Moral standards change, in the writing of history no less than in society. Until the shattering experience of the Vietnam War, writing the history of U.S. foreign policy was often an exercise in celebration. In 1966, for example, leading diplomatic historian Dexter Perkins published a paean to the wisdom and industriousness that had driven the country’s continental expansion, economic growth, and rise to global power. The Evolution of American Foreign Policy is a classic of American exceptionalism, preoccupied with showing how U.S. statesmen built a republic distinct from European powers in its virtue and restraint.

How did Perkins account, say, for the habit of sending the Marines into Central America when conditions there threatened U.S. business interests? Even President Woodrow Wilson, the visionary whose name branded a new form of idealism, cheerfully sent troops into nearby sovereign countries. “It seems strange that this ardent apostle of democracy and self-determination should so act,” Perkins admitted. But he had a ready explanation. “The regulatory spirit is strong in the virtuous,” and Wilson, being virtuous, saw that the Dominican Republic and Nicaragua desperately needed regulation. The outcomes, according to Perkins, were generally “constructive.” Perkins recognized that every so often, and especially before the young republic had “evolved,” U.S. policymakers had erred. In The American Approach to Foreign Policy, he frowned on the public’s moralistic impulses — he fretted, for example, that “a moral repugnance to imperialism and conquest might blind Americans to the practical difficulties in the way of giving complete independence to nations not yet very well prepared for it” — but the assumption that U.S. power was a beneficent influence on the world was central to his worldview.

We can read history for an accounting of the past, but we can also read history as a guide
to the present in which it was written. Just as Perkins reflected prevailing assumptions about American morality (even as they were under challenge from the Wisconsin School’s critique of American empire), Joe Renouard’s diligent account of what he calls “human rights in American foreign policy” from 1967 to 1991 can be seen as a bellwether of the place of human rights in the study of U.S. foreign policy.

After a long period of puzzling quiescence, historians have taken up the study of “human rights” with all the gusto of a guest last to arrive at the dinner table, and historians of U.S. foreign relations are among the most avid. One of the surprising features of the recent flurry of books and dissertations is how often international human rights promotion appears as a new manifestation of what older generations of historians saw as U.S. benevolence. Perkins criticized mistakes; Renouard does, too. But both mostly assume that when U.S. policymakers work wisely and efficaciously to advance what they describe as moral aims, moral outcomes ensue.

Some of Renouard’s conclusions will not surprise his readers: politicians politicize policymaking, U.S. policies are intended to serve U.S. interests, and geopolitics trumps human rights concerns. More surprising is Renouard’s operating assumption that humanitarianism and human rights are interchangeable and his contention that Reagan was a more vigorous human rights president than Carter.

Renouard argues that although Carter “had at least some effect on global events,” the “human rights cause would have moved forward” even without him. Carter made many mistakes, says Renouard, and the pious president’s tangible achievements could have been secured through quiet diplomacy. The author overlooks the Carter administration’s own view that a major benefit of its public stance was not in mitigating abuses but in repairing the country’s battered image in the wake of Vietnam and Watergate.

Renouard is considerably more impressed by Reagan’s strong second-term commitment to democracy promotion and the softening of his anti-anti-apartheid stance. Why Reagan’s rhetoric and policies made him an effective human rights president remains somewhat unclear, since in the USSR (which gets much attention) and South Africa, the changes that later arrived did so mostly under the impetus of factors other than official U.S. moralizing. As to the administration’s fueling of civil wars in Central America, where many critics believed Reagan’s policies incited death and destruction on a large scale, Renouard is ambiguous. He criticizes Reagan’s “politicization of the human rights cause” in Nicaragua and El Salvador, but his conclusions lean toward the exculpatory. After all, “solutions were never simple,” and some of Reagan’s advisers were “greatly distressed” by the Salvadoran death squads they were funding and by other complicating factors, at least behind the scenes.

Renouard’s book — richly researched across many U.S. archives, peppered with well-chosen quotations, and highly readable — seems very much the product of a world in which human rights is the preeminent idealism of our times. Because the book offers no definition of its central term, what is meant is revealed indirectly by what is covered and what is left out. Human rights is about combatting torture but not about fighting HIV/AIDS. It’s about promoting democracy but not about nuclear disarmament. It’s about anti-apartheid but not about the status of women in Saudi Arabia. The selections tell us as much about “human rights” circa 2016 as about the contestations of the 1970s and ‘80s.

Except for his intriguing hypothesis that the rise of ethnic lobbies in the 1970s spurred human rights politics, Renouard is not
interested in probing why this particular framework for thinking about ideals and interests became so prevalent or how it differed from competitors that came before or existed alongside it. (Patrick Kelly’s revelatory new book, Sovereign Emergencies: Latin America and the Making of Global Human Rights Politics, forthcoming from Cambridge University Press, shows that ethnic lobbies cannot account for the surge of interest in human rights violations in Latin America, which provided much of the impetus for the 1970s human rights “boom.”) Renouard is resolutely focused on the United States and executive-branch bilateral policymaking, attending occasionally to the role of Congress but overlooking foreign actors who were integrating human rights into international statecraft. Nonstate actors, intergovernmental organizations, and international law get short shrift. The magnetic effect of a present in which Amnesty International is a dominant voice in human rights is hard to escape: although Renouard contends that Amnesty played only a small role in shaping U.S. foreign policy relative to groups such as the AFL-CIO, it gets nine mentions to the union federation’s one.

Renouard has written an engaging and accomplished account of selective elements of U.S. foreign policy in the 1970s and ’80s. But historians of U.S. foreign policy, so slow to perceive the importance of human rights and catching on only after human rights ideals have begun to ebb, are at risk of staking too much on their newfound subject. To make “human rights” synonymous with “morality”—or at least with those moral causes (democracy promotion, abolition of torture) that remain salient today, while eliding those (disarmament, pacifism, development) that receded—is to adopt the perspectives of the actors whose choices need to be explained. Treating human rights as the sole manifestation of idealism in foreign policy, or as the highest evolution of such manifestations, is ahistorical. Even in the 1970s and 1980s, other moralizing frameworks jostled against human rights in the United States: “peace and justice,” socialism, religion, anti-imperialism, and anti-communism, to name a few. They differed in their implications for the ways Americans viewed the world, conceived of their interests, and defined what acceptable policymaking looked like.

For Perkins and much of his generation, patriotic praise of America’s global beneficence was a scholarly obligation in the life-or-death battle against communism. Today’s scholarship sometimes seems to suggest a not-dissimilar investment on the human rights side of contemporary battles. Historians know that policymakers have complicated, self-interested motives and that policies are implemented with varying degrees of effectiveness. But without examining the perspectives of those on the receiving end of American foreign policy, scholars today may risk repeating Perkins’s error: inferring that Washington’s moral aspirations generally result in “constructive” outcomes, even when recent events should incline us to profound skepticism.

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