

# H-Diplo ROUNDTABLE XXII-15

Rasmus Sinding Søndergaard. *Reagan, Congress, and Human Rights: Contesting Morality in US Foreign Policy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. ISBN: 9781108495639 (hardback, \$59.99).

7 December 2020 | <https://hdiplo.org/to/RT22-15>

Editor: Diane Labrosse | Production Editor: George Fujii

## Contents

---

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Introduction by Debbie Sharnak, Rowan University .....        | 2  |
| Review by Michael Franczak, University of Pennsylvania .....  | 5  |
| Review by Theresa Keeley, University of Louisville .....      | 8  |
| Review by Doug Rossinow, Metropolitan State University .....  | 11 |
| Review by Christian Ruth, University at Albany-SUNY .....     | 15 |
| Response by Rasmus Sinding Søndergaard, Lund University ..... | 18 |

INTRODUCTION BY DEBBIE SHARNAK, ROWAN UNIVERSITY

---

In the ever-expanding field of human rights in U.S. foreign policy history, Rasmus Sinding Søndergaard's new book contributes to a growing focus on the 1980s.<sup>1</sup> His study, *Reagan, Congress, and Human Rights: Contesting Morality in US Foreign Policy*, is centrally concerned with the struggle between the Reagan administration and various members of Congress. In large part, he focuses on how congressional actors—whom Søndergaard describes as “foreign policy entrepreneurs”—ultimately forced President Ronald Reagan to deal seriously with human rights, but in the perhaps unintended way of crafting a conservative human rights policy that centered around the twin goals of anti-Communism and democracy promotion (2). By placing congressional activism at the center of his analysis, he focuses on how relations between the executive and legislative branches shaped the foreign policy of human rights, but also how human rights shaped executive-legislative relations during Reagan's administration.

The first half of the book provides an evolution of Reagan's shift, or ‘turnaround’ on the issue of human rights as well as the establishment of the Congressional Human Rights Caucus (CHRC). The last three chapters deal with case studies on Soviet Jewish emigration, South African apartheid, and Nicaragua. As Søndergaard explains in his response below, this structure combined “an examination of new approaches to human rights in the Reagan administration and Congress in the 1980s with an in-depth analysis of how individuals in these two branches of government contested the role of human rights in specific foreign policy cases.”

The reviewers in this roundtable are generally complimentary of this project, noting both its excellent research and important contributions to the field. Michael Franczak states how the book “is a superbly researched, uniquely argued, and notably well-written contribution to the modern history of human rights.” Doug Rossinow similarly explains how Søndergaard's work “reflects excellent work in U.S. Congressional archives and provides reliable accounts of important developments in U.S. foreign policy during the presidency of Ronald Reagan.” Indeed, various reviewers note the extensive, “wide array,” (Rossinow) and well-researched nature of the book which “draws on both largely ignored and recently released material from Congressional membership and Non-governmental Organization (NGO) groups, combined with new resources from the National Archives and Presidential Libraries” (Ruth).

The reviewers are also enthusiastic about the book's contributions to the field of human rights history. Franczak praises Søndergaard's explanation of how in the “1980s Republicans and Democrats came to embrace a shared (and therefore limited) definition of human rights by, well, arguing about it.” Rossinow writes that Søndergaard's “major innovation is to locate [Reagan's] policies and the struggles around them in the context of human rights history and historiography.”

All the reviewers identify the importance of Søndergaard's chapter on the CHRC. As Theresa Keeley explains, his discussion on the topic is “valuable because it not only shows that human rights was a popular issue, but also how malleable the concept was.” She notes that the CHRC “was not about making bold statements; it was, as Søndergaard stresses, about building a “minimal American consensus” (105). The CHRC's flexibility highlights how support for human rights could be both meaningful and meaningless, as the CHRC offered members of Congress the opportunity to respond to constituent concerns with minimal risk.” One of Søndergaard's major projects is putting Congress at the fore of understanding the institutionalization of human rights within US foreign policy. Thus, this chapter is key both in its originality for pursuing a new line of research and its importance for demonstrating Søndergaard's conclusions about governmental actors' evolution in utilizing human rights discourse during the decade.

---

<sup>1</sup> See, among others, Joe Renouard, *Human Rights in American Foreign Policy: From the 1960s to the Soviet Collapse* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2015); Robert Pee and William Michael Schmidli, eds., *The Reagan Administration, the Cold War, and the Transition to Democracy Promotion* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); Lauren Turek, *To Bring the Good News to All Nations: Evangelical Influence on Human Rights and U.S. Foreign Relations* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020).

In terms of case studies, Keeley and Rossinow both praise the South Africa chapter as a particularly useful illustration of how the interaction between Congress and Reagan reshaped human rights policy. Rossinow explains how the protest movement there “was the catalyst for a particularly successful Congressional challenge to Reagan’s foreign policy.” He further notes that the chapter offers “a fuller, more authoritative brief account than we have had before” on this topic. Keeley also remarks that she found this case study “the most convincing in understanding why particular members of Congress opposed U.S. foreign policy on human rights grounds.”

Alongside this praise, there are several areas on which the reviewers want more explanation or, at times, deeper analysis. Franczak and Christian Ruth, for example, want more information on the absence of social and economic rights in Søndergaard’s work. Ruth also wonders “to what extent did the citizens and governments of Nicaragua, South Africa, and the Soviet Union have the same views of human rights as American citizens and the American government? This is a quiet tension in the book, especially since most of Søndergaard’s sources come from the United States.” Rossinow would also have been interested in seeing a comparison between Central and South American cases, where events, especially regarding human rights, played out quite differently. In his response, Søndergaard largely agrees with all these lines of questioning while noting that they largely fell outside the purview of this particular narrative. In respect to socio-economic rights though, Søndergaard acknowledges this absence and gives readers a preview of his new work, explaining that his current project centers on “socio-economic human rights in Scandinavian diplomacy at the United Nations in the 1970s.”

The most serious critiques come from Keeley, who notes two central concerns. The first is the mischaracterization of her own work regarding the attribution of certain motivations to actors that she does not study. Søndergaard responds by stating that “I did not mean to suggest that Keeley made a claim about the individuals in question, but rather that her work demonstrates that liberal Catholics as a group tended to share the views of the Maryknoll Sisters on the situation in Nicaragua.<sup>2</sup> I acknowledge that my imprecision allowed for a misunderstanding.”

More substantively, though, she is “somewhat skeptical of Søndergaard’s suggestion that the Reagan administration’s focus on human rights was purely for political gain.” She asks if “it is not also possible that conservatives, including some within the Reagan administration, had a different understanding of human rights than that of their opponents? Many ardent anti-Communists saw living under Communism not as *a* violation, but as *the* most egregious violation of human rights.”

In response, Søndergaard explains that he did not seek to “suggest that the administration’s focus on human rights was *purely* for political gain” but rather he believes “the administration was enthusiastic about human rights when they were combined with anti-Communism. This was not a political ploy but was based on a sincere opposition to Communism and a firm belief that it constituted the ultimate human rights violation.”

Ultimately, despite these disagreements and their desire for more information, reviewers are enthusiastic about the work. Franczak explains that, “[a]fter reading Søndergaard’s book, I am convinced that contemporary American discourse around human rights is equally the legacy of conservative Republicans like Ronald Reagan and Jesse Helms as it is Jimmy Carter and liberal Democrats in Congress.” Keeley also states that the work, “contributes to a greater understanding of congressional human rights activism during the 1980s and how opposition on human rights grounds was part of a broader congressional challenge to executive power in the foreign policy arena.”

Ruth perhaps leaves us with the most useful concluding remark by stating: “the best sections of Søndergaard’s book showcase just how much there is left to unveil in what could be called ‘traditional’ human rights histories of the late Cold War.” Indeed, while Søndergaard helps lay some historiographical and historical foundations for studying human rights in

---

<sup>2</sup> Theresa Keeley, “Reagan’s Real Catholics Vs. Tip O’Neill’s Maryknoll Nuns: Gender, Intra-Catholic Conflict, and the Contras,” *Diplomatic History* 40:3 (2015): 533.

the 1980s—particularly from a congressional perspective—he also paves a research path for other scholars of this period to advance in future work.

**Participants:**

**Rasmus Sinding Søndergaard** is Senior Researcher at the Danish Institute for International Studies. Previously, he was a Marie Curie Fellow at Lund University and a postdoc at Georgetown University. He is the author of *Reagan, Congress, and Human Rights: Contesting Morality in US Foreign Policy* (Cambridge University Press, 2020). His research on human rights and democracy promotion in US foreign policy has been published in *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, *the Journal of Cold War Studies*, *International Politics*, and several edited volumes.

**Debbie Sharnak** is Assistant Professor of History and International Studies at Rowan University. She is working on a book manuscript entitled “*Of Light and Struggle: The International Histories of Human Rights and Transitional Justice in Uruguay*” which examines the evolution of human rights discourse and the origins of transitional justice from the mid-1960s through the 1980s. Her work has been published in *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, *the Journal of Iberian and Latin American Studies*, *TALLER*, the *Washington Post*, and several edited volumes on topics such as U.S. foreign policy, Latin America, human rights, and transitional justice.

**Michael Franczak** is a Postdoctoral Fellow in Global Order at the University of Pennsylvania’s Perry World House. His most recent article, “Losing the Battle, Winning the War: Neoconservatives versus the New International Economic Order” appeared in *Diplomatic History* in November 2019. He is currently finishing a book on U.S. foreign policy and global inequality in the 1970s for Cornell University Press.

**Theresa Keeley** is an assistant professor of the U.S. and the World at the University of Louisville. Her first book, *Reagan’s Gun-Toting Nuns: The Catholic Conflict over Cold War Human Rights Policy in Central America*, (Cornell University Press, 2020). She has published articles in *Diplomatic History*, *Gender & History*, *The Catholic Historical Review*, and *U.S. Catholic Historian*. Her research and teaching focus on human rights, U.S. foreign relations, gender, religion, and law. Before entering academia, she was a human rights activist and attorney.

**Doug Rossinow** is professor of history and interim dean of the College of Liberal Arts at Metropolitan State University in St. Paul, Minnesota. He is the author of *The Reagan Era: A History of the 1980s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), among other works.

**Christian Ruth** is a Lecturer in History at the College of St. Rose and Ph.D. candidate at the University at Albany-SUNY. His dissertation focuses on how competing concepts of basic human needs and human rights were created during the Cold War. His research as appeared in *H-Nutrition*, *ReMedia*, and *Nursing Clio*, and he currently has an article under review for *The Journal of Cold War Studies* on locust swarms and development aid in Africa during the 1980s.

REVIEW BY MICHAEL FRAN CZAK, UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

---

Despite the wide scientific consensus regarding COVID 19's natural origins, U.S. President Donald Trump insists that the novel virus was created in a Chinese lab.<sup>1</sup> While the President has threatened only U.S. funding to the World Health Organization, Trump allies in Congress want to make Beijing pay—literally—for its alleged COVID crimes.<sup>2</sup> Senator Josh Hawley's (R-MO) Justice for Victims of COVID-19 Act, for instance, promises to “strip China of its sovereign immunity” and “empower Americans and other victims around the world to recover damages [from China's government].”<sup>3</sup> According to Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX), the crisis demonstrated that China's censorship of scientists and journalists was “no longer just a human rights threat, but also a threat to [U.S.] national security and global health.”<sup>4</sup>

It's not just Republicans demanding changes in Beijing. Former Vice President Joe Biden's first major TV ad centers on clips of Trump from January and February praising Chinese President Xi Jinping; of course, Hillary Clinton employed a similar strategy in 2016 with Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin. Trump has “grant[ed] Mr. Xi a free pass on human rights violations,” wrote former UN Ambassador and Biden surrogate Susan Rice in a May 19 op-ed for the *New York Times*, thus demonstrating his “abandonment of American moral leadership.” In contrast, as Vice President, Biden “advocated for American journalists in China and made the case for human rights even while on Chinese soil.”<sup>5</sup>

Hawley's bill will not pass, and Biden did not change Beijing's mind. But that is the point. In *Reagan, Congress, and Human Rights: Contesting Morality in US Foreign Policy*, Rasmus Sinding Søndergaard shows how during the 1980s Republicans and Democrats came to embrace a shared (and therefore limited) definition of human rights by, well, arguing about it. Sometimes this allowed for impressive collaboration and shows of solidarity, if not concrete results. More often, it involved partisan grandstanding, self-promotion, and trading accusations of hypocrisy. After reading Søndergaard's book, I am convinced that contemporary American discourse around human rights is equally the legacy of conservative Republicans like Ronald Reagan and Jesse Helms as it is Jimmy Carter and liberal Democrats in Congress.

*Reagan, Congress, and Human Rights* is a superbly researched, uniquely argued, and notably well-written contribution to the modern history of human rights—a crowded field that Søndergaard shows is far from complete. Human rights may have undergone a global “revolution” in the 1960s and 1970s—where most of the current scholarship is set—but they were

---

<sup>1</sup> Trump told reporters: “Whether they [China] made a mistake, or whether it started off as a mistake and then they made another one, or did somebody do something on purpose?” (“Coronavirus: Trump stands by China lab origin theory for virus,” *BBC*, 1 May 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52496098>).

<sup>2</sup> Senator Tom Cotton (R-AK), the loudest of Washington's China hawks, proposed a \$43 billion bill combining a new Pacific fleet with economic sanctions and incentives for US companies to move manufacturing home. He explained: “More Americans than ever, like more Asians than ever, recognize that China is a pariah state, and we ought to treat them like a pariah state.” (Gerald F. Seib, “Tom Cotton Has a China Coronavirus Attack Plan,” *Wall Street Journal*, 11 May 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/tom-cotton-has-a-china-coronavirus-attack-plan-11589204375>).

<sup>3</sup> Josh Hawley, “Senator Hawley Announces Bill to Hold Chinese Communist Party Responsible for COVID-19 Pandemic,” 14 April 2020, <https://www.hawley.senate.gov/senator-hawley-announces-bill-hold-chinese-communist-party-responsible-covid-19-pandemic/>.

<sup>4</sup> Emily Jacobs, “GOP senators call for tough response against China over coronavirus crisis,” *New York Post*, 16 April 2020, <https://nypost.com/2020/04/16/republicans-call-for-action-against-china-over-coronavirus-crisis/>.

<sup>5</sup> Susan E. Rice, “Trump Is Playing the China Card. Who Believes Him?” *New York Times*, 19 May 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/19/opinion/trump-biden-china.html>.

(re)made by Washington in the 1980s.<sup>6</sup> That is, while Carter left office deeply unpopular, polls showed that Americans remained enthusiastic about the idea of human rights in U.S. foreign policy. Thus, it was Ronald Reagan and various members of Congress (Søndergaard’s useful term is “foreign policy entrepreneurs”) who capitalized on the new popularity of human rights while defining its boundaries (21).

