Wilfrid Laurier University

Scholars Commons @ Laurier

Political Science Faculty Publications

Political Science

8-2012

The Skeptical Forsythe: Peace, Human Rights, and Realpolitik

Rhoda E. Howard-Hassmann
Wilfrid Laurier University, hassmann@wlu.ca

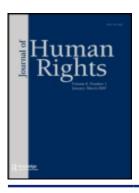Follow this and additional works at: https://scholars.wlu.ca/poli_faculty

Part of the Political Science Commons

Recommended Citation

The Skeptical Forsythe: Peace, Human Rights, and Realpolitik

Rhoda E. Howard-hassmann

Published online: 30 Aug 2012.

Submit your article to this journal ⬈

Article views: 132

View related articles ⬈

Roundtable

The Skeptical Forsythe: Peace, Human Rights, and Realpolitik

RHODA E. HOWARD-HASSMANN

During David Forsythe's long and extremely distinguished career of research on human rights, he has contributed to many debates, such as on the right to development (Forsythe 1989) and the place of economic, social, and cultural rights in foreign policy (Forsythe and Heinze 2006). Here, I would like to focus on his analysis of the contradictory relationships among human rights, justice, and peace. In so doing, I particularly want to pay tribute to David's intellectual rigor and skepticism. Whatever his personal ideals, he has always asked hard questions about the costs of implementing human rights.

For all that we write about the theory of human rights and for all that as scholars we are committed to them, human rights are difficult to protect. Particularly difficult is the question of whether, how, and when rights-protective democracies ought to intervene to protect the human rights of citizens of other countries. In international relations, peace frequently trumps human rights. Furthermore, no matter how internally democratic they may be, states willingly ignore human rights in favor of other values.

David describes himself as a "pragmatic liberal" (Forsythe 2006: 262). He is pragmatic because he realizes the impact of *realpolitik* on the likelihood that human rights will be a central concern of international relations. David has always been a close observer of US foreign policy, characterized by much rhetoric favorable to human rights but much action contrary to it. In his book on US abuse of post 9/11 prisoners (Forsythe 2011b), David shows how even the Obama administration, for which many in the human rights community had had very high hopes, has reneged on its promises to respect international human rights and

Rhoda E. Howard-Hassmann is Canada Research Chair in International Human Rights at Wilfrid Laurier University in Canada. Her current research project is on state-induced famine; so far, her case studies include Zimbabwe and North Korea.

Address correspondence to Rhoda E. Howard-Hassmann, Canada Research Chair in International Human Rights, Department of Global Studies & Balsillie School of International Affairs, Woods 4–158, Wilfrid Laurier University, 75 University Avenue West, Waterloo, Ontario N2L 3C5, Canada; E-mail: hassmann@wlu.ca

humanitarian law. Partly because of his close observation of US foreign policy, David has also been skeptical of the proposition that democracies do not make war on each other. In his *Human Rights and Peace*, he noted that the United States overthrew the democratically elected governments of Iran in 1953 and Guatemala in 1954. Both, he said, were at least partial democracies. "Thus we need to pay closer attention to the intriguing question of covert war by democracies against democracies—or perhaps against quasi-democracies" (Forsythe 1993: 10). David concedes that mature, stable democracies may not make war against each other (Forsythe 1993: 20–21).

Early in his career, David studied the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and he continued his interest in that and other human rights nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) over the course of his career (for example, Forsythe 2005). From the ICRC in Germany during WWII to Doctors without Borders now, there is a long-standing debate about whether NGOs should provide assistance to victims of war or of human rights violations, when to do so might strengthen their enemies or oppressors. Even the most idealistic of interveners, David shows, may do more harm than good when they attempt to help those who suffer gross abuses of their human rights.

David's study of both humanitarian intervention and human rights has led him to the awareness that peace and human rights are not identical concepts nor are they necessarily coterminous; rather, the desire for peace may result in relegation of human rights to a secondary goal. When I first started studying human rights in the late 1970s, I had not thought about this problem, concerned as I was with the establishment of human rights in newly independent countries of English-speaking Africa (Howard 1986). But then I read David's chapter on the Indian intervention in Sri Lanka in 1983 to prevent genocidal attacks against ethnic Tamils. India had to carefully back down from its defense of the Tamils when it became apparent that support for possible secessionists in Sri Lanka might embolden Sikh secessionists in India (Forsythe 1993: 94–96). Peace within India took precedence over the human rights of some Indians' coethnics in another sovereign state.

At least on the normative front, there has been progress in international relations regarding the protection of human rights. When David started writing in the field, there was no discussion of what later became the responsibility to protect. By 2005, such responsibility had been accepted, in principle, by the United Nations General Assembly. In 2011, when the Arab Spring morphed into the Arab Winter of rebellion and repression in Libya, the United Nations Security Council responded quickly, authorizing support to the Libyan rebels. However, the responsibility to protect did not seem to extend to Bahrain, effectively a protectorate of Saudi Arabia and far too close to that country for the United States, NATO, or the UN to intervene. Nor, by mid-July 2012, had the responsibility to protect extended to Syria, despite the Syrian government's mass murder of thousands of people demonstrating for a more democratic and rights-protective government.

