

Harold Hongju Koh on Madeleine Albright and human rights in the late 1990s

To be honest, the thing that most affected human rights in 1998 to 2001 was Madeleine Albright. She was the first Secretary of State for whom human rights was a passion, in the same way as Jimmy Carter was the first President for whom human rights was a passion. That meant that Madeleine Albright would put human rights on the agenda when other people, her subordinates, were trying to keep it off. Because human rights was on the agenda, our Bureau had an important voice. Now, in these debates, being able to say “this has always been the position for thirty years” is very helpful, because it suggests that a particular stance is less the result of some particular immediate political calculation than part of some long-term understanding of U.S. foreign policy interests. How many people really remember what happened in the early days of the Carter administration, or how human rights were first articulated as a value? Also, you have to remember that the Reagan era—there were strong human rights elements, with the post-Helsinki period, the criticism of the Soviet human rights practices. Somebody like George was able to say “these kinds of arguments were made in the 70’s in Latin America, they were able to be made in the 80’s against the Soviet Union, and they should be made now in the 90’s against China.”