Initially, the Reagan Administration had little use for human rights, at least as practiced by the Carter Administration, which it saw as counterproductive punishment of reliable anti-Communist allies. The disastrous 1981 nomination of Ernest Lefever for Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights led to an early and abrupt “Reagan turnaround,” embodied in neoconservative thinkers like Elliott Abrams (Reagan’s eventual choice for the post) and Jeane Kirkpatrick at the United Nations. Through two explanatory chapters and three case studies—Soviet Jews, or ‘refuseniks’; apartheid in South Africa; and the Nicaraguan ‘Contras’—Søndergaard argues that “pressure from members of Congress had the unintended consequence of initiating the [Reagan] administration’s creation of a conservative human rights policy centered on democracy promotion and anti-communism,” and in the process “changed the conversation from whether human rights concerns should inform US foreign policy to how they should” (20-21).<sup>7</sup>

As I anticipate that other members of this roundtable will address the case studies in greater detail, I will focus on two aspects of the book that were most notable to me as a historian of U.S. foreign policy and development.

The first is how Reagan and Congress—separately and together—defined human rights. Beginning in 1981, the Reagan Administration introduced a “conservative human rights policy” that, as its architect Elliot Abrams put it, recognized just “two categories of human rights: freedom from government violations of the integrity of the person, and a list of civil and political liberties.” As Søndergaard points out, “the Reagan administration’s downgrade of economic and social rights represented a significant rhetorical break with the previous official US government definition of human rights” (145). Policy Review Memorandum 28, the Carter Administration’s human rights blueprint, recognized and defined “economic and social rights” as “the right to free from government action or inaction” inhibiting an individual’s “basic needs” for “food, shelter, health care and education.”<sup>8</sup>

I understand the omission of social and economic rights in a “conservative human rights policy.” More striking to me—and wanting for explanation—is that Reagan’s liberal opponents in Congress did the same. It was not always this way. The 1973 U.S. Foreign Assistance Act—“the country’s pioneering human rights legislation,” writes Samuel Moyn—introduced the “new directions” principles focusing U.S. foreign aid on the “basic human needs” of the world’s poor.<sup>9</sup> Clearly, in the early 1980s there was an abrupt and bipartisan abandonment of social and economic rights, in the White House and Congress alike. Why?

---

<sup>6</sup> A (brief) list includes Sarah Snyder, *From Selma to Moscow: How Human Rights Activists Transformed U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018); Steven L.B. Jensen, *The Making of International Human Rights. The 1960s, Decolonization and the Reconstruction of Global Values* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Barbara Keys, *Reclaiming American Virtue: The Human Rights Revolution of the 1970s* (Harvard University Press, 2014); Jan Eckel and Samuel Moyn, eds., *The Breakthrough: Human Rights in the 1970s* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014); Akira Iriye, Petra Goedde, eds., *The Human Rights Revolution: An International History* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); and Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights and the Uses of History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> Page numbers refer to Rasmus Sinding Søndergaard. “Reagan, Congress, and Human Rights.” Apple Books, <https://books.apple.com/us/book/reagan-congress-and-human-rights/id1507313180>.

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Department of State, “PRM on Human Rights,” 8 July 1977, <https://fas.org/irp/offdocs/prm/prm28.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> Samuel Moyn, *Not Enough: Human Rights in an Unequal World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 142.

Second, and relatedly, is Congress' institutionalization of human rights in the 1980s, which Søndergaard details through the largely unknown story of the Congressional Human Rights Committee (CHRC). "Consistently one of the largest caucuses with hundreds of members, but essentially run by its two founders," Congressmen John E. Porter (R-IL) and Tom Lantos (D-CA), the CHRC's rise both "demonstrated the broad appeal of certain human rights issues among members of Congress" and "revealed the limitations of a bipartisan consensus on human rights" (177).

From the start, the CHRC "virtually ignored" economic and social rights, which, as mentioned, had been an important part of congressional human rights discourse less than a decade earlier (177). More important, however, was the CHRC's purposefully limited stance on violations of rights it did recognize. The CHRC's ambition was not to enact a consensus on legislation—like, say, the Congressional Black Caucus—but to facilitate 'visibility' for any human rights issue a member of Congress would like to highlight. By courting everyone from liberal neophyte Barney Frank to Jesse Helms, the powerful leader of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, the CHRC became the least exclusive club on Capitol Hill. In its eagerness to serve (Congress), the CHRC "provided a range of legislative services to its members that made it easier for them to engage in human rights activism," such as annual "scorecards" which "helped members of Congress to keep track of their own actions and made it easy for them to inform their constituents on their support for popular human rights issues" (191-92).

The CHRC founders' worship of bipartisanship and avoidance of anything deemed "controversial" blinded the organization to consensus even among its constituents. Take apartheid. Søndergaard explains that

Although several of its members strongly opposed apartheid, the CHRC was initially reluctant to forcefully address human rights violations in South Africa and refrained from taking a position on US policy. Only after Congress voted in favor of economic sanctions against South Africa in 1985, backed by considerable public support, did the CHRC more actively condemn apartheid and support a tougher US policy. Even then, most of CHRC activities on South Africa protested individual cases rather than delivering a more comprehensive critique of apartheid (212-213).

Instead of collective action through legislation, Lantos and the CHRC exalted 'visibility' as an end in itself. Thus, while Congress was voting on sanctions, CHRC staff spent October 1985 mailing "more than 150 letters on specific human rights cases to heads of states in the Soviet Union, Poland, Romania, East Germany, Iran, South Africa, Gabon, Nigeria, Somalia, Chile, Cuba, El Salvador, Guatemala, Taiwan, China, South Korea, and the Philippines." Referring to the letter-writing campaign in the CHRC's 1986 newsletter, Lantos boasted: "This is the ultimate power of the Congressional Human Rights Caucus. By focusing congressional attention directly on the most serious human rights violations, we emphasize the tremendous bipartisan support for human rights in the Congress" (192). I guess you can't be accused of selling out if your mission is to buy in.

REVIEW BY THERESA KEELEY, UNIVERSITY OF LOUISVILLE

---

*Reagan, Congress, and Human Rights: Contesting Morality in US Foreign Policy*, as Rasmus Sinding Søndergaard explains, “traces the role of human rights concerns in US foreign policy during the 1980s, focusing on the struggle among the Reagan administration and members of Congress” (2). Søndergaard outlines the book’s contributions as threefold. First, he focuses on human rights in the 1980s. In doing so, Søndergaard is part of a growing group of scholars, including Carol Anderson, Sarah B. Snyder, and Kelly J. Shannon,<sup>1</sup> whose work branches beyond the typical focus on the 1940s or the 1970s. Second, he centers his analysis on members of Congress, rather than “presidents or grassroots movements” (7). Third, he argues that the Reagan administration changed its approach to human rights in 1981.

The book consists of six chapters. The first provides background on the approach of members of Congress and of presidents Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan to human rights in the 1970s and 1980s. Chapter 2 argues the Reagan administration underwent a change regarding human rights in 1981 that was prompted by congressional pressure. Chapter 3 details the development and significance of the Congressional Human Rights Caucus (CHRC). The remaining three chapters are case studies that examine the struggle between Congress and the Reagan administration over Soviet Jewish emigration, apartheid in South Africa, and human rights in Nicaragua.

Søndergaard’s chapter on the CHRC is valuable because it not only shows that human rights was a popular issue, but also how malleable the concept was. CHRC was a bipartisan effort started by Democrat Tom Lantos of California and Republican John E. Porter of Illinois in 1983. Though without legislative power, the caucus highlighted human rights issues by sponsoring activities such as briefings, seminars, and film screenings, and by hosting dissidents. Perhaps most significantly, CHRC institutionalized the human rights activism of congressional members through its computer tracking system, which listed issues and congressional actions. In an unusual move that demonstrated its significance, Congress made CHRC a permanent commission in 2008.

