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Sarah B. Snyder. “‘A Call for U.S. Leadership’: Congressional Activism on Human Rights.”

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Sarah B. Snyder’s “‘A Call for U.S. Leadership’: Congressional Activism on Human Rights” is an excellent examination of a critical yet mostly overlooked chapter in the emergence of human rights as a component of American foreign policy: the 1973 hearings on human rights chaired by Representative Donald M. Fraser’s House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on International Organizations and Social Movements. She argues that these hearings “fundamentally recalibrated U.S. foreign policy formulation,” and “precipitated a wave of legislation that reshaped the State Department’s bureaucracy and formalized human rights as a factor in U.S. policy.” This built the “foundation upon which Jimmy Carter’s administration could build and assured that attention to human rights would last beyond Carter’s presidency” (372).

As her recent historiography on “Human Rights and U.S. Foreign Relations” demonstrated, the study of human rights has captured the attention of scholars in the past decade who have produced numerous excellent examinations of the issue, from the United Nations’ “Universal Declaration of Human Rights” to case studies that focus primarily on the Carter yearsonward. Diplomatic historians have also studied many important human-rights organizations (Snyder’s award-winning book on Helsinki Watch, *Human Rights Activism and the End of the Cold War* is part of this trend), and key individuals involved in the emergence of human rights concerns, and are taking transnational approaches to the study of the question.¹

¹ Sarah B. Snyder, “Human Rights and U.S. Foreign Relations: A Historiographical Review” *Passport*, April 2013, Issue 44, Volume 1: 16-21; and *Human Rights Activism and the End of the Cold War: A Transnational History of the Helsinki Network* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2011).

Snyder does an excellent job demonstrating how Fraser and other members of Congress came to be concerned about human rights and the issues his subcommittee on International Organizations and Social Movements decided to investigate. For many, the Vietnam War was the catalyst to criticism of American foreign policy and questions about the nature of the regimes the United States supported in the name freedom during the Cold War. Yet, if the war in Vietnam had been an isolated event, it is unclear if the concern for human rights would have emerged when it did. As Fraser noted, U.S. involvement in the coups in Greece in 1967 and Chile in 1973, and the American intervention in the Dominican Republic in 1965 were decisive, as it was, Fraser stated, “the continuing erosion of human rights in the world” that prompted his hearings (377). “Because many concerns had developed over the years about the U.S. role with regimes committing serious human rights violations,” Fraser sought “a more systematic approach to the topic made sense” (376).

Snyder deftly analyzes Fraser’s subcommittee hearings in the fall 1973 and how the members moved beyond moral concerns to explore the question of human rights from the perspective of how Washington’s support for authoritarian regimes was having a negative long-term impact on U.S. foreign policy. In the wake of the hearings, the subcommittee’s report, “Human Rights in the World Community: A Call for U.S. Leadership,” recommended legislation seeking to create an Office for Human Rights in the Bureau of International Organizations, a designated human rights official in each geographic branch of the State Department, and a legal advisor on human rights as part of an Advisory Committee on Human Rights. The importance of the hearings can be measured by the pushback by the Nixon and Ford administrations, and Snyder carefully examines Secretary of State Henry Kissinger’s efforts to derail the proposed changes to the State Department. Kissinger, she notes, saw human rights as a lesser concern than did the subcommittee, and “resented the interference of Congress in the formulation and implementation of U.S. foreign policy” (385).

The outcome was significant. Congressional advocates of human rights learned that their most effective tactic was to focus on restricting military aid to regimes that violated human rights, forced the State Department to conduct two studies of how it considered human rights in the making of policy, and forced administrative changes in the State Department that included the appointment of an Assistant Legal Advisor for Human Rights and a human rights official in three regional bureaus. Snyder’s examination of the important 1974 State Department report, “U.S. Policies on Human Rights and Authoritarian Regimes,” calls attention to an important document that has not received the attention it deserves, including by this author.

It is hard to argue with Snyder’s conclusion that Fraser’s hearings, and the resulting report and legislation, “signaled a turning point in U.S. foreign policy formulation” (396). Still, as she correctly notes, the “subcommittee’s hearing should be viewed as part of a larger pattern of congressional activism in foreign policy in these year, spurred to a large degree by the Vietnam War and Watergate scandal” (375). There is, however, little discussion of

the other aspects of congressional activism on foreign policy in the essay. Congressional activism was not limited to just human rights. At the same time Fraser's hearings were held, the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence was formed and had begun to examine abuses of power by the Executive Branch and American multinational corporations abroad.

Senator Frank Church, who chaired the Senate hearings and expanded them to include investigations of covert operations to overthrow governments and assassinate foreign leaders, had already called for recalibration of American foreign policy and a broader definition of national security to include moral concerns and human rights. While Kissinger was battling with Fraser and his allies over the role of human rights in foreign policymaking and the structure of the State Department, he was fighting with Church over access to documents on American policy in Chile, the Dominican Republic, Cuba, and other nations where covert operations had recently been conducted, and how much information the Church Committee would make public. Moreover, support for governments facing what the Nixon and Ford administrations saw as Soviet directed threats, such as Angola and Greece, was being challenged in Congress as it sought to reestablish more say in the conduct of American foreign policy. A fuller sense of the context and the identity of Fraser's allies would help explain why the Congressman's little-known subcommittee had such a significant impact that Snyder so expertly analyzes and explains.

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