HUMAN RIGHTS AND DIPLOMACY

The bloodhounds of history

Bulgaria, 1876: Gladstone was outraged

Is encouraging human rights a legitimate goal of foreign policy? History provides no clear answer but several revealing lessons

"I AM blighted by the Foreign Office at present. Earlier today, a creepy official, who is 'in charge' (heaven help us) of South America, came over to brief me ahead of my trip to Chile. All crap about Human Rights. Not one word about the UK interest; how we saw the balance, prospects, pitfalls, opportunities in the Hemisphere."

Few politicians express themselves with the bluntness of Alan Clark, who jotted these thoughts down in his diaries when a British minister in the 1980s. But many think that the issue of human rights is at best a distraction and at worst an encumbrance to the traditional jobs of diplomacy—promoting your country's interests and safeguarding its security.

Critics of those who want western policymakers to encourage human rights abroad often see the debate as a modern obsession—even aberration—that dates back to Jimmy Carter. In fact, the argument about the place of human rights in foreign policy is rooted in old ideas about the rights of man which took on a new lease of life during the 18th-century Enlightenment and the French Revolution.

As Henry Kissinger writes in his book, "Diplomacy" (Simon & Schuster, 912 pages, $17.50), "Ideological fervour propelled French armies across Europe on behalf of universal principles of liberty, equality and fraternity." In the aftermath of the wars, conservative statesmen like Metternich in Austria and Castlereagh in Britain were determined to reimpose peace and order. They believed the Napoleonic wars were the sort of ghastliness that happens when countries try to export "the rights of man". Order, they argued, had to be maintained through a balance of power, in which states did not challenge each other's legitimacy.

Thus two sides quickly emerged in the early 19th century, one concerned with the role of the universal rights of man in the formulation of foreign policy, the other concerned with order. The two sides persist today. Call them liberals and realists.

Liberals in foreign policy (who may not be liberals in domestic affairs) tend to be optimistic interventionists. They believe that history is on the side of "human rights", and that countries like America or Britain should be prepared to give history a shove. Liberals make little distinction between personal and public morality. If it is wrong for an individual to do something, then it is also wrong for a state to do it. In 19th-century Britain, the patron saint of such thinking was William Ewart Gladstone, the leader of the Liberal Party. In America it was Woodrow Wilson, president from 1912 to 1920. Though they were different in many ways, Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan were both intellectual heirs of Wilson's moral fervour and belief in America as guardian and promoter of freedom.

Realists are more pessimistic about progress in human affairs and believe that states live by different moral rules from individuals. They see power rather than principle as the driving force of international affairs. Avoiding unnecessary conflict is an important aim of states—and criticising another country's human rights is likely to lead to such conflict. In 19th-century Europe, Bismarck, the German chancellor, and Gladstone's great rival Disraeli were arch-realists. In 20th-century America, Teddy Roosevelt and Richard Nixon were realist presidents; perhaps the greatest modern practitioner-theorist of realism has been Henry Kissinger.

The liberal-realist debate tends to throw up the same questions repeatedly. Three in particular recur: how do you decide what is moral in diplomacy? How do human rights fit with your other foreign-policy aims? And is history on the side of the liberals or the realists?

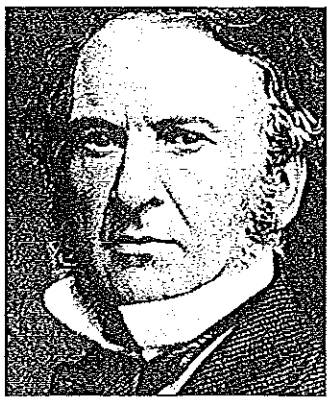
Bloodsuckers versus hypocrites

Disagree with someone on economics and you are usually simply questioning their powers of analysis. Argue with them about human rights and you often end up questioning their morality. In Victorian Britain, the master of moral indignation was Gladstone. In 1876, outraged by reported atrocities by Turks against Christians in Bulgaria, he led a campaign for concerted European intervention in the Balkans, complete with pamphlets and mass rallies. "There is not a cannibal in the South Sea Islands", he thundered, "whose indignation would not arise and overboil at the recital of that which has been done." To Disraeli, the Conservative prime minister of the day, Gladstone's moral posturing was intolerable. In private, he called him "an unprincipled maniac". In public, he said the worst Bulgarian atrocity he knew of was Gladstone's pamphlet on the subject.

One of the main reasons why Gladstone was able to stir up public opinion was that then, as now, voters were worried that their country's foreign policy implicated them in the evil acts of a foreign nation. Just as modern Britons criticise their government for selling weapons to Indonesia, which has a bloody record in East Timor, so the Victorians asked how Britain could be allied with the brutal Turks.

Diplomats then, as now, responded with arguments about national interests. Disraeli's government was pursuing a pro-Turkish policy to offset the power of Russia and to protect British imperial interests. In a twist which seems peculiarly contempo-


Liberals: Wilson ...


... Gladstone


Realists: Kissinger ...


... Disraeli

Castlereagh Metternich Bismark

rary, the leak of an ambassadorial telegram stirred up popular passions. The British ambassador in Turkey was found to have argued that Britain's interest in keeping Turkey strong was "not affected by the question whether it was 10,000 or 20,000 people who perished."

Modern realists, bemoaning the criticism they are subjected to, sometimes see popular pressure as a new phenomenon. But even the *cause célèbre* of the Bulgarian atrocities was not the first example. Castlereagh was loathed by the radicals of his day. Shelley wrote:

> I met Murder on the way—
> He had a mask like Castlereagh—
> Very smooth he looked, yet grim;
> Seven bloodhounds followed him:
>
> All were fat; and well they might
> Be in admirable plight,
> For one by one, and two by two,
> He tossed them human hearts to chew
> Which from his wide cloak he drew.

Modern invective just isn't up to standard.

To many liberals, Henry Kissinger is the personification of amoral foreign policy, rather as Castlereagh once was. But Mr Kissinger is also one of the few diplomats to try to articulate a moral basis for realist policies. As an academic Mr Kissinger's first book was a sympathetic study of the efforts of Metternich and Castlereagh to re-establish international order in post-Napoleonic Europe. When the joined the Nixon administration, he chillingly pledged to "purge our foreign policy of all sentimentality".

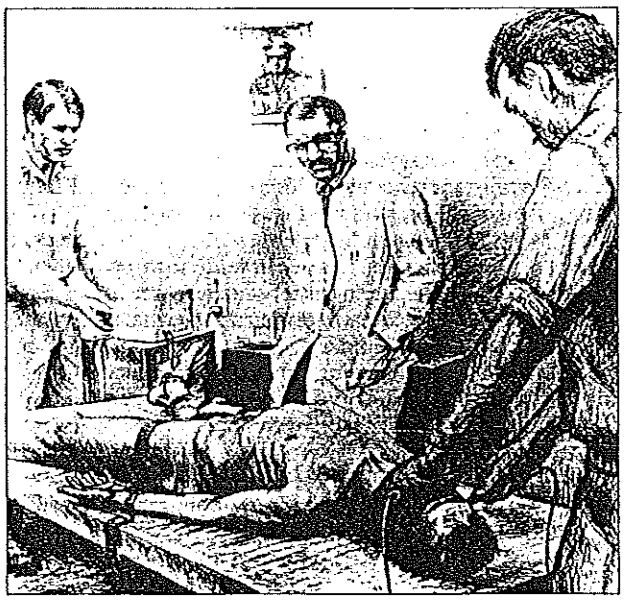
In Mr Kissinger's view, Metternich had re-established peace in 19th-century Europe on the basis of the balance of power and an agreement by the big powers to accept each other's legitimacy. Similar ideas infused Mr Kissinger's own attempt to reduce cold-war tensions through detente with the Soviet Union and the re-opening of ties with China. So far as Mr Kissinger was concerned, the Soviet military threat was a legitimate source of concern; Soviet treatment of its dissidents less so. Mr Kissinger even persuaded President Ford not to receive Alexander Solzhenitsyn in the White House, lest this antagonise Soviet leaders.

Mr Kissinger has never accepted that his policies were in any sense amoral. Rather he argued that peace and order were prerequisites for the achievement of moral ends "because ideals could hardly flourish under conditions of perpetual war or anarchy". In his speeches and writings Mr Kissinger has often insisted that considerations of human rights should indeed play a part in the formulation of American foreign policy. As his biographer, Walter Isaacson, notes, however, such avowals of the importance of human rights are usually followed by sentences beginning "But".

Inevitably in a country as suffused with Wilsonian ideals as America, Mr Kissinger became a controversial figure. Conservatives approved of his readiness to use force to protect American interests but disliked his compromises with the Soviet Union. Liberals liked the idea of better relations with the Soviet Union but were horrified by the regimes Mr Kissinger was prepared to support (the Shah in Iran, Augusto Pinochet in Chile).

When it comes to the central dilemma of foreign policy today—policy towards China—Mr Kissinger is again an important figure (this time in the background). And, again, he is making the case that constructing a working relationship with the Chinese in the interests of maintaining a balance of power is more important than pressing for changes in the country's human-rights policy. His maxim concerning the Soviet Union—"not to hold detente hostage to improvements in Moscow's treatment of its own people"—could summarise his position on China.

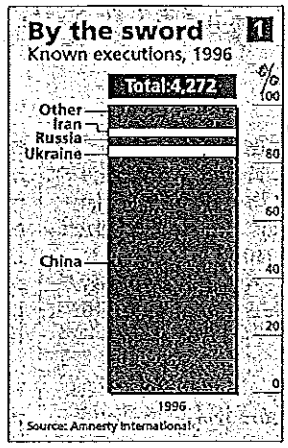
At the moment America's China policy seems to be swinging in a Kissingerian direction. Having come to office pledging to get tough with dictators "from Baghdad to Beijing", Mr Clinton has found getting tough with China on human rights much harder than he had imagined. An early attempt to link China's trade privileges with improvements in its observance of human rights was abandoned under pressure from American businessmen. But it is not just vulgar commerce that is leading the Clinton team to play down human rights. The threat of military conflict with China over Taiwan has emphasised to the Americans how high the stakes are—and caused them to redouble their efforts to get on with the Chinese.


Is this an internal affair?

To realists, Mr Clinton's dilemma over China was to be expected. It is easy, they say, to posture about human rights, much harder to do anything. Gladstone's agitation for Balkan intervention in 1876 was no more effective than similar pleas have been in the 1990s. Which leads to the second perennial question: how does human rights fit with other foreign-policy concerns?

Historically, attempts to put

human rights at the centre of foreign policy have often gone awry. The two American presidents who have laid most emphasis on human rights (broadly defined) were Woodrow Wilson and Jimmy Carter. Both left office disappointed men.



Grand illusions?

When he persuaded America to enter the first world war, Wilson felt it was not enough to argue that fighting was in America's national interest. The war was being fought, he said, to "make the world safe for democracy". After the war, Wilson argued for a new world order which transcended traditional great-power politics and placed a greater emphasis on collective security, democracy and self-determination. Yet even Wilson's sympathetic biographer, Arthur Link, notes that Wilson's faith in the miraculous power of democracy sometimes led him to "illusory appraisals and quixotic solutions".

In the end Wilson's countrymen rejected membership of the League of Nations, which Wilson believed to be the key to a new world order. Henry Lodge, a Senator who opposed the League, commented that American policy should be based on human nature "as it is, not as it ought to be". Yet though Wilson was defeated, his belief that America should promote freedom, democracy and self-determination has remained the dominant strand in American rhetoric and a part—often a large part—of its foreign policy.

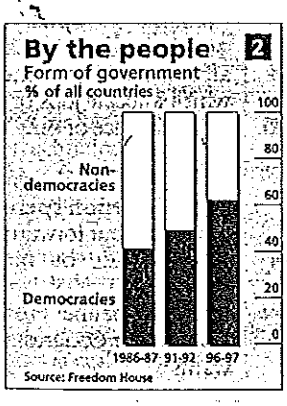
Human rights have rarely loomed as large as they did under Jimmy Carter. When he was elected in 1976, he pledged to put concern for human rights back into the forefront of American foreign policy after the heyday of Mr Kissinger's realism. Mr Carter's attempts to distance America from some of its nastier authoritarian allies was undermined when these regimes were replaced by rabidly anti-American governments in Iran and Nicaragua. The Carterites could respond with some justice that the source of much of this anti-Americanism lay in America's previous willingness to identify itself with repressive governments. But America's humiliation in the Iran hostage crisis and the rise of Soviet adventurism in the third world reinforced the impression that Mr Carter's human-rights-centred foreign policy had merely weakened America. The election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 appeared to signal a return to hard-edged realism.

In practice, however, far from revealing that the pursuit of human rights abroad was futile, Mr Reagan's presidency showed that it was possible to have your cake and eat it—ie, you could crusade for rights while enhancing your national power and interest. Mr Reagan was not a realist in the Kissinger mould. He had opposed detente. Unlike the Kissingerites, who drew a distinction between the Soviet Union's internal and external behaviour, the Reaganites saw the two things as closely connected. The famous phrase—"evil empire"—was a moral one. The "Reagan doctrine" sought to roll back Soviet-backed governments by backing "freedom-fighters" around the world.

That the democratic credentials of the Nicaraguan Contras or the Afghan Mujahideen were, to put it mildly, disputed made some people suspect that the Reagan doctrine was simply old-fashioned power politics dressed up as a crusade. Towards the end of his presidency, however, Mr Reagan was able to show that American zeal could be applied even to right-wing allies. In 1987, American pressure did a lot to push authoritarian but pro-American South Korea towards democracy. Similarly the Reagan administration was prepared to pull the rug from underneath Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines, despite his impeccable anti-communist credentials.

Mr Reagan's presidency made clear that supporting freedom could successfully be made a central tenet of American foreign policy and that the means existed to pursue that goal. In the case of the Reagan doctrine, those means were the support of proxy wars. In the case of South Africa—trade sanctions, initially opposed by the Reagan administration (but signed by the president nonetheless)—showed that there were non-military tools for pushing human rights abroad.

The collapse of communism in Europe in 1989 appeared at first to release America from the moral ambiguities of the cold war. Without a global struggle against the Soviet Union to wage, America could be much more unequivocal in its support of human rights around the world. No longer would it have to say of a right-wing dictator that "He may be a sonofabitch, but he's our sonofabitch." Francis Fukuyama, an official in the Bush administration, famously predicted "the end of history" as nations began to converge on liberal democracy. Both George Bush and Bill Clinton proclaimed that spreading democracy should be a main aim of American diplomacy.



But the West's apparent failure to make much progress in pushing human rights in China (see chart 1) has dented some of this confidence. Clinton administration officials now take refuge in the notion that the spread of economic freedom in China will eventually bring in its wake political freedom. In some respects this is a rationalisation for inaction on human rights. But it also fits in with a tenet of liberal thought—long resisted by the realists—that history is on the side of human rights.

History's hidden hand

Realists tend to think that liberals are soft in the head. Mr Kissinger recently wrote that: "The growth of democracy will continue as America's dominant aspiration, but it is necessary to recognise the obstacles it faces at the moment of its seeming philosophical triumph." In his view, cultural differences around the world, combined with the inevitable jostling among rival centres of power, make confidence in the spread of democracy a dangerous illusion.

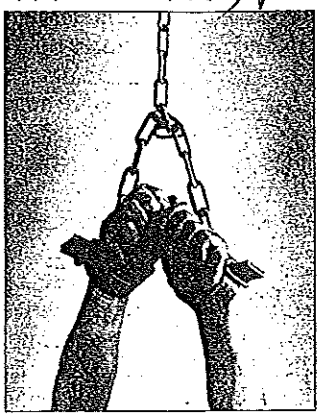
For much of the past two centuries, the liberal belief in the inevitable spread of human rights and democracy did indeed seem like more of an act of faith than a piece of analysis. But these days, it seems to be the realists who are curiously reluctant to acknowledge the obvious: that democracy has made vast and heartening progress in the past 25 years.

European dictatorships collapsed in Greece, Spain and Portugal in the mid-1970s. Most of Latin America's dictatorships collapsed in the 1980s. Communism fell in Eastern Europe in 1989, apartheid has gone, and former Asian autocracies like Taiwan and South Korea have also become more democratic. So, for all the protestations of the realists, there does seem to be a bit of a trend here (see chart 2).

Indeed, one of the lessons of recent history may be that the realists' preoccupation with balance-of-power politics risks neglecting the underlying forces that move history. Many of Mr Kissinger's decisions—such as the snubbing of Mr Solzhenitsyn—now seem ill judged. Those who regard it as soft-headed to campaign for the release of political prisoners might reflect that today's prisoner can be tomorrow's president. Ask Nelson Mandela or Vaclav Havel. In such a climate, faith in the spread of human rights and willingness to give it a helping hand may not be a liberal illusion—it may be realistic.

A suitable target for foreign policy?

The Economist (12 April 1997) p. 15.



"WE SET this nation up to make men free, and we did not confine our conception and purpose to America," proclaimed President Woodrow Wilson in 1919. As the century draws to a close, the Wilsonian idea that it is America's mission to promote freedom abroad retains a powerful grip in his country. On a recent visit to China, Newt Gingrich, the speaker of the House of Representatives, told his hosts that the idea of freedom was so central to American identity that a Chinese-American relationship that did not include discussion of human rights was impossible. In such a dialogue, proclaimed the normally garrulous Mr Gingrich, "I can't speak. I have nothing to say."

Yet, for all the boldness of Mr Gingrich's words, western policy on human rights is a mess. For the past six years, the European Union has sponsored a motion censuring China at the annual session of the UN Human Rights Commission. This year, however, France and Germany have backed off, making a common EU position impossible. In Washington meanwhile, the Clinton administration has been facing a barrage of accusations that America is sacrificing human-rights policy on the altar of trade with China. Fighting for human rights in places like Myanmar and Nigeria has become more difficult as a result.

The whole shambles will merely confirm the prejudices of sceptics who think that the very notion of linking human rights and foreign policy is mistaken (see pages 19-21). "Realists" argue that the "internal affairs" of other states are not the proper business of foreigners. Once that rule is broken, they say, the door is opened to all sorts of unnecessary disputes. Why argue with another country if it presents no threat to your security and is prepared to co-exist with you peacefully?

The realists also often argue that it is hubristic to try to export western ideas of freedom to places with different traditions and levels of development. Attempts to introduce western political models into poor countries have a habit of coming unstuck: look at Africa or Cambodia. The West's own experience teaches that rights evolve over time. Universal suffrage came to Britain only in 1918. Racial segregation continued in parts of the United States until the 1960s.

These are powerful arguments, but they are not ultimately convincing. It is true that in the long run internal changes, particularly wealth and better education, tend to be the main agents and underpinnings of civil rights. But that is not to say that there is no role for external pressure. In some places—South Africa, for one—such pressure has undoubtedly helped to bring change. The pressure need not be for wholesale reform. It is possible to object to governments torturing or silencing their citizens without asking them to adopt the American constitution in its entirety.

But why bother to object? Why should it matter to the citizens of Western Europe or America if one lot of foreigners is mistreating another lot? For several reasons.

The first is simple morality. If you hear your neighbour beating up his children, do you give a shrug and say it is none of your business? Most people think not. Realists argue that the moral rules that apply to individuals do not apply to states, whose relations should be governed by considerations of national interest not of morality. But countries are made up of individuals, and in democracies their wishes are meant to be reflected. Few voters would endorse the idea that their governments should completely ignore moral issues in making foreign policy. Most tend to feel—correctly—that at some stage their own countries would be defiled by maintaining uncritical relations with an utterly barbaric government. Who would argue for normal relations with Nazi Germany?

Good for one, good for all

But morality is not the only reason for putting human rights on the West's foreign-policy agenda. Self-interest also plays a part. Political freedom tends to go hand in hand with economic freedom, which in turn tends to bring international trade and prosperity. And governments that treat their own people with tolerance and respect tend to treat their neighbours in the same way. Dictatorships unleashed the first and second world wars, and most wars before and since. Democracies seldom, if ever, take up arms against each other.

Even in more prosaic issues than those of war and peace—the observance of international agreements on trade or the environment, for instance—liberal democracies are more likely to play by the rules. They, after all, accept the concepts of scrutiny and legal challenge. A world in which more countries respected basic human rights would be a more peaceful and orderly place.

All very well, the sceptics reply, but even with a global economy the world is not a global country with a global set of laws, a global police force to enforce them and a global judiciary to try wrongdoers. Moreover, in the real world, western democracies trade enthusiastically with countries like China and Indonesia. They may wince at massacres in Beijing or East Timor, but they will not, in Jack Kennedy's words, "pay any price, bear any burden" to promote liberty. They will almost certainly not go to war and they are generally reluctant to disrupt trade. The countries singled out for a bashing are often soft targets, like Myanmar, which offer few economic opportunities and have little power to hit back. Sometimes when the West claims to be acting in the interests of human rights, it is really responding to domestic pressures—such as protectionist demands against cheap competition.

It is true that there are elements of inconsistency, even hypocrisy, in the West's attempts to foster the cause of human rights round the world. So what? That is an inevitable consequence of the fact that human rights are only one of many foreign-policy concerns. Keeping the peace and encouraging trade are also important goals. The point is that democracies should both accept and proclaim that promoting freedom is an important aspect of foreign policy.

How that objective should be pursued will depend on circumstances. Some governments are more brutal than others; some are more susceptible to pressure than others. Depending on the egregiousness of the offence and the other interests at stake, supporting human rights may mean anything from armed intervention to a statement in parliament. The effort will not always succeed, but it is unlikely to be wholly ignored. Nowadays autocrats are defensive, especially when they are accused of failing to respect human rights—witness China's outraged protestations every time it stands accused. The idea of democracy, and indeed the practice, albeit often in a flawed manner, is spreading as never before. Pressure for human rights discomfits oppressors, encourages their victims and, in the long run, makes the world safer. Apply it.