Ultimately, however, the CHRC was safe. The caucus defined human rights narrowly by “largely ignoring economic, social, and cultural rights” (109). The CHRC steered clear of controversial issues and gave members the flexibility to choose issues of importance to them. It was not about making bold statements; it was, as Søndergaard stresses, about building a “minimal American consensus” (105). The CHRC’s flexibility highlights how support for human rights could be both meaningful and meaningless, as the CHRC offered members of Congress the opportunity to respond to constituent concerns with minimal risk.

In the final three chapters, Søndergaard shows the contrasting ways in which Congress and the president interacted over human rights issues in three areas of the world. Søndergaard characterizes Soviet Jewish emigration as an area of “generally constructive collaboration” between the executive and legislative branches (266). Congress – together with NGOs – pushed for a “rigid linkage” between Jewish emigration and U.S. policy (161). Although the Reagan administration rejected this approach and preferred quiet diplomacy, Søndergaard contends that congressional members succeeded in pushing Reagan to “become more outspoken in his public criticism of Soviet human rights violations over the years” (162). Congressional criticism initially “complicated improvements in superpower relations,” but eventually, advances in human rights “contributed to an overall improvement on bilateral relations between the two countries” (162). Parsing out congressional impact is “difficult to measure,” Søndergaard argues, because of the “basic agreement between the executive and legislative branches on the goals of US policy toward the Soviet Union” (161).

---

<sup>1</sup> Carol Anderson, *Bourgeois Radicals: The NAACP and the Struggle for Colonial Liberation, 1941–1960* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Sarah B. Snyder, *From Selma to Moscow: How Human Rights Activists Transformed U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018); Kelly J. Shannon, *U.S. Foreign Policy and Muslim Women’s Human Rights* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).

In contrast, Congress and the president disagreed regarding how to handle South Africa. The relationship was “tumultuous” and ended with congressional critics changing the direction of U.S. policy (267). Congress, for only the second time in history, overrode a president’s veto of foreign policy legislation to pass the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act of 1986. The move was even more significant given that the president’s own party controlled the Senate at the time.

Of the three cases studies in *Reagan, Congress, and Human Rights*, I found this one the most convincing in understanding why particular members of Congress opposed U.S. foreign policy on human rights grounds. Søndergaard describes how and why individual members of Congress, namely Democrat Ron Dellums of California, as well as groups such as the Congressional Black Caucus, led the charge against apartheid. Søndergaard explains how outside groups, including TransAfrica and the Free South Africa Movement, worked with as well as exerted pressure on members of Congress to challenge U.S. support for South Africa’s apartheid regime. He also notes the activism outside the Beltway, as 23 states and 83 cities pushed for divestment. Søndergaard shows how opposition to Reagan’s policy of constructive engagement grew over time, especially among Republicans. As he notes, “South African violence, the failure of the Reagan administration policy, and the growing anti-apartheid movement combined to sway public opinion which ultimately changed the political calculus on apartheid” (208).

While Søndergaard argues that Reagan “rarely framed apartheid as a human rights issue” (170), human rights were front and center in U.S.-Nicaragua policy debates. The White House and its congressional adversaries proposed alternative ways of framing human rights. The Reagan administration characterized the Sandinista-led Nicaraguan government as the premiere violator of human rights. Policy opponents instead contended it was the Contras, the counterrevolutionaries, who with U.S. training and arms, sought to overthrow the Nicaraguan government. In exploring this back-and-forth between Reagan and his congressional opponents, Søndergaard follows prior scholars, such as William LeoGrande and Cynthia Arnson.<sup>2</sup>

As with his discussion of South Africa, Søndergaard includes the opponents both in and outside of Congress and how the two worked together. He argues that “liberal Catholics and anti-war advocates in the Democratic Party were among the most outspoken opponents of US support for the Contras” (263). He also notes the larger movement against U.S. intervention in Central America that included “a mixture of leftists, labor unions, church organizations, and peace groups” (223). And, unlike the cases of Soviet Jews and apartheid, the Reagan administration engaged in human rights debates concerning Nicaragua and even joined forces with individuals and NGOs who pointed to the human rights abuses of the Sandinistas.

In discussing the faith of some congressional opponents, Søndergaard notes that “[Edward] Markey, [Edward “Ted”] Kennedy, [Christopher] Dodd and [Peter] Rodino were all liberal Catholics, who, as Theresa Keeley has demonstrated in her analysis of the intra-Catholic conflict over US Nicaragua policy, tended to share the views of the Maryknoll Sisters” (226). Although I appreciate Søndergaard’s use of my work, he gives me credit for arguments I did not make. I did not analyze any of these men, their religious beliefs, or their possible connection to the Maryknoll Sisters, a U.S.-based order of missionary nuns.<sup>3</sup>

I am also somewhat skeptical of Søndergaard’s suggestion that the Reagan administration’s focus on human rights was purely for political gain. He contends that the Reagan “administration’s commitment to human rights was strategic, highly selective, and only truly enthusiastic when combined with anti-communism” (262). No doubt there was political advantage, especially in dampening opponents’ calls for greater human rights in U.S. foreign policy, but is it not also possible that

---

<sup>2</sup> William M. LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Cynthia J. Arnson, *Crossroads: Crossroads: Congress, the President, and Central America, 1976-1992*, 2nd ed. (College Park: Penn State University Press, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> Theresa Keeley, “Reagan’s Real Catholics vs. Tip O’Neill’s Maryknoll Nuns: Gender, Intra-Catholic Conflict, and the Contras,” *Diplomatic History* 40:3 (June 2016): 530-558, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/dh/dhv033>.

conservatives, including some within the Reagan administration, had a different understanding of human rights than that of their opponents? As Søndergaard acknowledges, “While liberals were particularly concerned with human rights violations in rightwing regimes supported by the United States, conservatives believed the United States should limit its human rights criticism [to] the Soviet Union and its allies” (262). Many ardent anti-Communists saw living under Communism not as *a* violation, but as *the* most egregious violation of human rights. I mention this not as a critique, but as a way of noting how Søndergaard’s work underscores the difficulty of parsing politicians’ motivations.

Ultimately, *Reagan, Congress, and Human Rights* contributes to a greater understanding of congressional human rights activism during the 1980s and how opposition on human rights grounds was part of a broader congressional challenge to executive power in the foreign policy arena. Human rights was a popular issue in the 1980s, as it had the support of both sides of the political aisle and the majority of the U.S. public. What was less agreed upon was what rights were the most important, whose human rights mattered, and to what degree human rights concerns should influence U.S. foreign policy. In highlighting the “ambiguity and elusiveness of the concept of human rights” (264), Søndergaard shows the complexity of the executive versus legislative branch battles over human rights’ role in U.S. foreign policy.

REVIEW BY DOUG ROSSINOW, METROPOLITAN STATE UNIVERSITY

---

This new book by Rasmus Sinding Søndergaard reflects excellent work in U.S. Congressional archives and provides reliable accounts of important developments in U.S. foreign policy during the presidency of Ronald Reagan (1981-1989). His book is effectively divided into two parts.

