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Umberto Tulli. “‘Whose rights are human rights?’ The Ambiguous Emergence of Human Rights and the Demise of Kissingerism.” *Cold War History* 12:4 (November 2012): 573-593. DOI: 10.1080/14682745.2012.654491. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2012.654491>

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Reviewed by **Seth Ackerman**, Cornell University

Umberto Tulli's article joins a growing literature that examines how East-West détente collided with the human rights movement of the 1970s. A clearly argued and well-organized piece of historiography, the article presents a convincing framework for understanding the domestic political contest over human rights as a factor in the decline and fall of President Richard Nixon and National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger's détente. Tulli argues that Kissinger's *realpolitik*-oriented diplomacy provoked two separate but intertwined critiques by domestic opponents, each of which was rooted in a logic of American exceptionalism, and each based on the moral imperative of human rights. Cold Warriors used human rights as a tool to discredit détente diplomacy by drawing attention to Soviet and Communist repression in the interest of reviving a more confrontational stance toward Moscow. Liberals, meanwhile, embraced human rights as an antidote to Kissinger's amoral foreign policy, but unlike conservatives they did so in order to advance a somewhat vaguely articulated post-Cold War foreign policy doctrine, one that accepted the desirability of U.S.-Soviet rapprochement while aiming to foreground American ideals. Despite these clashing motivations, the two critiques ended up reinforcing each other, with the result that the domestic legitimacy of Kissinger's foreign policy was seriously undermined by 1976.

Tulli offers a useful review of the factors that drove human rights concerns to the forefront of foreign policy debate in the 1970s, pointing to elements highlighted in the secondary literature, such as the growth of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) like Amnesty International, the emergence of a more assertive Congress in the Watergate era, and a need for an overarching foreign policy rationale at a time when traditional Cold War structures and doctrines were in abeyance. But the heart of his narrative is an account of interactions between Congress and the executive branch during the 1973-76 Nixon-Ford presidential term. Based mostly on Congressional records, administration policymaking documents,

and the contemporary press, the story has three major sets of protagonists. On the left there were the “new internationalists” (580), such as Senators Harold Hughes (D-IA) and Donald Fraser (D-MN), who condemned in public hearings Kissinger’s status-quo-oriented diplomacy and used legislative amendments to require that American assistance to foreign governments be conditioned on human rights criteria. On the right, there was a seemingly more disparate set of actors that Tulli calls the “conservative insurgency” (585) against détente, whose most visible spokesman was Senator Henry “Scoop” Jackson (D-WA). Seeking to use Communist human rights violations to undermine Washington’s détente policies, their methods included the Jackson-Vanik amendment, adopted in 1974, which prohibited trade normalization with Communist countries that did not allow free emigration; persistent demands that President Ford meet with Soviet dissident Alexander Solzhenitsyn over the Politburo’s strenuous objections; and first denouncing, and then capitalizing on, the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, which established a semi-official framework for holding Communist regimes to account for their human rights policies.

The final protagonist in the story is, of course, the Nixon-Ford administration itself, with Kissinger providing the thread of continuity. Long a critic of Wilsonian crusades, the National Security Adviser abhorred the injection of human rights issues into foreign policy, believing that attempts to interfere in other countries’ domestic affairs undermined both stability abroad and a rational policymaking process at home. Tulli follows Kissinger as he scrambled, with dwindling success, to deflect, co-opt, and shut down the various legislative and rhetorical assaults on his diplomacy. Ultimately, Tulli concludes, while events overseas, such as turmoil in Portugal and Soviet intervention in Africa, were most responsible for the crisis of Kissinger’s foreign policy project in 1975-76, “it was congressional assertiveness on human rights which weakened his realistic rhetoric and his ability to build a domestic consensus”:

By early 1976, journalists, commentators and pundits were foreshadowing Kissinger’s decline. Indeed, his diplomacy and the successes it brought never really resonated with the American public, who were in favor of détente and bipolar dialogue, but who also felt that morality and ideals should be reflected in the making of American foreign policy.

Once the Cold War consensus had split and Kissingerism had been defeated because of its perceived amorality, human rights offered a strong moral and ideological way to recreate wide domestic support. By proclaiming human rights to be a ‘fundamental tenet of (American) foreign policy,’ the new president, Jimmy Carter, attempted to respond to the growing attention toward human rights, uneasily trying to synthesize the neoconservatives’ and the new internationalists’ approaches to human rights (593).

Thus, Tulli argues for the importance of human rights in the decline of Kissinger’s *realpolitik* diplomacy while presenting a symmetrical image of opposition to Nixon’s foreign policy, emphasizing its sources on both the right and the left. Although Tulli crafts

these two arguments with polish and documents them amply, neither is new in the historiography of détente. They can be found, for example, in Julian Zelizer's recent history of the domestic politics of national security or Robert David Johnson's account of Congress's role in the Cold War.¹

What is refreshing, however, is Tulli's care in distinguishing between "Kissingerism" – the subject of the article – and détente in general. It is the demise of the former, not the latter, that Tulli seeks to explain, for he rightly points out that even in late 1976, when Kissingerism was near death, the concept of détente was still broadly favored as an overall framework for East-West relations. Yet this observation, in turn, underscores an asymmetry that goes unremarked in the article. By the start of 1977, a resurgent conservative movement led by Ronald Reagan had turned the Republican Party heavily against détente, whereas liberal and moderate Democrats in Congress still largely supported it (despite a few vocal but politically anomalous neoconservatives like Senator Jackson).

Thus, while Tulli is surely correct in arguing that the use of human rights to attack "Kissingerism" was ideologically "double-headed" (573) its use to attack the foundations of détente itself was largely limited to the right. That minor reservation aside, Umberto Tulli's article provides a valuable analysis of an important political turning point in the later Cold War.

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¹ Julian Zelizer, [*Arsenal of Democracy: The Politics of National Security - From World War II to the War on Terrorism*](#) (New York: Basic Books, 2009); Robert David Johnson, *Congress and the Cold War* (Cambridge University Press, 2005).