Was Jimmy Carter's emphasis on human rights a sound basis for foreign policy?

Viewpoint: Yes, Jimmy Carter's emphasis on human rights was an effective response to changing geopolitical realities.

Viewpoint: No, Jimmy Carter's emphasis on human rights undermined vital alliances and increased international tensions.

From its inception the United States understood itself as a nation dedicated not only to securing its interests and enhancing its welfare but also to securing human rights and enhancing political freedom, civil liberties, and individual rights in the world. There were two competing theories, however, regarding how best to advance these goals. One theory emphasized the power of example, asserting that the United States would best serve the cause of expanding human rights by building "a more perfect union" at home, "a city upon a hill" that other peoples would want to emulate. The other theory emphasized U.S. missionary responsibilities. It was not enough to build a perfect society in America; it would be a betrayal of American ideals not to spread these ideals actively worldwide, taking action where they were violated.

Until the mid 1970s, American policymakers viewed the advancement of human rights as secondary to, but derivative of, the pursuit of general U.S. foreign-policy interests. The perception was that, as the leader of the Free World in its struggle against communism, everything that served U.S. interests also served the cause of human rights, even if not immediately. This rationale was used to justify U.S. support for authoritarian and dictatorial regimes that were anticommunist. This line of thinking was also behind U.S. intervention against popularly elected governments when they adopted policies deemed inimical to the interests of the United States or U.S. business (for example, in Iran in 1953 and Guatemala in 1954). Thus, in 1970, shortly before the election of the left-leaning Salvador Allende as president of Chile, Henry Kissinger, national security adviser to President Richard M. Nixon, reportedly told a secret White House gathering, "I don't see why we need to stand by and watch a country go Communist due to the irresponsibility of its own people." The United States was active in trying to prevent Allende from coming to power, and then in efforts to destabilize his regime.

Human rights became a more prominent issue in the early 1970s as a result of congressional action. There were several reasons for this change, among them the prominence of the civil-rights struggle at home and the experience of the Vietnam War, which caused many Americans to question the priorities of U.S. foreign policy. Another contribution was the effort by the Nixon administration, under the influence of Kissinger, to advance a more realpolitik kind of foreign policy. Trying to normalize relations with the Soviet Union under détente, the administration tacitly accepted that the issue of Soviet citizens' political, religious, and other rights were an internal matter of the Soviet Union. Leading senators and congressmen disagreed, focusing their attention especially on the issue of Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union. In 1974 Congress passed the Jackson-Vanik Amendment, tying trade liberaliza-
tion for the Soviet Union to its treatment of Soviet Jews who wanted to leave that country. In 1975 Congress mandated that U.S. economic aid be conditioned on the recipient's human-rights record. Congress also required the Department of State to prepare an annual report on the state of human rights in countries receiving U.S. aid.

The executive branch joined the legislative branch in its stand on human rights when President Jimmy Carter took office in January 1977 and made the issue a central feature of his administration's foreign policy. A month after assuming office Carter ordered the reduction by two-thirds of military aid to Uruguay and Argentina, both then military dictatorships. U.S. military aid to Guatemala was banned in 1978. The Carter administration also launched a series of diplomatic initiatives against the regime of Augusto Pinochet in Chile and also reduced its involvement with Nicaraguan leader Anastasio Somoza. In July 1979, when the leftist Sandinista movement took over Nicaragua after popular unrest forced Somoza to flee the country, the United States gave the new regime more than $100 million in aid during its first eighteen months in power, even though the Sandinistas espoused radical-socialist economic and social policies. In October 1979 the Carter administration supported a coup by reformist military officers in El Salvador.

Beginning in 1978 the administration also exerted increasing pressure on the shah of Iran to allow greater freedom of expression to the Muslim opposition to his regime. As the anti-shah forces—including not only Muslim clerics but Western-educated professionals—gained strength, the Iranian military turned to the United States for help. The military feared that the mullahs were the driving force behind the anti-shah movement and that, once in power, these Muslim clerics would dominate the new regime and turn Iran into a theocracy. Leading Iranian military officers, many of them U.S.-trained, said they would seize power only with the support of the United States. Carter, though, warned the Iranian military not to intervene and let the political struggle unfold on its own. For a short while it appeared as if Carter's gamble had worked, as Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi was succeeded by liberal politicians such as Shapour Bakhtiar and Mehedy Bazargan. Soon, however, the mullahs took over and installed the Ayatollah Khomeini as leader of Iran, turning it into a theocracy.