In the first, Søndergaard sketches a matrix for struggles over U.S. policy and over the role and definition of human rights in the context of those battles during the 1980s. These conflicts were sometimes partisan and ideological, with relatively liberal Democrats in the Congress opposing the policies of a conservative Republican administration, but sometimes they featured political convergence across those lines of division. Following the findings of Sarah Snyder, in Søndergaard's view the Reagan administration pivoted early on from an initial hostility to the very notion of human rights as a factor in U.S. foreign policy, which had become associated with Reagan's Democratic predecessor, Jimmy Carter, to a conservative, anti-Communist claim to uphold a valid concept of human rights.<sup>1</sup> The major voice for human rights in U.S. policy, however, was the Congressional Human Rights Caucus (CHRC), which was formed in 1983, and which boasted bipartisan membership. Søndergaard argues that the CHRC made it impossible for human rights concerns to recede from attention in policy-making discussions in the Reagan era, and he contends that members of the Congress ought to receive more attention from scholars of U.S. foreign policy than has been customary.

In the book's second part, Søndergaard presents three extensive case studies of conflict over human rights in the formulation of U.S. foreign policy during the 1980s. These case studies concern 'refuseniks' and the desire of Soviet Jews to emigrate, U.S. policy toward the racial apartheid state of South Africa, and Reagan's persistent efforts to destabilize and replace the socialist Sandinista government of Nicaragua. In the matter of Soviet Jewry, human rights claims against the Soviet Union enjoyed consensus support in the U.S. political system, aligning the full spectrum of both major parties with the Reagan administration. Debates over what stance the U.S. government ought to take toward the regime in Pretoria pitted a relatively friendly executive branch against an invigorated Congressional opposition of united Democrats, led by African American members, joined eventually by some Republicans, who all agreed that the apartheid state constituted a system built on human rights violations. This battle resulted in an extraordinary loss of control over U.S. foreign policy by Reagan, a popular incumbent president, with the 1986 passage of a strong sanctions law aimed at South Africa that Reagan vetoed and that the Congress then upheld. The lengthy struggle over Reagan's indirect war against the Sandinistas turned on a more divided Congress, as liberal Democrats sought to hem in the administration, but were in turn limited by support for Reagan's policy from a solid base of Congressional Republicans, one that was augmented by conservative and moderate Democrats. In terms of foreign policy, the conflicting parties in Washington fought the Nicaragua issue to a standstill, with neither side getting all of what it wanted.

The force of Søndergaard's findings might be assessed in two basic areas: the history of U.S. foreign policy in the late Cold War, specifically during Reagan's presidency; and the mushrooming scholarship and interpretive debate around human rights history.

Søndergaard divides Reagan's foreign policy team into "hardliners" (such as US Ambassador to the United Nations Jeane Kirkpatrick and Director of Central Intelligence William Casey) and "moderates" (primarily George Shultz, after he replaced Alexander Haig as secretary of state in 1982). He sees the hardliners as antipathetic to human rights as a cause in itself. They favored a tough-minded approach to world affairs in which the United States would seek allies where it could find them in a global struggle against Communism, and would largely eschew moral criticism of such allies. However, the hardliners sometimes cited human rights as one reason to oppose Communism. The moderates appeared less hostile to the notion of human rights and paid greater attention to world and domestic public concern over state repression abroad. The

---

<sup>1</sup> The key point of reference for Søndergaard is Sarah Snyder, "The Defeat of Ernest Lefever's Nomination: Keeping Human Rights on the United States Foreign Policy Agenda," in *Challenging US Foreign Policy: America and the World in the Long Twentieth Century*, ed. Bevan Sewell and Scott Lucas (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 136-161.

divide between these factions is clear enough, although I might tend to see it as one between zealots and conservative pragmatists—a division based as much on methods and temperament as on policy goals or ideology. Søndergaard contends that Shultz cared about human rights, citing Shultz’s discussion of the issue in his memoirs (72-73), but he does not portray Shultz as a human rights champion. It appears more that Shultz took no offense at the expression of human rights concerns. He seemingly saw little benefit in extravagantly defending notoriously atrocious states, and something to be gained from holding such regimes at arm’s length if possible. Shultz’s pragmatism surely overtook at least some areas of Reagan’s policy in the middle and late 1980s, if never completely.

Søndergaard argues that a shift toward a conservative pro-human rights stance, a stance that was focused on political and civil rights alone, occurred during the early years of the Reagan presidency, but in another respect he sees a great deal of consistency in Reagan’s foreign policy. He associates Reagan’s stance in foreign affairs with the ‘rollback’ orientation of conservatives that dated back to the 1950s, citing 1983’s National Security Decision Directive 75, which supposedly articulated a strategy for weakening the USSR and winning the Cold War, as well as the so-called “Reagan Doctrine” speech of 1985 in which Reagan embraced the goal of overthrowing revolutionary, anti-American regimes in various places (48-49). Rather than evidence of a consistent foreign policy stretching through the first four years of Reagan’s presidency, however, these documents spotlight the clearest points of temporary victory for those who were committed to finding ‘rollback’ opportunities in an administration wracked by foreign-policy factionalism. The Reagan Doctrine was real enough, even if it was applied only in select cases. While Reagan certainly looked forward to the eventual demise of Communism, he did not arrive in the White House with a plan to topple the Soviet Union, or even the hope of doing so.

In his case studies, Søndergaard provides valuable accounts that reveal a great deal about Congressional debates over U.S. foreign affairs during the twilight years of the Cold War. His chapters on Soviet Jewry and South Africa policy are fresher than his discussion of U.S. policy toward Nicaragua, since the last of these has been the subject of a relatively richer historiography. Søndergaard deserves praise for using new archival materials that are drawn from the personal papers of numerous members of the U.S. House and Senate in support of his analysis of debates over Nicaragua policy. Overall his account provides superb support from a wide array of primary source materials. Nonetheless, his narrative here is familiar from earlier published accounts.<sup>2</sup> There is no doubt that committed, persistent Congressional resistance to Reagan’s Nicaragua policy stemmed from outrage over the human rights records not only of the Nicaraguan Contras but more generally of those forces in Central America with which the Reagan administration allied itself. The drama around U.S. policy toward Nicaragua was one part of a larger regional story. Søndergaard does not offer a case study from South America, where events played out differently. Here Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights Elliott Abrams and others in the administration made a mark as (arguably improbable) human rights and democracy advocates, as they eventually threw in their lot with pro-democracy initiatives in Argentina and Chile. As I see it, some of Reagan’s men calculated, by the mid-1980s, that the risk of leftist insurgencies taking power in the Southern Cone if dictatorships there gave way to democracy was small, partly because of the successful repression that these regimes had instituted after they had taken power, and that therefore a conservative regime in Washington could afford to support democracy there.<sup>3</sup> An extended comparison of U.S. policy toward Central and South America under Reagan’s presidency would be welcome.

---

<sup>2</sup> Leading secondary sources, from which Søndergaard draws skillfully, include William M. LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977–1992* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Malcolm Byrne, *Iran-Contra: Reagan’s Scandal and the Unchecked Abuse of Presidential Power* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2014); Kathryn Sikkink, *Mixed Signals: U.S. Human Rights Policy and Latin America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004); and Theresa Keeley, “Reagan’s Real Catholics vs. Tip O’Neill’s Maryknoll Nuns: Gender, Intra-Catholic Conflict, and the Contras,” *Diplomatic History* 40:3 (2015): 530–558.

