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Review of Joe Renouard, *Human Rights in American Foreign Policy; From the 1960s to the Soviet Collapse* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), ISBN 9780812247732, 324 pages.

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Joe Renouard, *Human Rights in American Foreign Policy: From the 1960s to the Soviet Collapse* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), ISBN 9780812247732, 324 pages.

There are historians who do dense narrative history with great attention to documenting the details. And there are other historians who use history to paint a big conceptual picture whose accuracy often leads to much debate. Joe Renouard is in the former camp, with his new book on human rights in US foreign policy during the middle and late stages of the Cold War. Samuel Moyn is in the latter camp, with his stimulating and widely read but controversial interpretations in *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History*.

They both agree, as do others, that attention to human rights in US foreign policy increased more or less around 1970. However, they differ as to why. The subject is important and merits extended attention. For Moyn, "The best general explanation for the origins of this [human rights] social movement and common discourse around rights remains the collapse of other, prior utopias, both state-based and internationalist."¹ That is, the push for international human rights is not just idealism but actually a utopian project, and attention to these rights took off only after the evident failures of two other utopian movements—communism, and national liberation from colonialism.

There is broad agreement that after the adoption of the UN Charter with its path breaking reference to human rights and adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the UN General Assembly in 1948, not much of immedi-

1. SAMUEL MOYN, *THE LAST UTOPIA: HUMAN RIGHTS IN HISTORY* 8 (2010)

ate importance happened on the world stage with regard to rights for some time (except in Europe). This suggests that political elites really did not engage in much negative learning from the German holocaust by making sure not to repeat genocide and other gross violations of human rights. They continued to prioritize traditional national interests such as power and independence even if overlaid with an ideological superstructure—e.g., anti-communism, anti-colonialism, or anti-capitalism. In fact, President Harry Truman did not consider the 1948 Declaration important enough to mention in his memoirs. Moyn goes too far in arguing that the push for human rights circa 1970 was a totally new development, without connection to antecedent talk about rights. However, for reasons of space, that point will not be pursued in depth here.

For Renouard, who cites Moyn² but does not directly engage with his arguments, US attention to human rights is part of the idealistic tradition and took off in the late 1960s because of a long list of international and domestic factors.³ The evident failure of communism and anti-colonialism to deliver on their promises is not among the factors he noted. There is good reason for this, Renouard is on the correct track, and this will be covered later in this review.

Communism in the West was widely considered a façade for self-serving autocratic rule long before circa 1970. Joseph Stalin had appealed to Russian nationalism rather than international communism during the dark days of World War II, shutting down the Comintern. In addition, the split between Stalin and Josip

Tito, so clear by 1948, reaffirmed the continuing strength of some version of nationalism even by those identifying as communists. There are clear reasons why former communists wrote a book with the title *The God That Failed* in 1949.⁴ The Soviet crushing of the Hungarian uprising in 1956 only confirmed again what was widely known: Russian-led communism was less a utopian crusade based on international solidarity in pursuit of liberating people from exploitation, and more a fig leaf for an autocratic Russian Empire. A defensive fear of “encirclement” by hostile Western forces may have driven the Empire—the same fear perhaps found in Putin’s mindset today. However, the result of Soviet power remained an empire. It is strange that a respected historian like Moyn, now at Harvard, would ignore so much historical evidence about the early recognition of the failure of communism in the West to deliver on its promises. For whatever reason, he constructed a provocative but erroneous big picture. Again, before the 1970s, the concept of “the God that Failed” was well known and had virtually nothing to do with the renaissance of the human rights discourse—as further explained below. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 had something to do with expanded global action for human rights, but not circa 1970.

With regard to communism outside Europe, again Moyn is wrong but for a different reason. The lure of communism remained vibrant for some in Asia and elsewhere after the 1970s, specifically in China and parts of India. Also in Latin America, communist movements in El Salvador and Nicaragua endured into the 1980s. The appeal of communism was, in

2. *Id.* at 8.

3. JOE RENOARD, HUMAN RIGHTS IN AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY: FROM THE 1960S TO THE SOVIET COLLAPSE 6–12 (2016).

4. THE GOD THAT FAILED (Richard Crossman ed., 1972)

fact, not over by the 1970s, undermining Moyn's argument. It strains credulity to think that a leftist such as Daniel Ortega would think: communism has failed so now I am free to emphasize human rights. Some non-communists in the West may have thought this after 1991, but not circa 1970. The Reagan Administration (1981–1989) remained mostly fixated on “the communist menace” especially in Central America. In China, the ruling elite led by Deng Xiaoping indeed turned toward more capitalist practices in the late 1970s. This shift was based on some private property rights as protected by legal contracts, but the one party state continued to pursue short term stability through repression and an increasingly evident rejection of civil and political rights. In addition, Western trading partners have downplayed human rights violations in China because of shared economic and strategic interests. The Carter Administration (1977–1981) generally gave China a pass regarding human rights violations. The status of communism circa 1970 had little to do with renewed attention to international human rights, whether in Europe or beyond.