At about the same time as NATO intervened in Libya, France intervened in Côte d'Ivoire to enable the legally elected president, Alessane Ouattara, finally to take over power from his predecessor, Laurent Gbagbo. In this latter case, the purpose was enforcement of the democratic norm of formal elections. But whether enforcement of the results of elections might protect the human rights of Ivoirians was not clear: Ethnically based electoral rivalry, without a foundation of human rights, might leave Ivoirians worse off than they were under the stable dictatorship of Félix Houphouet-Boigny from 1961 to 1993.

In international relations, peace frequently trumps human rights, and David reminds us that perhaps it should. In the expansionist version trumpeted by some activists, peace is synonymous with all good things, including human rights. But in the real world, peace

is not-war, one very important good thing. If war—especially civil wars such as we have seen in the last 40 years in countries such as Guatemala, El Salvador, Liberia, or Congo—is the ultimate violator of all human rights, then compromises for peace may be ethically justifiable. Thus, justice might have to give way to so-called "reconciliation"; that is, to political deals that permit previously antagonistic factions to live in peace, even if perpetrators of the grossest human rights violations are permitted to rejoin society without atoning for their crimes. Mechanisms of transitional justice (TJ) may not be at all just but may be necessary to preserve peace.

Nevertheless, David is skeptical of the contemporary movement to TJ. In the past, he notes, justice did not extend to such criminals as Germany's Wehrner von Braun and Japan's General Ishii, involved respectively during WWII in slave labor and biological experimentation. Peace was more important than justice, especially when the victor could use the talents of genocidal human rights abusers; transitions to democracy successfully occurred without concern for justice. David also cautions us to be mindful of the structure and context of each case of TJ, before assuming that particular mechanisms such as truth commissions have particular results. In many cases, he argues, it will be at least a generation before TJ mechanisms are implemented, and powerful countries such as the United States and Russia may never implement any mechanisms to investigate such cruelties as the mistreatment of prisoners at Abu Ghraib or massacres in Chechnya (Forsythe 2011a).

And then there are the exceptionally hard cases that are not amenable to any foreign policy interventions to protect human rights. For example, North Korea is almost entirely neglected in the human rights literature, though not by human rights NGOs, which issue frequent reports on starvation, famine, and enforced slavery there (e.g., Hawk 2003). North Korea is, or threatens to become, a nuclear power: The overarching goal of nuclear peace has resulted in neglect in the international arena of the human rights of North Korea's citizens. Loose nukes trump human rights, as it were. Other interests are also at stake. South Korea fears an overflow of refugees and the enormous costs of integrating the two countries should the present regime in North Korea collapse. Both South Korea and the United States fear attack by conventional weapons, as well as possible future nuclear attack. China, a friend to North Korea, fears a much bigger influx of refugees in its northeastern region if the North Korean regime is destabilized. Thus, the human rights of North Koreans take a very distant second place to these threats both to international and to national stability.

These are the kinds of problems that David's skepticism toward human rights and his acknowledgement of the primacy of *realpolitik* first forced me to confront. As a pragmatic liberal, David is willing to accept political realities even if they impinge on the liberal human rights project, and even if it means sometimes jettisoning human rights in favor of other goals such as diplomatic negotiations towards peace. Nevertheless, David stated in 2006 that he was "cautiously optimistic about a liberal world order in the long term" (Forsythe 2006: 6). Six years later, I hope that David retains the optimism he expressed then. His cool, skeptical, restrained voice—both in person and in print—masks a deep commitment to human rights. I am privileged to have been his colleague and friend for almost 25 years.

References

FORSYTHE, David P. (ed.). (1989) *Human Rights and Development: International Views* (London: Macmillan Press).

FORSYTHE, David P. (1993) *Human Rights and Peace: International and National Dimensions* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press).

FORSYTHE, David P. (2005) *The Humanitarians: The International Committee of the Red Cross* (New York: Cambridge University Press).

FORSYTHE, David P. (2006) *Human Rights in International Relations, 2nd ed.* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press).

FORSYTHE, David P. (2011a) Human rights and mass atrocities: Revisiting international justice. *International Studies Review*, 13(1), 85–95.

FORSYTHE, David P. (2011b) *The Politics of Prisoner Abuse: The United States and Enemy Prisoners after 9/11* (New York: Cambridge).

FORSYTHE, David P., and HEINZE, Eric A. (2006) On the margins of the human rights discourse: Foreign policy and international welfare rights. In *Economic Rights in Canada and the United States*, R. E. Howard-Hassmann and Claude E. Welch, Jr. (eds.) (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press).

HAWK, David. (2003) *The Hidden Gulag: Exposing North Korea's Prison Camps* (Washington, DC: US Committee for Human Rights in North Korea).

HOWARD, Rhoda E. (1986) *Human Rights in Commonwealth Africa* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield).