Midway through Jimmy Carter’s first year in office, Congressman Donald Fraser fretted about global perceptions of the new U.S. initiative to promote international human rights. “Some people around the world view the notion that the U.S. is about to become the world’s moral leader with disbelief,” the liberal Minnesota Democrat told a group of lawyers. “They wonder about a nation that plotted assassinations, destabilized governments, and engaged in murderous wars suddenly claiming the right to pass judgment on the morality of other nations.” Fraser—whose own legislative efforts had been instrumental in putting human rights promotion on the Carter administration’s agenda—understood better than most that it was precisely the impetus of recent events that had pushed the country toward human rights: with its self-confidence and reputation in tatters after the Vietnam War, Americans urgently sought to reclaim their country’s good name. The legislator was a leading voice for human rights, yet he worried that the rest of the world would greet the country’s sudden moralizing turn with skepticism or even hostility. Surprisingly, however, Fraser’s concerns proved unfounded. The country, so recently condemned by much of the world for brutality and aggression, managed to rehabilitate its image almost in the blink of an eye when Carter took office, at least among Western allies, and the human rights policy deserves a significant share of the credit. As Newsweek aptly put it in June 1977, “in an uncertain post-Vietnam era, [Carter’s push for human rights] has finally given the U.S. and other democracies something to boast about.”

Carter’s human rights program was among the most ambitious of all American public diplomacy campaigns, but a comprehensive account remains to be written and its effects abroad have been surprisingly little studied. Nicholas Cull’s masterful account of the U.S. Information Agency (USIA) concludes a brief sketch of the public diplomacy of human rights with the assessment that it “won friends in the developing world.” Historians of human rights argue that Carter’s rhetoric sparked an extraordinary burst of activism across the globe in the 1970s. By giving the concept unprecedented public exposure, the argument goes, Carter helped propel it to dizzying heights of popularity. Thus, for example, activists abroad reported that Carter’s rhetoric offered welcome legitimacy for their own work on behalf of human rights. Yet there
were also highly visible pockets of opposition. West German chancellor Helmut Schmidt, whose disdain for Carter was legendary, dismissed human rights as dangerous, self-serving moralizing that would provoke the Soviets into derailing détente.\(^9\) In the Third World, condemnations of human rights as Western-centric and imperialist grew louder and more strident.\(^{10}\)

Much more so than most foreign policy initiatives, Carter’s human rights program was aimed at public opinion—above all at home, but also abroad. It was a public relations program even more than it was a tool to meliorate actual human rights abuses, and it was adopted as a policy priority largely because it struck a chord with the American public. A clamorous public response to a few ad hoc steps created the program, far more than any intentional plan of action.\(^{11}\)

Once underway, public statements by Carter, top State Department officials, and National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski comprised the focal points of the public diplomacy component of human rights promotion, with the United States Information Agency playing a small supporting role in disseminating these statements and interpreting them for foreign publics.\(^{12}\) Administration officials were acutely concerned with the ways that human rights diplomacy affected not only those countries directly targeted for criticism but broader global opinion as well. I have argued elsewhere that America’s turn to international human rights promotion was primarily a form of domestic psychotherapy brought on by the emotional traumas of the Vietnam War, but to say that international human rights promotion was above all a mechanism for domestic healing does not mean that the international audience was unimportant.\(^{13}\) Americans yearned to feel good about their country again, and this desire was intimately connected to American perceptions of their country’s standing in world opinion.