As for the anti-colonial movement, after 1945 it was certainly a priority for many who felt their dignity denied under colonialism, but it did not speak to the same set of issues as raised by the mainstream human rights discourse. These latter issues were centered on personal rights within states, rather than remain-

ing quiescent until colonialism had been undermined, and were in fact part and parcel of many if not most anti-colonial movement long before the 1970s. This is clearly evident in public debates about personal rights in the anti-colonial movement in India, and almost everywhere in the emerging post-colonial world, before and after 1947. Within the anti-colonial movement, there was almost always a debate about, and a power struggle over, autocracy versus personal rights of various sorts as in Algeria and Kenya.⁵ Once again, Moyn is off base in his reconstruction of events. Demands for national independence from colonial rule did not supplant and suppress human rights debates. Rather, the two were intertwined early on, inherently so. Moreover, the anti-colonial movement did not fail in its “utopian” objectives. It succeeded: colonialism became illegitimate. What remained was the separate set of issues concerning personal rights in newly independent nation-states, as evaluated against the benchmark of international recognized human rights.⁶

My own view is similar to, but not identical with, Renouard's in that US foreign policy began to give greater attention to internationally recognized human rights circa 1970, rather than just to “freedom” in the Cold War struggle, for myriad, disjointed, and contingent reasons. This is quite different from Moyn's view.

5. See FABIAN KLOSE, *HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE SHADOW OF COLONIAL VIOLENCE: THE WARS OF INDEPENDENCE IN KENYA AND ALGERIA* (Dona Geyer trans., 2013).

6. Moyn considers the push for international human rights utopian in large part precisely because these rights are international and not grounded in national law and courts. But the point of international human rights is to set a standard by which to judge national developments. The international norms are to be implemented primarily through national processes. Only if national authorities are “unable or unwilling” to meet international standards are international authorities supposed to control. International rights standards do not float in some metaphysical international universe but are linked to concrete national factors—and are negotiated primarily by national delegations in the first place.

1) The United States as a whole was troubled by war crimes and atrocities so evident in the war in Southeast Asia. After 1968, Democrats seized on this mood to further challenge the realist and dissembling policies of President Richard Nixon and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger.⁷ Democrats in Congress like Representative Donald Fraser of Minnesota found the language of human rights useful in their critiques of Republican realism and the downplaying of human rights and humanitarian law by Kissinger. This was true par excellence in the rise of Jimmy Carter.

2) At about the same time and for different reasons, a bargain was struck at the UN after which the UN Human Rights Commission began to take up specific inquiries in a negotiated range of countries. These inquiries included torture by the pro-Western Greek junta; repression in a developing country like Haiti; occupation of Palestinian territories by Israel; racism in apartheid South Africa; etc. Increasingly, the United States had to take a position on these issues within the context of the international law of human rights and humanitarian affairs.

3) Cross cutting these factors was the emergence of private groups like

Amnesty International. Starting in 1961, mainstream media picked up the group's publications that stressed international standards on civil rights.

4) Still further, the rise of moral crusaders in the Republican Party, like Barry Goldwater and Reagan, and the early neo-cons in the Democratic Party, like Senator Scoop Jackson, again used the language of human rights to attack the Nixon-Ford-Kissinger policies of detente with the Soviet Union. Rather than the pursuit of stability in Great Power relations, these early neo-cons in the Democratic Party sought a crusade in the name of victory or roll back. One result was the Helsinki Accords and its "basket three" of issues—and also the proliferation of other rights groups like Helsinki Watch which over time became Human Rights Watch.⁸

5) Space does not permit further enumeration, but there were additional reasons for increased use of the human rights discourse in the United States around 1970, such as the cumulative effect of the Black civil rights movement increasingly linking domestic concerns to international developments and vice versa.⁹

Hence, there was a cascading and expanding discourse on internationally

7. Niall Ferguson's characterization of Kissinger not as a realist but as an idealist is creative but misleading. Picturing Kissinger as committed to a life of principle in which he endorsed pessimistic standards, to be achieved by dissembling and deception, is an interesting form of idealism. To be skeptical about progressive developments, and hence willing to endorse evil as the lesser evil, is hardly a conventional notion of idealism. Right from the opening pages this book is an advocate's brief, not a balanced biography, even if Ferguson articulates a few minor criticisms of his subject. NIALL FERGUSON, *KISSINGER, VOLUME 1, 1923–1968: THE IDEALIST* (2015).