<sup>3</sup> See the important essays collected in Robert Pee and William Michael Schmidli, eds., *The Reagan Administration, the Cold War, and the Transition to Democracy Promotion* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); and Morris Morley and Chris McGillion, *Reagan and Pinochet: The Struggle over U.S. Policy toward Chile* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

The broad Congressional alignments in support of the human rights of Soviet Jews and of non-white South Africans in the 1980s provide food for thought. Supporting the rights of the refuseniks was a no-brainer for Americans, and united liberals and conservatives in a righteous Cold War crusade that salvaged some of the divisions over U.S. foreign policy that had erupted and lingered because of the U.S. war in Vietnam. Perhaps this shows that the moral basis of anti-Communism in the United States remained alive and well, and that dissent from what had seemed, to many, an egregious adventure in Vietnam had never betokened a widespread liberal abandonment of essential Cold War values. Perhaps it shows that identifying as one's causes religious liberty, the freedom to move and live where one chose, and the rights of Jews in particular as an oppressed group was a formula for assembling a maximum political alliance in the United States in this historical moment. No one in Washington was on the other side of this issue, although Reagan himself did not always press the cause as hard as some advocates might have wished, especially after he started to make progress in nuclear diplomacy with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.

The explosion of protest over Reagan's warmth toward the Pretoria regime in the 1980s became the focus, in a way, for a wide-ranging moral discontent with Reagan's policies, especially as many of those seemed inimical to the interests of people of African descent. That surge of protest, which rapidly gained establishment support in Washington as it made waves on university campuses, became the political site for the emergence of an oppositional vision of a U.S. foreign policy based in ideals of democracy and equality, one that was not shackled by seemingly outdated Cold War concerns or by a curious attachment to racist powers abroad. This protest movement was the catalyst for a particularly successful Congressional challenge to Reagan's foreign policy. Søndergaard provides a rounded narrative of this episode, one that builds on existing scholarship on protest activity but that pulls together a fuller, more authoritative brief account than we have had before. On this policy front, the pragmatists led by Shultz and Assistant Secretary of State Chester Crocker tried to sell a policy of "constructive engagement" (166-169), which is to say the administration said it was trying to change the apartheid system in its own nonconfrontational way. However, critics found that stance either insincere or ineffective or both. Ironically, when the opposition briefly overwhelmed the ship of state, it was being steered by the supposedly less polarizing 'moderates,' not the 'hardliners.' As the extra-governmental mobilization mounted in civil society, politicians in the Congress responded with new backing for serious sanctions against South Africa. Democrats appeared to find Reagan's Cold War arguments for sticking with Pretoria less compelling than the demands for tough action from their party's political base.

Beyond these narrative contributions and analyses of Reagan-era policies, Søndergaard's major innovation is to locate those policies and the struggles around them in the context of human rights history and historiography. He does so effectively, although his findings in this regard are a bit muted. He associates himself with Robert Brier's appealing recommendation that historians of human rights drop the effort to identify 'the' era when human rights truly became powerful in a lasting way in the twentieth-century world.<sup>4</sup> Søndergaard prefers the search for "multiple chronologies of postwar human rights history and a focus on the variety of human rights vernaculars" (6). In his introduction and early chapters, he points toward a promising effort to juxtapose familiar liberal or center-left languages of human rights with a conservative version of human rights talk that the Reagan administration gradually advanced in the 1980s. In the end, however, we do not get a detailed presentation of the latter. Instead, a revamped Cold War consensus and oppositional liberal versions of human rights politics prevail in his narrative. We might conclude that the effort by some elements in the Reagan administration to build a conservative human rights politics simply remained underdeveloped and failed to garner firm support either within the administration or from the American conservative movement. It would seem that there should have been ample material in various conservative traditions for a robust human rights language in the context of the lingering Cold War. Yet Søndergaard's effort to show that such a language or politics took hold securely in the Reagan administration is not fully realized, possibly because it cannot be.

More broadly, human rights talk appears to have been selective and opportunistic for almost everybody in elected office during the Reagan era. This is an important conclusion and it is one that Søndergaard allows, albeit gently. It is unclear how well this finding comports with the notion that human rights had become really important as a driving force behind U.S.

---

<sup>4</sup> Robert Brier, "Beyond the Quest for a 'Breakthrough': Reflections on the Recent Historiography on Human Rights," *European History Yearbook* 16 (2015): 155-173.

policy advocacy or policy results. Few indeed are the players in this study whose embrace of human rights does not appear to have been convenient, inconsistent, and heavily instrumentalized. It may be relatively easy for many to acknowledge this of people like Reagan or Abrams. Yet it also is somewhat true of Representative Tom Lantos (Democrat of California), one of the leaders of the CHRC and reputedly a hero of this history. Like other liberal Democrats, he embraced with alacrity the role of scourge of state Communism where Soviet Jewry or Tibet was concerned. He also avidly supported the Persian Gulf War of 1991 and the unprovoked U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, not exactly covering himself with glory as a human rights advocate in these episodes.<sup>5</sup> The CHRC overall was notably slow to embrace the anti-apartheid cause, which evidently seemed more controversial than supporting refuseniks. Perhaps ‘broad but thin’ is one way to describe the status of human rights in U.S. foreign policy debates during the 1980s. We should applaud Søndergaard for advancing the analysis of this nexus so densely and seriously into this period.

---

<sup>5</sup> Søndergaard recounts (113-114) Lantos’s involvement with false testimony to the Congress, during the build-up to the Gulf War, regarding alleged human rights abuses by occupying Iraqi troops in Kuwait (Søndergaard incorrectly states that the testimony occurred in 1989, rather than 1990). In 2002, Lantos argued that declining to make war on Saddam Hussein’s Iraq would be similar to the infamous appeasement of Nazi Germany by Britain and France in 1938. Lantos, a Holocaust survivor who was utterly devoted to the State of Israel, reportedly told a visiting member of the Israeli Knesset, also in 2002, “You won’t have any problem with Saddam. We’ll be rid of the bastard soon enough. And in his place we’ll install a pro-Western dictator, who will be good for us and good for you.” Akiva Eldar, “They’re Jumping in Head First,” *Ha’aretz*, 29 September 2002, <https://www.haaretz.com/1.5150315>, accessed 15 June 2020). Lantos became a critic of U.S. occupation policies by 2006, when the war had become highly unpopular.

## REVIEW BY CHRISTIAN RUTH, UNIVERSITY AT ALBANY-SUNY

Rasmus Sinding Søndergaard's most recent book, *Reagan, Congress, and Human Rights* is part of a growing chorus of new scholarship on the end of the Cold War. For Søndergaard, like many of us who study the 1980s, the Reagan administration presents as a study in contrasts. The standard bearers of the new conservatism pushed a muscular foreign policy that came to rely on the rhetoric of morality as much as strength of arms. Initially the administration was violently allergic to human rights concerns, but by the midpoint of the decade it had glommed onto human rights as a core part of its foreign policy. Søndergaard interrogates this shift, framing his analysis through a quote by journalist Tamar Jacoby, who claimed that by 1986 there had been a "turnaround" for the Reagan administration's attitude toward human rights (2). How did this turnaround happen? To what extent was such a turnaround even true? The turnaround conundrum is as much a useful literary device to structure the book as it is a genuine topic for discussion. Oriented around Jacoby's observation, Søndergaard's book draws on both largely ignored and recently released material from Congressional membership and Non-governmental Organization (NGO) groups, combined with new resources from the National Archives and Presidential Libraries. Such a diverse source-base is the scaffold for what might be considered the book's true topic, epitomized by Jacoby's quotation: analyzing the contestation between the Reagan administration and Congress on human rights issues. This is vital, Søndergaard argues, because the battle over human rights between these two groups was the "defining factor shaping American attention to human rights in the 1980s" (248).

The book tracks the evolution of human rights throughout President Ronald Reagan's time in office, bringing the study to the end of the Cold War era. After laying the historical groundwork of the state of human rights at the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the Reagan administration, Søndergaard wastes little time in leaping into the deep end of Congressional politics. He unleashes a flurry of names here, ranging from little-known Congressional staffers to major figures such as Henry M. "Scoop" Jackson (D-WA) and Dante B. Fascell (D-FL). It might be easy to get lost, but careful signposting helps guide the reader through the Congressional morass. What will most interest those who study Congress and its impact of human rights legislation will likely be Søndergaard's detailed history of the Congressional Human Rights Caucus (CHRC), which was created in 1983. The CHRC's journey to prominence during the 1980s reflected a larger push among members of Congress, especially Democrats, to carve out moral lines on human rights concerns. The tension between the Reagan administration and Congress often centered on these lines, and an important part of the "turnaround" that Jacoby spoke of is attributed to Congressional muscle, which prompted the administration to soften its human rights stance. Søndergaard treats the murky depths of the administration's inner politicking just as he does with Congress and immediately acquaints the reader with a variety of Secretaries of State, Congressional liaisons, and National Security Staff officials. Derived from over two dozen archives, the story of Congress and the administration's internal changes and infighting over human rights affairs is compelling. It is a credit to the straightforward writing style and layout of the book that among this cast of characters it is easy to keep up with the narrative.

Indeed, the book's structure is quite direct, and is organized as a series of case studies on major human rights crises during the Reagan era. Proceeding roughly chronologically, Søndergaard briefly moves through the breakthrough period of human rights in the 1970s and the Jimmy Carter administration right into the transition to what is commonly thought of as Reaganite neoconservatism or neoliberalism. In doing so, Søndergaard cleaves to what has become a common narrative among human rights scholars.<sup>1</sup> Samuel Moyn has most famously hammered out this 'breakthrough' narrative, which argues that modern human rights emerged in the mid-1970s seemingly apropos of nothing because of different social and political pressures.<sup>2</sup> Søndergaard firmly places himself in the same vein, which puts *Reagan, Congress, and Human Rights* explicitly after this "breakthrough" (15). Indeed, Søndergaard's work is part of a larger series on human rights that Moyn co-edits.

<sup>1</sup> For examples, see Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010); Thomas Borstelmann, *The 1970s: A New Global History from Civil Rights to Economic Inequality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); and Barbara J. Keys, *Reclaiming American Virtue* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), among others.

<sup>2</sup> See Moyn, *The Last Utopia*.

Almost a decade since his book *The Last Utopia* was published, Moyn's analysis still looms large over not only Søndergaard's work but the general field of contemporary human rights. This carries some analytical and intellectual effects, which Moyn himself has addressed.<sup>3</sup> Søndergaard has firmly sandwiched his work between Moyn's chronology and the scholarship of other major figures in the field, particularly Barbara Keys, by emphasizing the importance of Congress in establishing human rights based foreign policy not only in the 1970s, but the 1980s as well.<sup>4</sup>

*Reagan, Congress, and Human Rights*, then, is a historiographically well-placed piece of scholarship. One could, however, criticize the book for moving too far along the path of common 'negative rights': it emphasizes violations of legal and political rights above other, broader definitions of human rights. Social and economic rights are given little attention here, even though the three main case studies take place in the Soviet Union, Nicaragua, and South Africa, which were stricken with harsh socioeconomic disparities. Human rights and legal scholars have only recently started to delve into social and economic rights' complicated histories, and it would have been fascinating to see Søndergaard add his voice to these new studies.<sup>5</sup> But this is wishful thinking, not a genuine critique. As Søndergaard himself notes, social and economic rights are finally due for their time in the sun, but he understandably limited his framework of analysis for this project (256).

Still, the lines between these categories of human rights are increasingly being erased by historians and this is worth interrogating further. For example, although Søndergaard mentions it only once, the series of famines across North and East Africa during Reagan's 1983-1984 election year were a major humanitarian crisis for the administration. Many of the Congressional figures that feature in Søndergaard's analysis sat on committees dedicated to dealing with foreign aid programs in such drought and poverty-stricken regions. For the administration, it became, as Alexander Poster and others have shown, a question of image, as it struggled to reconcile social and economic aid to governments with human rights violations.<sup>6</sup> The differences between socioeconomic aid, human rights, and humanitarian aid were blurred, and Søndergaard does not dive into them too deeply.

Are human rights and humanitarianism the same thing? What about human rights and foreign aid? Perhaps a greater question for Søndergaard's book is: to what extent did the citizens and governments of Nicaragua, South Africa, and the Soviet Union have the same views of human rights as American citizens and the American government? This is a quiet tension in the book, especially since most of Søndergaard's sources come from the United States. Additionally, human rights are not frequently defined here and are often presumed to fall under the most common negative rights claims. It is the eternal refrain of a reviewer to want more from a piece of scholarship, and it would not be realistic to expect Søndergaard to have conducted a globetrotting adventure to flesh out every possible localist angle for his research. Given how meticulously researched the book is seems foolish to ask for more, but such questions still nag.

Regardless, the best sections of Søndergaard's book showcase just how much there is left to unveil in what could be called "traditional" human rights histories of the late Cold War, which focus on such things as governments' violations of bodily integrity, torture, and the use of extrajudicial violence and imprisonment. The book's vigorous back and forth between

---

<sup>3</sup> See Moyn, *Not Enough: Human Rights in an Unequal World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Barbara J. Keys, *Reclaiming American Virtue*; see also William Michael Schmidli, "'The Most Sophisticated Intervention We Have Seen': The Carter Administration and the Nicaraguan Crisis, 1978-1979," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 23:1 (2012): 66-86.

<sup>5</sup> Some recent scholarship includes Julia Dehm, "Highlighting inequalities in the histories of human rights: Contestations over justice, needs and rights in the 1970s," *Leiden Journal of International Law* (2018), 31, 871-895. See also Stephen Macekura, *Of Limits and Growth: The Rise of Global Sustainable Development in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); and Vijay Prashad, *The Poorer Nations: A Possible History of the Global South* (London: Verso, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Alexander Poster, "The Gentle War: Famine Relief, Politics, and Privatization in Ethiopia, 1983-1986," *Diplomatic History* 36:2 (April 2012).

Congress and the administration over whether the Nicaraguan Contras or the Sandinistas were the worst human rights violators highlights how complicated the relationship between Congress and the Reagan administration's traditional human rights views were.

Moreover, such examples show how their respective use of human rights puts the almost ephemeral nature of those rights on stark display. Søndergaard has done an admirable job of showing just how malleable the concept of human rights had become at the turn of the 1980s, as the Reagan administration's impromptu creation of a "conservative human rights policy" highlights (248). Both the administration and Congress had very different ideas of what human rights meant, who it was primarily supposed to apply toward, and how it should be defended. These disagreements resulted in a long, fiery confrontation that pushed the boundaries of human rights policy, and forced the administration to make human rights a part of its foreign policy playbook. Moral authority became an important part of power-politics inside the Beltway during Reagan's administration, one that was fueled by competing human rights narratives.

In this vein, I hope the book will spark similar debate among human rights historians about the scope of Congressional influence at the end of the Cold War, especially in the larger context of the 1970s and 1980s. It is exciting to see the rising tide of work that has started to firmly push historical analysis into the 1980s and the end of the Cold War, and Søndergaard's new book is a worthy addition to this body of research. Human rights' bandwagon days might have died down somewhat among scholars of American foreign relations, but as we turn our eyes more and more toward the 1980s and 1990s perhaps there an opportunity for a resurgence.<sup>7</sup> If so, it will be with scholarship like this at the forefront.

---

<sup>7</sup> Thomas W. Zeiler, "The Diplomatic History Bandwagon: A State of the Field," *The Journal of American History* 95:4 (2009): 1053-1073; see also Sarah B. Snyder, "Human Rights and U.S. Foreign Relations: A Historiographical Review," *Passport* (April 2013), 16.