Carter's emphasis on human rights as "the heart and soul" of U.S. foreign policy now alarmed many in Congress, who felt he went too far. In June 1979 more than one hundred members of Congress signed a full-page advertisement in The New York Times, warning that Carter's policy toward Nicaragua was leading to the creation of another Cuba in the hemisphere. In the presidential election of 1980 one of the major themes of the successful Republican candidate, Ronald Reagan, was that Carter's human rights policies were undermining U.S. interests.

**Viewpoint:**

Yes, Jimmy Carter's emphasis on human rights was an effective response to changing geopolitical realities.

Jimmy Carter entered office in January 1977 promising to make human rights an "absolute" in his administration's foreign policy. Although many perceived the new president's resolve as either idealism or naivété, his ideas about shifting the basis of American foreign relations to human rights in many ways reflected a continuation of themes developed during the administrations of his two immediate predecessors, Presidents Richard M. Nixon and Gerald R. Ford. Over the course of Carter's administration, human-rights considerations played crucial roles in several critical foreign-policy decisions and provided a sound basis for the president's strategic approach in general, even if the application of these decisions is not known to have led to efficient results.

Fundamental changes in the geopolitical structure had begun to manifest themselves by the end of the 1960s. Certainly the most momentous transition for American strategic planners was the opening of a serious rift between the Soviet Union and mainland China. While the relationship between the two largest communist powers had never been without tension, Mao Tse-tung's growing assertions of his country's political independence from Moscow and his pretensions to a leadership role in the communist world exacerbated the situation. In the spring of 1969 the diplomatic estrangement between the two countries broke out in armed border clashes.

Many American strategists recognized a substantial opportunity in the Sino-Soviet split. If China could be drawn away from the Soviet orbit, the strategic situation of the United States could be dramatically improved. A series of positive diplomatic signals from the Nixon administration, followed by well-received visits to Beijing by national-security adviser Henry Kissinger in July 1971 and the president himself the follow-
CARTER'S HUMAN-RIGHTS MESSAGE

At his inauguration on 20 January 1977 President Jimmy Carter called for a new emphasis in U.S. foreign policy:

To be true to ourselves, we must be true to others. We will not behave in foreign places so as to violate our rules and standards here at home, for we know that the trust which our Nation earns is essential to our strength.

The world itself is now dominated by a new spirit. Peoples more numerous and more politically aware are craving and now demanding their place in the sun—not just for the benefit of their own physical condition, but for basic human rights.

The passion for freedom is on the rise. Tapping this new spirit, there can be no nobler nor more ambitious task for America to undertake on this day of a new beginning than to help shape a just and peaceful world that is truly humane.

We are a strong nation, and we will maintain strength so sufficient that it need not be proven in combat—a quiet strength based not merely on the size of an arsenal, but on the nobility of ideas. We will be ever vigilant and never vulnerable, and we will fight our wars against poverty, ignorance, and injustice—for those are the enemies against which our forces can be honorably marshaled.

We are a purely idealistic Nation, but let no one confuse our idealism with weakness.

Because we are free we can never be indifferent to the fate of freedom elsewhere. Our moral sense dictates a clear cut preference for these societies which share with us an abiding respect for individual human rights. We do not seek to intimidate, but it is clear that a world which others can dominate with impunity would be intolerable to decency and a threat to the well-being of all people.


The advent of détente—a relaxation in the tension between the United States and the Soviet Union based on close diplomatic and commercial ties—coincided with the need to resolve the emerging contradiction in American foreign policy. This diplomatic engagement, which Kissinger and other prominent American leaders advocated, was expected to result in Soviet geopolitical restraint and eventually in the domestic reform of the Soviet system. As with China, no constructive engagement of the Soviet Union could be expected to bear fruit if the galvanizing force behind American foreign policy remained a fundamental and highly ideological rejection of the values of the Soviet system of government.

Human rights was a convenient vehicle to further American diplomatic goals. Many who either opposed détente or wished to hold it in check should it not produce effective results began to criticize the Soviets' human-rights record for the first time in the cold war. Such measures as the Jackson-Vanik amendment, passed in 1974, linked the growth of commercial ties and the extension of most-favored-nation status to human-rights issues such as Jewish emigration. The Helsinki Conference of 1975 created international human-rights standards to which all signatory countries, including the Soviet Union, were obliged to adhere.

