Barbara J. Keys’s innovative, new book, *Reclaiming American Virtue,* explains the “ascendancy” of human rights in the United States in the 1970s (10). Clearly influenced by Samuel Moyn’s *The Last Utopia,* Keys largely accepts Moyn’s periodization but disputes his claim that this attention to human rights came “seemingly from nowhere.”¹ Keys sees human rights in the United States as a project of both conservative and liberal Democrats, although the strains had different motivations. In what is her most original and likely controversial argument, Keys emphasizes that feelings of guilt, embarrassment, and shame over the Vietnam War drove liberals in the 1970s to pick up human rights language that was not new but was little used. Keys argues they made human rights mainstream, not just the purview of lawyers and religious groups. Keys gives equal attention to the conservative strain, about which much more has already been written, particularly in works on Senator Henry J. Jackson (D-WA).² Conservatives, in her view, were concerned not with assuaging guilt over the war but instead with waging and winning the Cold War.

Beyond analyzing the differing motives of these Democrats, Keys has written a detailed history of efforts to induce United States officials to pay more attention to human rights beginning in full force in 1973 with the end of U.S. involvement in Vietnam. In addition to revealing previously unheralded human rights activists who were influential in the 1970s, such as Amnesty International USA’s David Hawk, her work is one of the first to


pay considerable attention to the influence of the Democratic Senator from South Dakota, James Abourezk. In Keys’s book, the principal forums for human rights advocacy were the halls of Congress and later, after Jimmy Carter’s election heralded wider possibilities, the State Department and the White House.

*Reclaiming American Virtue* is an important addition to the growing literature on human rights for several reasons. First, it is an effort to grapple with Moyn’s framework for human rights in the 1970s from the perspective of deep and varied archival research. Second, in attempting to explain why Americans came to care about human rights, Keys makes a strong case for the influence of emotions, building upon earlier contributions by Frank Costigliola and others who highlighted the role of emotions in shaping United States foreign relations.\(^3\) Finally, the book is very accessible and thus an excellent starting place for those wanting to understand debates over human rights in the 1970s.

Of course, one can always find areas that could have been strengthened, and I will address three in the remainder of this review. First, relating to terminology, Keys offers a wide-ranging discussion to demonstrate how fluidly the term “human rights” was used in the 1950s and 1960s. Given this mutability, it is surprising to see a relatively narrow definition in Keys’s writing about the 1960s. For example, Keys does not regard initiatives such as the Alliance for Progress as human rights efforts because “they did not appeal to international law, nor were they legitimized with rights talk” (40). She sees United States’ policies that might be read as support for human rights, such as its alliance with “anticolonialism, self-determination, and antiracism,” as undertaken for self-interested reasons – to ensure that these states aligned with the United States (43). Even if this were the case, and my reading of the evidence suggests both were factors, do the motives of activists have to be purely altruistic for us to regard something as a human rights initiative? For example, some of those condemning the Soviet human rights record in the late Cold War were certainly doing so for cynical reasons. Does that mean that we cannot characterize those involved in highlighting these abuses as participating in a human rights campaign? Similarly, Keys does not see the United States’ stance on Rhodesia as a “general human rights initiative”; she characterizes it as “part of an anticolonial posture” and “an offshoot of antiracial policies at home” (45). U.S. officials who were active on Rhodesia framed the conflict in terms of self-determination as well as racial discrimination.\(^4\) To be considered a human rights initiative, would efforts need to remain totally divorced from support for decolonization and equal rights domestically?

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Keys draws a similar line when discussing outrage in the wake of the 1967 Greek coup, which she sees as underpinning the human rights campaigns that would follow but not one of them because it “did not involve a full-fledged embrace of human rights rhetoric” and “human rights appeals were part of a broader repertoire of moral and political arguments”⁵ (76). But, does the fact that those concerned about events in Greece also regretted the government’s non-democratic nature undermine their attention to human rights violations? Evidence shows that concerned members of Congress utilized human rights language in their advocacy when warning Secretary of State Dean Rusk that the United States should not “take a hands off, no comment, position regarding the denial of human rights in Greece today.”⁶ Opponents of the Greek regime and the United States government discussed the situation in Greece in human rights terms, with American officials assuring those interested that it was raising its concern for the “safety of political prisoners,” which suggests the post-coup years in Greece were a focus point for those active in human rights.⁷

It strikes me that Keys might have further parsed the human rights language of the years about which she was writing as well as conceptions of human rights in our own time. Related to this point, Keys might have addressed more directly the questions: Whose definitions of human rights matters? Those of U.S. policymakers? What about those putting pressure on them? Are their definitions the same? How do any nuances shape human rights activism or U.S. policy?