8. In general, Republicans tend to utilize the discourse on human rights in relation to "American values" whereas Democrats are slightly more inclined to mention human rights as found in international law. Republicans like Reagan both referred to human rights and also disparaged international law and the United Nations as foreign constructs. These two semantic traditions, human rights as part of American values and human rights as found in international law and organization, permit some agreement across the parties. One sees this in the history of the human rights bureau in the State Department under both Democratic and Republican administrations.

9. See MARY LOUISE DUDZIAK, *COLD WAR CIVIL RIGHTS: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CIVIL RIGHTS AND FOREIGN AFFAIRS IN THE TRUMAN ADMINISTRATION* (2001).

recognized human rights in the United States more or less around 1970, but not for any one or two similar reasons. Not much of this had anything to do with waiting for the failures of communism, and the limitations of the anti-colonial movement, to become evident.

If Renouard has the better of the argument about the emergence of increased attention to the human rights discourse in Washington, one might wish that he had manifested some of Moyn's penchant for big picture conceptualizing. Renouard tends to overwhelm the reader with a mass of details. Perhaps this is necessary when covering disparate cases during the different decades. For Carter, there was his special interest in Latin America, relations with other dictators, and the special cases of the Shah of Iran and Afghanistan after the Soviet invasion. For Reagan, there was the role of anti-communist ideology, the special case of Central America, East Asian developments, and the big emphasis on democracy promotion at least here and there. But, one doubts in particular that students will be able to synthesize and summarize the impressive amount of narrative history presented about the record on human rights compiled by the Congress plus the Carter and Reagan administrations,¹⁰ not to mention the push for democracy abroad toward the end of the Cold War.¹¹ The author has read a great deal and seems largely accurate in his dense history. Given the amount of material covered however, it is important

to be able to have thematic summaries. Yet his conceptual framework and the final big picture winds up being far short of new or profound.

To the extent that Renouard has a conceptual framework for his study, it is the traditional view that attention to human rights abroad is liberal idealism which creates tension with a self-interested realism based on perceptions of national interest.¹² This traditional framing is not new, nor does it allow one to explore the difference between so-called neo-cons like George W. Bush and realists like George H. W. Bush. Kissinger, for what it is worth, regarded Reagan as a liberal, not a realist.¹³ Renouard notes the view, which he attributes to some activists, that at least on some occasions national self-interest can be blended with attention to the rights of others.¹⁴ But just as he did not really engage with Moyn's incompatible interpretations, Renouard does not take on in any significant way William F. Schulz's detailed argument that serious attention to human rights is often very much in the United States self-interest in the long run.¹⁵ Even if one agrees with Schulz's argument, there still remains the question of how to get from here to there. Supporting Abdel al-Sisi's repression in Egypt no doubt guarantees future problems and eventual explosions of discontent. But should policymakers in Washington push for the uncertain quest for stable democracy in the future, when in the short term there is pressure to link up with a reliable if repressive ally

10. RENOARD, *supra* note 3, ch. 2–4.

11. *Id.* ch. 5.

12. *Id.* at 6.

13. HENRY KISSINGER, *DIPLOMACY* 763, 771 (1994) (use of only the liberal-realist distinction makes it very difficult to accurately portray figures such as Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush).

14. RENOARD, *supra* note 3, at 18.

15. WILLIAM F. SCHULZ, *IN OUR OWN BEST INTEREST: HOW DEFENDING HUMAN RIGHTS BENEFITS US ALL* (2001).

in a troubled and violent region posing dangers to the United States homeland?

The best that the author can do by way of conclusion is to argue that Washington has had a mixed record in wrestling with the tensions between liberalism and realism in foreign policy. He argues that "consistency is an impossible standard,"¹⁶ and notes "the selectivity of policies and rhetoric."¹⁷ Reinhold Niebuhr concluded something similar decades ago, as far back as the 1930s, when he argued that attempts to advance morality or justice in the state system of world affairs always led to a mixed picture with unsatisfying compromises. Renouard's ultimate conclusion is that the basic liberal-realist tension will continue. He writes that

given nationalism and the commitment to national interest, "it remains to be seen" just what role attention to human rights will play in future US foreign policy.¹⁸ This is definitely not a new and provocative argument, even if his coverage of foreign policy details is largely accurate and impressive.

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16. RENOARD, *supra* note 3, at 13.

17. *Id.* at 14.

18. *Id.* at 279.