When Carter entered office, human rights became crucial to American policy making. By 1977 serious problems had developed in the détente relationship with the Soviet Union. Although recent scholarship debates to what extent Moscow was responsible, it is plain that countries closely associated with and supported by the Soviet Union embarked on several provocative steps internationally. In 1975 the pro-Soviet government of North Vietnam conquered South Vietnam, blatantly violating the Paris Peace Accords that had ended the Vietnam conflict. Later that year Fidel Castro began to dispatch the first of thousands of Cuban troops to Third World countries with substantial Marxist revolutionary movements. Moscow's assistance was a major factor in many of these deployments. Within the first few weeks of the Carter administration, there was also intelligence that the Soviets were accelerating the development of their nuclear-missile programs to achieve either strategic parity with or an outright advantage over the United States.

Since détente was not producing the kind of restraint its proponents had believed it would, many members of the American foreign-policy-making establishment advocated military and diplomatic policies that more closely reflected containment thinking. Although some of these policies involved the increased deployment of
raw military power in forward strategic positions, human rights added an interesting new dynamic to their approach.

The concept was extremely useful because unlike communism, human-rights violations could be argued by degrees, giving the Carter administration a great deal of flexibility in its approach to foreign affairs. Theoretically, he could use attacks on the human-rights records of certain countries as leverage to elicit cooperation with Washington and at the same time turn a blind eye to the human-rights records of countries with which the United States desired good relations for strategic reasons. In a world where the American strategic interest was being redefined, human rights had the potential to make transitions much easier and more flexible.

Superpower diplomacy offers perhaps the most important application of that principle. The second round of the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT), arms-control negotiations that had been under way for several years before Carter took office, became inextricably linked with the Soviet human-rights record. Although some have argued that the president’s denunciations of the persecution of individual Soviet dissidents angered Moscow with what it viewed as undue meddling in its internal affairs and actually led to harsher measures against the dissidents, the balance of evidence indicates that Carter and many in his administration believed the terms offered by the Soviets to be a bad deal. Attacking the Soviet Union on apparently unrelated human-rights grounds is best understood as an attempt either to extract concessions in the negotiations or to avoid signing an agreement to the disadvantage of the United States. As it was, SALT II negotiations dragged on in great difficulty until the treaty was finally signed in 1979. It still has not been ratified by the Senate.

With China the situation was fundamentally different. The Chinese were certainly not known for a stellar human-rights record. Beijing’s treatment of its political dissidents, its minority Christian and Muslim populations, and the Tibetans, among others, were easily as objectionable as Soviet human-rights abuses. Despite these facts, however, the Carter administration pursued the fulfillment of Nixon’s policy toward China. Although Secretary of State Cyrus R. Vance and national-security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski disagreed about the precise timetable for the formal normalization of diplomatic relations with China, the process was ultimately brought to completion and announced on 1 January 1979. Human-rights concerns played no serious role in the process or in Sino-American relations for years after.

The transition to a foreign policy based on human rights was also relevant to more peripheral strategic areas. Unlike doctrinaire anticommunism, Carter’s human-rights policy provided him with a means of stabilizing or altering the governments of noncommunist and pro-American countries to try to prevent more radical changes that might endanger their relationships with the United States. Ideally, this approach was a sound means of securing the domestic situations of those countries and eliminating the stigma implicit in American alliances with brutal regimes. With such countries as Brazil, Chile, and Argentina, favorable relations predicated on improvements in human rights met with success over time.

While it is true that the approach resulted in some notable and embarrassing failures, it is simplistic to dismiss the construct of foreign policy based on human rights as flawed. The unfortunate developments in Iran and Nicaragua, for instance, had much to do with American docility in supporting and encouraging regime-sponsored reform. There was also a serious lack of intelligence on and political understanding of the opposition movements. Had these flaws been avoided, there was a good chance that these countries could have become stable and effective allies through reform.

Although the Carter administration’s foreign policy was, for a variety of reasons, not generally successful, its reliance on human rights as a mobilizing ideology was not misguided. It was an effective response to changing geopolitical realities and a continuation of a theme established in the foreign policies of two previous administrations. In superpower relations human rights provided a sound strategic basis, as it gave the administration the flexibility to place a brake on the negative aspects of détente with the Soviet Union and simultaneously explore its coincidences of strategic interest with China. In the Third World success was somewhat more limited, but several pro-American governments became more stable and less heinous because their relations with the United States had to accommodate human-rights considerations. The administration’s abundant foreign-policy blunders had much more important causes than the importance it attached to human rights.

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Viewpoint:
No, Jimmy Carter’s emphasis on human rights undermined vital alliances and increased international tensions.

No American president is more closely identified with human rights than Jimmy
Carter. During his campaign for the presidency, Carter repeatedly invoked the language of human rights as part of his appeal for a foreign policy that was moral in its conception and its execution, or, as he put it in a major address at the University of Notre Dame within a few months of his inauguration, a foreign policy that would make us “proud to be Americans.” This emphasis on human rights specifically, and public virtue more generally, emanated from Carter’s personal convictions and from the political necessity of restoring public faith in institutions that had been seriously weakened by Watergate and the Vietnam War. The return to Wilsonian idealism was, in other words, a reaction against the realpolitik of the Nixon-Kissinger era.

Carter came into office believing that the United States was obsessed with the concept of containment and that Kissinger’s “grand design,” with its almost exclusive focus on the Sino-Soviet-American triangular relationship, was myopic. He believed that East-West issues, although important, could not be allowed to dominate completely the U.S. foreign-policy agenda. In Carter’s view—and, by the mid 1970s, he had considerable scholarly support for this belief—North-South issues were becoming increasingly important. There was, he said, a need to come to grips with changes in the Third World. The failure to deal with these matters was, according to Carter’s analysis,
responsible for many of the weaknesses of the detente policy.

In his memoir *Keeping Faith* (1982) Carter set out several reasons for attempting to promote human rights abroad. He argued that support for human rights within totalitarian regimes would enhance freedom and democracy while "helping to remove the reasons for revolutions that often erupt among those who suffer from persecution." A strong human-rights policy "would also help strengthen our influence among some of the developing nations that were still in this process of forming their own governments and choosing their future friends and trading partners." Carter added, "And it was the right thing to do."

During his single term in office, President Carter attempted to transform words into deeds by creating an institutional framework for human-rights policy within the executive branch, by engaging in quiet diplomacy to encourage American allies and client states to improve their human-rights records, by rewarding governments that showed progress in human-rights observance, and by making human-rights progress a condition of U.S. military and economic assistance in selected cases. His administration also attempted to make human rights a significant factor in the work of multilateral institutions by directing American representatives to organizations such as the World Bank to vote against loans to countries with patterns of human-rights violations, by working to strengthen the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and other regional human-rights organizations, and by increasing the human-rights emphasis of the United Nations.

To a considerable extent criticisms of Carter’s human-rights policy parallel those leveled against its historical model, namely, Woodrow Wilson’s efforts to inject moral considerations into American foreign policy. Carter, like Wilson, designed and implemented a policy that was seriously flawed because it was moralistic, inconsistent, and, ultimately, counterproductive.

Like Wilson, Carter believed in American exceptionalism and articulated this belief on many occasions. Early in his administration, Carter stated that "no other country is as well qualified as we to set an example" of human freedom and human rights. Secretary of State Cyrus R. Vance often pursued the same theme. In his memoir *Hard Choices* (1983) he linked faith in American virtue with support for human rights internationally: "Historically, our country had been a force for progress in human affairs. A nation that saw itself as a 'beacon on the hill' for the rest of mankind could not content itself with power politics alone. It could not properly ignore the growing demands of individuals around the world for the fulfillment of their rights." Naturally, such a self-conception, no matter how often it was qualified by references to the need for improvement in the United States, was offensive to other countries. In addition to being advanced with rhetoric that often sounded self-righteous and arrogant, the Carter administration’s human-rights policy appeared selective. The administration advocated observance of civil and political rights far more ardently and consistently than it advocated observance of economic and social rights. Inevitably, the policy and its public justification created an impression that Carter was demanding that other countries meet an American standard that had long been surpassed in the United States rather than a universal standard that the United States, too, often failed to meet.

The requirement imposed by Congress that the State Department submit annual reports on the status of human rights in all countries receiving U.S. assistance—and the brutally frank manner in which the State Department complied during the Carter years—was indicative of the moralism that characterized the Carter administration’s human-rights policy. On balance the reporting requirement had a deleterious effect on American foreign policy. There was, after all, nothing quiet about this aspect of American diplomacy. Making foreign governments the objects of a subjective and public grading of compliance with human-rights standards created much resentment and set up the United States government for the charge that it had appointed itself the world’s judge. The resentment aroused by the “grading policy” increased when the State Department raised the standards, and Carter made it clear that the grades mattered.

Perhaps the most insistent criticism of Carter’s human-rights policy was that it was inconsistently applied. The Soviet Union came under heavy criticism for its suppression of political dissent, but the People’s Republic of China (PRC), with which the United States was in the process of normalizing diplomatic relations, did not. Also because of the approachment with the PRC, the Carter administration failed to punish or even isolate the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia, perpetrator of one of the worst genocides in history. In the Philippines, the desire to preserve rights to important military bases at Clark Field and Subic Bay caused Carter to tone down criticism of the abysmal human-rights record of Ferdinand Marcos’s regime. Iran’s strategic significance
as a listening post and a military ally on the Soviet Union's southern flank protected it from the moral condemnation that Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi's repression deserved. As national-security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski noted in his memoir *Power and Principle* (1983), "In practical terms, our influence was greater with weak and isolated countries than with those with whom we shared vital security interests." Of course, it was not the difference in influence that was objectionable to critics of the policy as much as it was the difference in effort. The Soviet Union and other states regularly pilloried the United States for the inconsistency of its human-rights policy.

In the United States (and even within the administration), the Carter human-rights policy was subject to criticism from opposite sides. On the one hand, the policy was attacked for its failure to go far enough in its attempt to improve the behavior of repressive regimes. This criticism was especially prevalent in cases such as those involving Iran and communist China in which American pressures were lessened in order to avoid undermining other important foreign policy goals. On the other hand, the policy was faulted for going too far in its efforts to inject such controversial political goals into international relations. According to this critique, such interferences in the internal affairs of sovereign states could only cause resentment in those states censured for human-rights violations and serve to impede more essential foreign-policy objectives.

Carter's human-rights policy could be either morally consistent but utterly indifferent to the national interest or morally inconsistent but at least partially cognizant of the difference between allies and enemies and thus somewhat considerate of the national interest. It could not be both.

All too often, Carter's emphasis on human rights was not only moralistic and inconsistent but at least partially cognizant of the difference between allies and enemies and thus somewhat considerate of the national interest. It could not be both.

American criticism of the human-rights records of other governments invariably tended to put those governments on the defensive, and, in so doing, it injected into bilateral relationships tensions that might not otherwise have been present. This additional tension sometimes impeded progress on other important foreign-policy goals. With the Soviet Union the Carter administration was forced to try and steer a course between support for human rights and the desire for a comprehensive arms-control treaty. Because the United States had few means of influencing the Soviet Union directly, public criticism of human-rights abuses and symbolic shows of support for dissidents were the primary tactics used. Early in his administration Carter criticized the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia for intimidating citizens who were attempting to protest. In February 1977 Carter responded publicly to a letter from Andrey Sakharov, a noted Soviet physicist and dissident. Carter also met with Vladimir Bukovsky in the Oval Office in March, an act that contributed to Soviet intransigence later that same month, when Vance went to Moscow to present an ambitious arms-control proposal. In spite of Carter's efforts to "de-link" arms control and human rights, the Soviets refused to compartmentalize issues in the bilateral relationship, and, as a consequence, completion of the SALT II Treaty, which had seemed so close in 1977, was delayed until 1979. By then the domestic and international political environments had changed to such an extent that the U.S. Senate was no longer prepared to ratify such an agreement.

Although direct links are difficult to establish, American support for human rights no doubt encouraged revolutionary movements in some parts of the world. While this result may have been helpful (both from the standpoint of American national interests and of human rights) in Latin America, in Iran it proved to be an unmitigated disaster. The overthrow of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi resulted in the loss of a strategically situated ally, the national embarrassment of the hostage crisis, and human-rights violations in Iran that were different in character but not necessarily in severity from those committed by the shah's regime.

Carter's well-intentioned effort to make the promotion of human rights a priority in American foreign policy, like Wilson's appeal to moral principles sixty years earlier, ultimately created more problems than it solved. Essential foreign-policy objectives—such as nuclear-arms control, containment of communism, and the promotion of stability in the world—were frequently undermined by the effort to punish human-rights violators. Because of its moralistic and interventionist nature, Carter's emphasis on human rights frequently increased tensions in international relations while failing to achieve many tangible results. In sum, American foreign policy and the cause of human rights would have been better served by leaving human-rights issues to international governmental organizations such as the United Nations and the Organization of American States and to international nongovernmental organizations such as Amnesty International.

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