Related to this question of definitions, Keys offers an important analysis of President Jimmy Carter’s oft-cited inaugural address, which she maintains has been previously misunderstood. She argues convincingly that in his assertion that “our commitment to human rights must be absolute,” Carter was using the older definition of human rights as domestic civil rights. Thus, he was committing the United States to a domestic, rather than international project (246). Her analysis here will force many who are working on or teaching Carter’s human rights policy to reconsider their interpretations.

Second, in some ways Keys’s book suggests that there were multiple human rights booms or revolutions in the 1970s. Keys’s story is largely about the rise of broad-based attention to the issue, and she is most interested in how human rights garnered salience

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⁵ For a different interpretation of the United States’ responses to the Greek coup and the unilateral declaration of independence in Rhodesia, see Sarah B. Snyder “The Rise of Human Rights During the Johnson Years,” in Francis J. Gavin and Mark Atwood Lawrence, ed., Beyond the Cold War: Lyndon Johnson and the New Global Challenges of the 1960s (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 237-60.


⁷ Califano to Eisner, April 27, 1967, Foreign Policy Greek Crisis, 04/26-27/67, Box 176, Personal Papers of Joseph Califano, Lyndon Johnson Library.
as an issue at the grassroots level. She might have more fully distinguished among these booms and their relative significance.

One way to reach grassroots support was to find a way to make human rights abuses more immediate to foreign readers. Keys details how appeals were formulated with the clear intent of provoking emotional responses in readers, which would motivate them to take action against human rights violations. Thus, Keys’s book highlights human rights activism as an emotional response. But, is engendering emotional responses a measure of success, or are changes in policy? How important, for example, is Amnesty International USA for explaining the human rights boom? Its growth is crucial to Keys’s understanding of how Americans came to care about human rights, but the organization neither sought to nor succeeded in influencing U.S. policy for many years. Is the most critical question when broad-based support for human rights has developed or when the concern influences policymaking decisions?

Examining two responses to an International League for the Rights of Man statement on human rights and the war in Vietnam, Keys implicitly weights the significance of a small article in the *New York Times* versus a letter from Secretary of State Dean Rusk. The question is what type of attention was being sought by human rights activists – that of U.S. policymakers or the grassroots? Keys is focused on explaining the mass appeal of human rights, but she might more explicitly assess which audience was more important to safeguarding human rights internationally. Or put a different way, would the flourishing of grassroots support that Keys describes as the 1970s progressed have mattered if Gerald Ford had been re-elected in 1976?

Finally, Keys has chosen to end her manuscript with a bibliographic essay rather than a bibliography, which offers authors a chance to reflect on the existing historiography at the potential expense of an exhaustive listing of all works consulted. I suspect some readers, like myself, would have preferred a bibliography, which would have served as an invaluable resource to someone trying to get up to speed in a field, which Keys’s book will inevitably make students and nonspecialists want to do. My second hesitation about this choice is based on my guess that, having talked about the existing literature in her bibliographic essay, Keys was reluctant to address it in the main body of the text. Her decision to engage with historiography only in the back section means that it will be harder for some readers to appreciate fully how original Keys’s argument is. Although it is not the focus of this book, Keys is quite critical of Amnesty International, as she has been elsewhere, for using victims of human rights abuses for the organization’s own purposes as well as what she sees as the group’s limited goals.8 Here, her interpretation is new, but she is not able to highlight her contribution to the historiography sufficiently. In addition, Keys’s book is one of the first accounts of the influence of Soviet dissidence on United States human rights rhetoric and activism, but her addition to the literature is obscured by limited engagement with the existing historiography. Moreover, it means that she has insufficiently acknowledged her

8 See Keys’s talks on Amnesty International’s Campaign against Torture.
predecessors in the main text. To give one example, her chapter "The Liberal Critique of Right-Wing Dictatorships," would have benefitted from substantive engagement with David Schmitz's important *The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships*, but instead his work is referenced in only one endnote.⁹

Barbara Keys's book will meaningfully shift debates over American attention to human rights, forcing those who follow to grapple not only with changing conceptions of human rights, how ideas foster mass movements, the significance of nongovernmental and lower-level actors, but also, most significantly, with the interior lives of our subjects.

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