Focusing not on the construction and dissemination of public diplomacy campaigns but rather on how the media and the general public in America’s democratic allies responded to the policy, this chapter argues that in its initial phase, in terms of how opinion from around the world was communicated back to Washington, Carter’s human rights campaign was a great success. Contrary to Fraser’s supposition, public approval probably came not in spite of America’s recent past but because of it. Foreigners did not stop being suspicious of American motives and irritated by American self-righteousness, but as in the United States, many in the rest of the world were eager to see the “leader of the Free World” restore its position as a moral beacon. With the Soviet Union still tainted by its 1968 crackdown of the Prague Spring and its brutal repression of a dissident movement that began around the same time, even Westerners on the left were little inclined to view the communist superpower as a credible moral alternative to American power. As the dissident struggle gained major global exposure in the 1970s and moral heroes such as Andrei Sakharov and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn became household names, people in many areas of the globe grew uncomfortable with the downplaying of morality that was a precondition of détente. After the amoralism of the Nixon–Ford years, many at home and abroad welcomed the human rights policy as a return to a longstanding American tradition of idealism in foreign policy.
During the administration's first six months in office, global debate over Carter's human rights efforts centered on what to make of human rights promotion as a general stance and as a tool to provoke liberalization in the Soviet Union. Having come into office with a strong commitment to reinject morality into foreign policy but a weak sense of how that would translate into specific initiatives, the Carter administration scrambled in its first half-year to articulate and to implement a human rights vision. What human rights meant and how a human rights policy should work were the subject of presidential speeches, public statements by other top officials, and a surge of public commentary, both at home and abroad. Though the administration very early announced aid reductions or cut-offs to Argentina, Uruguay, and Ethiopia on human rights grounds, the primary target of early moves was the Soviet Union, meaning that the new campaign was interpreted largely in a Cold War context. This chapter focuses on this early "honeymoon," rather than the later phases, when debate shifted to the policy's applicability to repressive anti-communist allies and to the details of implementation, and the policy bogged down amidst charges of hypocrisy, selectivity, inconsistency, and undermining Western security interests.

The message

As a presidential candidate, Carter often spoke of morality. The Georgia Democrat promised to restore honesty and decency to Washington, saying that the American government should be as good as the American people. But not until the end of the campaign, and then only briefly, did he talk about human rights as a specific vehicle for morality in foreign policy. Leading up to the inaugural address in January 1977, few commentators identified human rights as a prominent theme for the incoming administration. The immediate reaction to the inaugural offered little reason to anticipate that the speech would soon be canonized as a declaration of a major new commitment to human rights promotion. In the address, Carter spoke of a "new spirit" that was leading people around the world to demand "basic human rights" and said that the United States must tap into this new spirit to help shape a "humane" world. "Because we are free we can never be indifferent to the fate of freedom elsewhere," Carter declared, echoing language suggested by Brzezinski. "Our moral sense dictates a clear-cut preference for these societies which share with us an abiding respect for individual human rights." The speech's endorsement of human rights promotion was qualified: it abjured "intimidation" and accented the importance of cultivating America's internal strength, because the most powerful way "to enhance freedom" elsewhere was to model its achievements at home.

Nor did Carter's unique "inaugural abroad"—his inaugural address of 20 January 1977 that was intended as much for the rest of the world as it was for the United States—appear at the time to signal an expansive commitment to human rights promotion. It seemed intended to proclaim a new era of American limits. In a short statement of modest tone and even more modest goals, Carter said that the United States did not have all the answers and could not guarantee the "basic rights of all
human beings” to be free from poverty, hunger, disease, and “political repression,” though it would work with others to combat “these enemies of mankind.” Promising to be sensitive and helpful but not domineering, Carter spoke of a cooperative effort to move the world “closer to the ideals of human freedom and liberty.” The result, as West Germany’s Rheinischer Merkur put it in early March, was that “only a few took seriously Mr. Carter’s remarks on [human rights] during the campaign, and the breadth of his statement on it in the inaugural address was not recognized by many.”

The foreign media’s first widespread recognition that there was a major new policy with regard to human rights came two weeks after the inauguration, when the new president responded to a congratulatory message from the prominent dissident Andrei Sakharov. Breaking diplomatic protocol by writing directly to an individual Soviet citizen, Carter assured the Nobel laureate that human rights was “a central concern of my Administration.” The language was mild, but the personal nature of the letter, its transmission through the American Embassy in Moscow, and the ensuing publicity were provocative in the context of Soviet–American détente. Soon after, setting a contrast with Gerald Ford’s much impugned 1975 decision not to meet another Nobel Peace Prize-winning dissident, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Carter invited dissident Vladimir Bukovsky to the White House. He used the occasion to tell the press that “our commitment to human rights is permanent.”

