank you for listening. Now, if you have any questions, criticism, or whatever, please feel free to speak up.