As yet, though, what human rights promotion meant—beyond providing moral support to Soviet dissidents—remained unclear, within and outside the administration. Articulating the principles that would guide the new emphasis was a long and fraught process. Lengthy bureaucratic wrangling delayed the production of a Presidential Directive on human rights until 1978. In Carter’s first year, three major public addresses attempted to set out the new policy: the president’s speech to the United Nations General Assembly in March; Secretary of State Cyrus Vance’s Law Day speech in April; and Carter’s address at Notre Dame University in May. All three received substantial coverage overseas, including via the USIA, but all three left the policy vague and ill-defined. At the UN, Carter specified that his third major priority area, after arms control and economics, was “to advance the cause of human rights.” The specifics remained hazy. Vance’s Law Day speech the next month set out three categories of rights: civil and political; economic and social; and a new category of rights, formerly included in the civil and political category, relating to prohibitions against governmental violations of the integrity of the person, including torture and prolonged detention without charges. The third category was implicitly the priority area. But the speech offered no sense of when or how these rights would be taken into account in policymaking, other than to say each country would be assessed on a case-by-case basis. Carter’s commencement address at Notre Dame University reiterated that the United States would use its power for humane purposes, but human rights remained an abstract policy, described as a solution to the “moral crisis” produced by the Vietnam War and a way to inspire “a politically awakening world,” without specific policy implications.

In the first six months, then, Western opinion was reacting to a policy that was hazy and ill-defined. An administration official remarked a few months after Carter took
office that “no one [in the administration] knows what the policy is,” and the public was probably equally uncertain. Several early steps had indicated that human rights diplomacy would target Soviet human rights violations, and Western European publics no doubt viewed Carter’s rhetoric predominantly within the framework of the 1975 Conference on Security and Cooperation’s Helsinki Final Act, which bound the Soviet Union to certain human rights guarantees. But much remained unclear. How much would the administration press the Soviets if the Politburo retaliated by slowing progress on arms control—as they began to do almost immediately? To what extent would human rights concerns impinge on U.S. allies? Already the administration was signaling that strategically valuable allies such as Iran, the Philippines, and South Korea would not receive the same scrutiny as less important allies. Did human rights promotion include higher aid levels to combat poverty and hunger? The rhetoric suggested that it would, but in practice the country’s economic woes would torpedo efforts to promote economic rights.

The lack of clarity within the administration hamstrung the USIA’s efforts to promote the policy early on, leaving the agency with a surfeit of enthusiasm and a deficit of specific initiatives. After so many difficult years of struggling to contain damage to America’s image, USIA officers welcomed human rights as an easy sell and a positive way to regain respect. The policy also dovetailed with the themes the agency had adopted early in the decade, when the USIA began to downgrade Cold War anticommunism in favor of interdependence and transnationalism. Signaling the importance assigned to human rights, the USIA’s deputy director, Charles Bray, was tapped to be the agency’s representative on the State Department’s Human Rights Coordinating Group. In April, the U.S. Advisory Commission on Information recommended that “the human rights factor should command the Agency’s top priority.” The agency began to stress the theme in Voice of America broadcasts, to the point where fears rose that the Soviet Union would increase its jamming efforts, but the agency’s greatest impact abroad came simply through dissemination of speeches and press conferences by Carter and his top officials. Its machinery was “ready to roll,” the agency reported. All that was needed was “a clearer idea of the policy we want to project.”

It was not until mid-June that the agency proposed an action plan, and even then its vagueness about human rights and the specifics of U.S. policies to promote them pointed to continuing indecision within the administration. Without specifying what “human rights” meant, the agency proposed that human rights should be treated as a ubiquitous theme, included regardless of whether or not the issue was directly relevant to any given film, seminar, or press release. The plan proposed to stress the multilateral nature of human rights concerns and their relationship to America’s historical ideals. Continuing a longstanding theme of public diplomacy, U.S. civil rights struggles were highlighted as a model for other countries in their human rights efforts. Proposing the usual array of techniques (television and radio series, publication of translated books, visitor and speaker programs, seminars, publications, exhibits, and so on), with variations tailored to specific countries and regions, the agency proposed to publicize the achievements of human rights struggles around the world, including the efforts of
international and private human rights organizations, as well as to call attention to continuing abuses.34

Media reaction in Western Europe and Japan

Among West European leaders, Britain’s James Callaghan cautiously approved of Carter’s human rights diplomacy, while West Germany’s Schmidt and France’s Valéry Giscard d’Estaing expressed sharp disagreements.35 The media in these countries reflected, on balance, a more positive assessment. Press reports in America’s key democratic allies in the first six months of the Carter administration highlighted several themes.36 The human rights policy was often, though not universally, lauded. When reservations about the new policy surfaced, they focused on its potential to undermine détente, not on scepticism about America’s credibility as a moral leader in the wake of the Vietnam War, Watergate, and revelations of CIA misdeeds. Most commentators expressed approbation of the human rights policy because it seemed to signal renewed American confidence.

Recognition that human rights would be a priority for the new administration was relatively slow to materialize. Foreign media reaction to Carter’s inaugural tended to be favorable, though including relatively little discussion of human rights. Japanese television networks highlighted the new president’s call for freedom and human rights, but West German media were mostly reassured that Carter planned no new isolationism. The Times’ Washington correspondent, Henry Brandon, commented that Carter’s appeals “to human dignity, human rights, moral standards, honor, decency and above all to the ‘elimination of all nuclear weapons on earth’ are bound to arouse sympathy for him around the world.”37

Carter’s first news conference on February 8 garnered increasing notice of the human rights theme, and the perception began to take root that a distinctive new style was emerging in U.S. foreign affairs.38 Like the Stuttgarter Zeitung, many observers applauded the president’s human rights campaign as revivifying a long-established American tradition of idealism.39 Commentators typically welcomed the repudiation of the blunt realpolitik of the Nixon–Ford years. Even when they preferred realism to idealism, they recognized that the American public’s deep unhappiness with the lack of idealism in foreign policy needed to be addressed in order to stem a resurgence of American isolationism. The Guardian had reservations about the policy, for example, but noted that the reinjection of moralism into U.S. foreign policy was deeply welcome.40

At the same time, West European commentators began to worry that they might have to pay a price for a U.S.-directed human rights surge. With the Carter administration’s focus on using the Helsinki Accords to pressure the Soviet Union on its human rights record, the new moralism risked undermining détente, scuttling progress on arms control, and derailing other priorities, such as West Germany’s hopes for more German emigration from Eastern Europe. In March the Neue Rhein Zeitung fretted that “what America can afford, Europe cannot,” and the Hannoversche Allgemeine
called Carter’s moral pressure against the Soviets “more dangerous than useful,”
suggesting that support for dissidents should come from the public rather than from
governments. Marion Dönhoff, a founding member and eventual publisher of the
liberal weekly Die Zeit and a staunch supporter of better relations with the Soviet bloc,
criticized Carter’s heavy-handed support of Soviet dissidents. She hoped that Carter’s
human rights moves were intended merely to rally the American spirit, she wrote; once
that goal was achieved, they should be jettisoned. In March the influential left-liberal
Frankfurter Rundschau conceded that “Carter has started a necessary discussion,” but
needed to take responsibility for the U.S. role in supporting “many inhumane
dictatorships” among its allies. Only then would his moral engagement “be convincing
and . . . perhaps even have positive effects.”

On the German right, opinion was more enthusiastic. The center-right Berliner
Morgenpost, for example, praised Carter’s Notre Dame speech as giving U.S. foreign
policy “new, powerful contours” that gave voice to idealism without abandoning
pragmatism. The Frankfurter Allgemeine criticized the speech for being provocative—
“fighting fire with fire,” in its words, by directly challenging the Soviet bloc on human
rights.

British newspapers were cautiously commendatory. From a staunchly anti-
communist perspective, Guardian columnist Peter Jenkins observed in April that
affirmations of human rights were designed to strengthen Americans’ own support for
an active foreign policy, a key ingredient in upholding U.S. credibility both with allies
and adversaries. It was also working “to revive the spirit of the Western alliance and to
put an end to the mood of fatalistic acceptance of Soviet superiority and eventual
domination.” The Economist put a photograph of Carter on the cover of its March 5
issue and led with a major editorial called “Carter’s Way,” which argued that Carter had
regained the initiative vis-à-vis the USSR, primarily through his successful advocacy
of human rights. “So far,” the editors concluded, “it seems to have worked.” In a similar
vein, the Times’ foreign editor Frank Giles concluded that human rights were “still the
best hope” that freedom would spread to the East. After Carter’s Notre Dame speech,
the Financial Times lauded “renewed American confidence after Vietnam and Watergate” and declared that “the world not only calls for a new American foreign
policy; it is actually getting it.” On the right, however, some worried that “morality is
not enough”; the tabloid Daily Express called Carter’s vision “untenable.” Summing up
the overall reaction in March, London’s Observer noted that Carter’s human rights
initiatives vis-à-vis the Soviet Union and elsewhere had won “wide popular support in
the West.”

In France a handful of critics charged Carter with naiveté and self-righteousness.
Francois Chabert, writing in the first issue of the socialist-aligned Le Matin de Paris,
scoffed that the president’s “moral interventionism aimed at making the whole world
observe the honor codes not of Washington or New York but of Plains, Georgia.” But
the left-of-center Le Monde responded to Carter’s Notre Dame speech more favorably,
comparing it to John F. Kennedy’s major foreign policy speech of 1963. In February
liberal anti-communist Raymond Aron praised the administration on moral grounds
for choosing “the right method”—rhetorical support for Soviet dissidents—while the
leftist *Le Nouvel Observateur* praised the policy in more instrumental terms for giving Carter a tough-on-the-Soviets shield against U.S. defense contractors who opposed his cuts to the arms budget. In Italy, Milan’s center-left *Corriere della Sera* praised the jettisoning of “Kissinger’s Realpolitik, inspired by negative and pessimistic concepts,” in favor of America’s traditional, democratic values.

Japanese opinion was particularly ambivalent. Tokyo’s largest moderate newspaper, the *Yomiuri*, suggested in March that human rights “is in danger of becoming a quixotic crusade because the new president appears to prefer punishment to persuasion.” In May the independent *Sankei* described Japan as divided between arguments for and against Carter’s human rights diplomacy. After assessing the policy’s likely costs and benefits, the newspaper came down on the side of the benefits, including lasting peace and a powerful line of counterattack against communism. Though describing Carter’s policy as immature because it failed to make appropriate distinctions between abuses in communist and non-communist countries, the editors noted that the policy had positive effects in reducing the pull toward isolationism and bringing “vitality” to American diplomacy.

In these early months, much of the Western media praised the policy’s success in restoring confidence in U.S. leadership, at home and abroad. Canadian journalist Gwynne Dyer called Carter’s policy “emotionally satisfying.” Carter’s “new weapon,” the *Times* wrote in March, reengaged domestic support for détente by making it seem less like a sell-out and helped the United States win back some of the ideological appeal it once had. “Its most obvious effect has been to make the user feel better. This is not to be lightly dismissed, [since] the United States has been going through a serious crisis of confidence and is still adjusting to the relative decline in its military and ideological power. . . . President Carter needs to do something to restore the confidence of the West. It is no bad thing to remind people what they are supposed to be defending.”

**Foreign public opinion**

Foreign public opinion polls commissioned by the USIA indicated that majorities in America’s key democratic allies were aware of Carter’s human rights initiatives and that majorities of those familiar with the policy approved of it. In March and April, the agency reported that majorities in five Western European countries were aware of recent U.S. criticism of Soviet human rights violations. “Contrary to the misgivings expressed by some Western leaders and commentators about the risks of injecting a ’moral challenge’ into foreign policy,” the report commented, “the President’s statements on human rights have struck a responsive chord among the more informed public.” In a context in which European leaders were expressing misgivings about the potential dangers of Carter’s approach, it is striking that for those in the public who were aware of the U.S. position, most nevertheless believed statements supporting human rights to be “a good idea”: 65 percent were in favor in Britain, 68 percent in France, 79 percent in West Germany, 69 percent in Canada, and 55 percent in Japan. Similar large majorities, ranging from 61 percent in Canada to 78 percent in Germany, believed that other
Western leaders should also speak out for human rights. The exception was Japan, where only 36% approved of other leaders’ speaking out.59

A second survey three months later garnered similar results. In late July 1977, the USIA conducted public opinion surveys in West Germany, France, Great Britain, and Italy. The polls focused on issues relating to the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe follow-up conference in Belgrade, where the Carter administration was pressing the Soviet Union to uphold the human rights provisions of the Helsinki Final Act.60 As with the first poll, the results spoke most strongly to public opinion about Carter’s moves to press the Soviet Union on human rights, with less direct indications about public views on human rights as a general prong of U.S. foreign policy.

The results of the second round of polling showed that awareness of the policy remained relatively high. Fifty-seven percent of respondents in Germany, around 40 percent in France and Britain, and about a third in Italy reported awareness of U.S. statements in recent months criticizing Soviet violations of human rights. These figures were down slightly from earlier polling in late March and early April, when human rights advocacy was a new idea and publicity about Carter’s position and his embrace of Soviet dissidents registered as a surprise. The polls showed that among those aware of the policy of speaking out on human rights violations, majorities in all countries approved, with numbers in July still roughly as high as when they had been measured in March/April: two-thirds in Britain, about two-thirds in France and Italy, and over three-quarters in West Germany. Even communist party adherents in France and Italy agreed that human rights were properly considered an issue of international concern rather than a domestic issue protected from scrutiny by the doctrine of national sovereignty.61

Approbation, however, did not mean that Western Europeans saw human rights diplomacy as altruistic. The polls showed considerable scepticism about both motives and results. Most respondents—two-thirds in France and Italy and half in Germany and Britain—said they thought the Carter administration was acting for political gain rather than out of sincere moral concern for human rights. This view predominated not only on the left in Italy and France, but also among German Social Democrats and in Britain among Labour voters. Even in center-right supporters, the proportion of sceptics was nearly half in all four countries.62 Overall, fewer than half the respondents felt that the United States admitted its own human rights problems when criticizing others. As the USIA noted, Carter’s oft-repeated claims that human rights policy was deeply rooted in the beliefs of Americans rather than a posture designed for political gain had not convinced most Europeans. Pollsters found a widespread feeling that the United States moralized to others while ignoring its own problems—despite recognition that the country had a good record on human rights at home.63

Approval also did not mean that people felt the policy was working. Majorities agreed that U.S. efforts had had little effect, neither meliorating Soviet human rights abuses nor damaging relations with the USSR.64 Significantly, despite coming on the heels of widely publicized statements by Giscard d’Estaing and Schmidt about the potential for human rights to jeopardize détente, majorities in Germany and Britain
and about 40 percent of respondents in France and Italy agreed that criticism of Soviet violations should continue even if it "harms relations between the East and the West."65

CIA reporting concurred with the thrust of these findings. In April, the agency noted that initial international doubts about whether the president's commitment to human rights was serious had been dispelled by presidential statements and administration initiatives, both bilaterally and in international forums such as the UN. Though admitting that there continued to be "considerable confusion and suspicion" about American motives, the report concluded that "the administration's stand on human rights has spearheaded efforts to re-exert U.S. moral leadership in world affairs. It has focused international attention on the issue, stimulated thought and debate, and increased popular awareness. The U.S. stand has been heartening to many of those who feel oppressed by tyrannies of either the right or the left."66

The thrust of initial global public reaction to Carter's human rights agenda was summed up by USIA head John Reinhardt in November. Reporting to Jessica Tuchman, who as head of the National Security Council's Global Issues cluster was responsible for human rights, Reinhardt emphasized widespread popular support. "The President's emphasis on human rights has struck a responsive chord with peoples, if not always with governments," Reinhardt wrote. "Their interest appears to lie less in the policy implications of the President's views than in what is perceived as a powerful affirmation of basic human values." The concern Donald Fraser had articulated seemed not to be significant. As Reinhardt put it, "To a remarkable extent, given the traumas of U.S. society in recent years, other societies continue to look to the U.S. as a model."67 Reporting up the ladder, Tuchman agreed. "Everyone I have talked to and everything I have read in the past months confirms this," she wrote. "Each of the President's speeches and statements in this area has captured much attention and generated additional support."68

Conclusion

By mid-1977, Carter was known abroad "as the 'human rights' President."69 By the end of Carter's term in office, however, human rights diplomacy had succumbed to a renewed Cold War. Even before the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan scuttled détente, human rights diplomacy had come under increasing attack. Within a few months of Carter's taking office, the emphasis on Soviet violations began to dwindle, as the administration developed cold feet about potentially detrimental effects on arms control negotiations. The campaign shifted to target U.S. allies, especially in Latin America, while ignoring abuses in strategically vital areas (not to mention North Korea and China). Conservatives condemned the policy as undermining American allies; liberals rued its selective application. No one was satisfied. A State Department official told the Wall Street Journal in 1978: "We are engaging in an evangelical phase to advertise our moral concerns to the rest of the world. Yet the inconsistent way we apply our policy means we look hypocritical and moralistic, not moral. Eventually, the rest of the world gets tired of our holier-than-thou approach."70 The declining fortunes of
human rights were partly inevitable, for choices about how to balance strategic interests and ideals will always generate dissent. The policy’s short-term benefits also had long-term costs: raising hopes that could not be met guaranteed disappointment and disillusionment.

The USIA’s early enthusiasm for human rights diplomacy as a subject for public diplomacy waned considerably by 1980. Summing up the agency’s achievements for the outgoing administration, the USIA (now in its brief incarnation as the International Communications Agency) seemed unsure how to assess the human rights policy. In a retrospective analysis of its achievements over the last four years, it claimed significant public relations benefits from its human rights efforts only in Africa. It noted that at first Africans had greeted Carter’s human rights rhetoric “with scepticism and sometimes outright scorn.” By 1980, the agency claimed, human rights had become embedded in Africa’s political agenda, and public diplomacy’s information and exchange activities had helped put it there. Human rights had been particularly useful, the report noted, in that it provided “a positive credo” to counter the appeal of communism. As the report surveyed the rest of the world, however, human rights receded in importance, and the agency had little to say about the overall effects of human rights diplomacy.

Carter’s tenure ended in failure. A prolonged hostage crisis in Iran, economic malaise, rising international threats, and a pervasive sense of weakness and humiliation had overtaken the country by 1980, when Carter was trounced by Reagan. But his later failures should not obscure his early success. In May 1977, the London Times placed Carter’s human rights policy in “the good American tradition” of believing that “virtue will triumph, that in the long run the good guys will beat the bad guys.” Carter was probably right, the Times editors speculated, in “feeling that the world is now ready for a new and more confident America to rise from the ashes of its moral and military defeats.” To an extraordinary degree, Carter’s human rights diplomacy did just that, at least for a brief moment: it pulled America out of the mire of Vietnam and Watergate and restored America’s confidence in itself—and the world’s in America.

Notes

1 The research for this chapter was funded by an Australian Research Council Discovery Project Grant (DP110100424, 2011–2014). The author would like to thank Alessandro Brogi, Scott Kaufman, Emma Shortis, and Jack Davies for assistance and suggestions.

2 “Human Rights and U.S. Foreign Policy,” Address before the ABA International Law Section and the American Foreign Law Association, August 10, 1977, 151.H.4.2F, Donald Fraser Papers, Minnesota Historical Society, Saint Paul, MN. Negative opinions of the United States rose during the Vietnam years and continued to rise through 1976. According to a USIA report, surveys taken in Western Europe mid-1976 revealed a major diminution in public respect for the United States. Since a high point in favorable opinion in 1964, public opinion had hit record lows in Great Britain and Italy, was near its lowest point in West Germany, and was as low as it had been in France since De Gaulle took power in 1958. Leo P. Crespi, “Some Policy Implications of Recent
Survey Findings,” May 15, 1976, Office of Research Special Reports, Box 37, Records of the U.S. Information Agency, Record Group 306, National Archives, College Park, MD [hereafter USIA, RG 306].

3 In 1972, for example, Senator J. William Fulbright had written: “At present much of the world is repelled by America and what America seems to stand for. Both in our foreign affairs and in our domestic life we convey an image of violence.” Fulbright, Crippled Giant: American Foreign Policy and Its Domestic Consequences (New York: Vintage, 1972), 277.


8 See, for example, Sara Steinmetz, Democratic Transition and Human Rights: Perspectives of Foreign Policy (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 185.


14 On how Carter came to human rights and his administration’s early struggles to devise definitions and policies, see Keys, *Reclaiming American Virtue*, 214–268.


16 Subsequent commentators stressed the speech’s statement that “our commitment to human rights must be absolute”; however, it is clear that the reference to absolute commitment, coming as it did in a discussion of domestic issues, was intended to refer to human rights in their guise as civil rights for Americans.


30 Memo, Reinhardt to Christopher, June 16, 1977, Box 5, Secretariat Staff, USIA, RG 306.
33 “CU Action Program on Human Rights,” [undated, ca. March 1977], Box 46, Records of Warren Christopher, RG 59, National Archives, College Park, MD [hereafter Christopher Records, RG 59].
36 I base my conclusions about foreign media primarily on the USIA’s selective reporting of foreign media reaction to U.S. initiatives. According to former USIA officers, these reports were genuine efforts to present foreign views without putting a favorable spin on them; author interview with Michael Schneider, November 1, 2013. My own review of the Times (London) reporting confirms the general tenor of the representations the USIA made, at least in the case of that newspaper.
37 USIA, Office of Policy and Plans, Foreign Media Reaction, Morning Digest, January 21–24, 1977, Box 1, RG 306, NARA [hereafter “Morning Digest”].
38 Morning Digest, February 10, 1977.
39 Morning Digest, February 25, 1977. See also O Estado de Sao Paulo’s comment that it was a “typically American” gesture: May 25, 1977, quoted in Special Reports, May 27–June 2, 1977, p. 3.
40 Special Reports, March 4–10, 1977, pp. 2–3.
44 Morning Digest, May 24, 1977.
45 Morning Digest, May 24, 1977.
49 Morning Digest, May 24, 1977.
50 Quoted in Morning Digest, March 7, 1977.
52 Morning Digest, May 24, 1977.
54 Morning Digest, May 24, 1977.
62 Ibid., p. 6.
65 Report, USIA Office of Research, “European Attitudes toward the U.S. Position on Human Rights,” September 14, 1977, Office of Research Special Reports, Box 38, USIA,


68 Memo, Tuchman to Brzezinski, “USIA Suggestions for Human Rights Week—Your Query,” November 23, 1977, Doc. 89, FRUS II, 300–301. Liberal columnist Anthony Lewis came to the same conclusion after speaking to foreign policy professionals and government leaders in Europe. Without exception, he wrote, they praised the policy, often with unusual enthusiasm. The reason, Lewis proffered, was that Carter was “raising a standard. He is giving not just Americans but people in the West generally a sense that their values are being asserted again, after years of silence in the face of tyranny and brutality.” Anthony Lewis, “Raising a Standard,” New York Times, June 23, 1977, 23.


71 From the beginning, observers worried about the potential for the policy to boomerang in this way. See, for example, the British concerns expressed in B. L. Crowe to M. E. Pike, April 14, 1977, FCO 58/1162, FCO Kew.


Reasserting America in the 1970s
U.S. Public Diplomacy and the
Rebuilding of America's Image Abroad

Edited by
Hallvard Notaker, Giles Scott-Smith, and
David J. Snyder

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current research is on the role of public diplomacy in bringing political change to South Africa.

Brian C. Etheridge is Professor of History and Director of the Center for Teaching Excellence at Georgia Gwinnett College, USA. Previously, he was associate provost for academic innovation at the University of Baltimore. Winner of the Stuart L. Bernath Scholarly Article Prize from the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations in 2009, Etheridge is co-editor of the collected volume, The United States and Public Diplomacy: The New International History Meets the New Cultural History (2010). His book, tentatively titled Nazis and Berliners: Reconciling Memories of Germany in Cold War America, is forthcoming with the University Press of Kentucky.


Barbara Keys is Associate Professor of U.S. and International History at the University of Melbourne, Australia. She is the author of Reclaiming American Virtue: The Human Rights Revolution of the 1970s (2014); the prizewinning Globalizing Sport: National Rivalry and International Community in the 1930s (2006); and articles and book chapters on sport in the Cold War, human rights movements, and other topics. She is the recipient of the 2010 Stuart Bernath Lecture Prize of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations. Her current research focuses on anti-torture campaigns in postwar human rights movements; moral claims-making around international sports mega-events; and emotions in international history.

Michael L. Krenn is Professor of History and Director of General Education at Appalachian State University, USA. He has written five books, edited seven other volumes, and written numerous articles, chapters, and research notes. His two most recent books are Fall-Out Shelters for the Human Spirit: American Art and the Cold War (2005), and The Color of Empire: Race and American Foreign Relations (2006). He is currently at work on several projects, including a comprehensive study of U.S. cultural diplomacy from the time of Benjamin Franklin to today's "hip-hop" ambassadors and a biography of the early-nineteenth century natural scientist Samuel George Morton.

Paul M. McGarr is Assistant Professor in American and Canadian Studies in the Department of American and Canadian Studies at the University of Nottingham, UK. He is the author of The Cold War in South Asia: Britain, the United States and the Indian Subcontinent, 1945–1965 (2013). He has published articles and essays on Anglo-American political and cultural exchange with post-independent South Asia in Diplomatic History, The International History Review, Modern Asian Studies, Diplomacy