---

RESPONSE BY RASMUS SINDING SØNDERGAARD, LUND UNIVERSITY

---

I would like to express my gratitude to, Michael Franczak, Theresa Keeley, Doug Rossinow, and Christian Ruth for their insightful engagements with my book, to Debbie Sharnak for orchestrating the roundtable and introducing the discussion, and to Diane Labrosse for commissioning and editing it. I welcome this opportunity to restate the book's key arguments and conclusions and respond to criticisms and concerns.

In *Reagan, Congress, and Human Rights* I trace the role of human rights concerns in U.S. foreign policy during the 1980s, focusing on the struggle among the Reagan administration and members of Congress. The reviews confirm that I have been largely successful in demonstrating how individuals in the executive and legislative branches of government shaped U.S. human rights policy in the late Cold War. However, the reviewers also scrutinize the validity of parts of my analysis, point to elements they believe could have merited more attention, and question my choice of case studies. While I find some of these objections more warranted than others, I appreciate the chance to engage them all.

The book is divided into two parts. The first part offers a comprehensive overview of human rights in American foreign relations in the 1980s along with a chapter on Reagan's turnaround on human rights and another on the emergence of the Congressional Human Rights Caucus (CHRC) in 1983. The second part provides case studies of how human rights shaped U.S. foreign policy toward Soviet Jewish emigration, South African apartheid, and Nicaragua. Through this structure, I seek to combine an examination of new approaches to human rights in the Reagan administration and Congress in the 1980s with an in-depth analysis of how individuals in these two branches of government contested the role of human rights in specific foreign policy cases.

In *Reagan, Congress, and Human Rights*, I argue that congressional pressure led the Reagan administration to reconsider its initial intention to downgrade the role of human rights concerns in U.S. foreign policy and instead craft a conservative human rights policy centered on democracy promotion and anti-communism. As I acknowledge, this argument builds on the work of Sarah Snyder and on Tamar Jacoby's observation of a Reagan turnaround on human rights.<sup>1</sup> Crucially, I demonstrate that the seeds for a conservative human rights policy were present inside the administration from the onset, but that it only gained traction in the aftermath of stern congressional and public criticism (66-69). Moreover, I argue that the administration's decision to craft a conservative human rights policy was an unintended consequence for its liberal critics on Capitol Hill (2, 261). I contend that it proved influential because it changed the conversation from whether human rights concerns should inform U.S. foreign policy to how they should (2, 262). Throughout the book, I seek to trace how liberals, moderates, and conservatives selectively invoked human rights to further their agendas and to unearth the motivations behind their human rights activism.

In the conclusion, I argue that the struggle among the Reagan administration and members of Congress over the appropriate role for human rights concerns in U.S. foreign policy impacted U.S. human rights policy beyond the Cold War era in two important ways. First, it helped secure human rights as the key moral language in American foreign relations. While the 1980s could have seen a downgrade in the U.S. government's commitment to human rights following the election of Reagan, instead it witnessed the increasingly ubiquitous presence of human rights concerns in both the debates and institutions that shaped U.S. foreign policy. Second, the contestation among members of Congress and the administration moved American policymakers further away from a consensus on the content of U.S. human rights policy and underlined the ambiguity and elusiveness of the concept of human rights. I contend that this testifies to how human rights was fundamentally a political language that policymakers invoked to claim moral authority for their political agendas. The

---

<sup>1</sup> Sarah B. Snyder, "The Defeat of Ernest Lefever's Nomination: Keeping Human Rights on the United States Foreign Policy Agenda," in Bevan Sewell and Scott Lucas (eds.), *Challenging U.S. Foreign Policy: America and the World in the Long Twentieth Century* (Hounmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Tamar Jacoby, "The Reagan Turnaround on Human Rights," *Foreign Affairs* 64:5 (1986).

flexibility and ambiguity of human rights as a moral language that is easily adapted to diverse political causes meant that it became increasingly politicized (263-264).

The reviewers generally complement the book's source base. Franczak calls it "superbly researched," and Ruth observes that it "draws on both largely ignored and recently released material," while Rossinow notes that it "reflects excellent work in U.S. Congressional archives." Ruth, however, would have liked me to include archives from Nicaragua, South Africa, and the Soviet Union in order to examine the extent to which citizens and governments in these countries shared American views of human rights. As he points out, this would have required a globetrotting archival trip and he concedes that "Given how meticulously researched the book is, it seems foolish to ask for more, but such questions still nag." Such international research would be fascinating but it falls outside the purview of the book, which is concerned with examining the internal constellation of forces and influences that shaped U.S. human rights policy (11). Hence, the book shares some affinity with the recent call by Fredrik Logevall and Daniel Bessner for re-centering the United States in the historiography of American foreign relations.<sup>2</sup> One of my aims with writing *Reagan, Congress, and Human Rights* has been to include American domestic actors such as members of Congress, who are often neglected in histories of U.S. foreign relations.

Keeley faithfully summarizes the book's stated contributions to the existing scholarship as threefold: a focus on human rights history in the 1980s, attention to members of Congress, and an argument that the Reagan administration changed its approach to human rights in 1981. All the reviewers observe that the book contributes to our understanding of human rights history in the late Cold War. Calling the book "a historiographically well-placed piece of scholarship," Ruth notes that it is sandwiched between Samuel Moyn's influential claim of a human rights breakthrough in the 1970s and Barbara Keys's emphasis on the importance of Congress for U.S. human rights policy.<sup>3</sup> I happily acknowledge that my thinking about American attention to human rights has been profoundly shaped by the work of Moyn and Keys—along with several other important contributions to the scholarship on human rights history in recent years.<sup>4</sup>

None of the reviewers takes issue with my claim of a Reagan turnaround or with the importance I ascribe to congressional pressure. Moreover, they appear to be convinced of my assertion that relations among the administration and members of Congress played a crucial role in shaping American attention to human rights in the 1980s. According to Ruth, "the story of Congress and the administration's internal changes and infighting over human rights affairs is compelling." Keeley argues, "Søndergaard shows the complexity of the executive versus legislative branch battles over human rights' role in U.S. foreign policy."

The reviewers' verdict on my attempt to trace what led liberals and conservatives to invoke human rights is somewhat more mixed. Keeley notes, "Søndergaard's work underscores the difficulty of parsing politicians' motivations." Parsing other people's motivations is of course a notoriously difficult task. Keeley writes that she is "somewhat skeptical of Søndergaard's suggestion that the Reagan administration's focus on human rights was purely for political gain." She notes how I contend that the "administration's commitment to human rights was strategic, highly selective, and only truly enthusiastic when combined with anti-communism" (262). In fact, I do not suggest that the administration's focus on human rights was *purely* for political gain. The exact quotation that Keeley cites points to how I believe the administration was enthusiastic

---

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Bessner and Fredrik Logevall, "Recentering the United States in the Historiography of American Foreign Relations," *Texas National Security Review* 3:2 (2020). See the H-Diplo Roundtable on the article at <https://hdiplo.org/to/RT21-42>.

<sup>3</sup> Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010); Barbara J. Keys, *Reclaiming American Virtue: The Human Rights Revolution of the 1970s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> The list of insightful historical scholarship on human rights in American foreign relations is long and rapidly expanding. Along with several articles and edited volumes, the following books were particularly relevant to my research: Sarah B. Snyder, *Human Rights Activism and the End of the Cold War: A Transnational History of the Helsinki Network* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Joe Renouard, *Human Rights in American Foreign Policy: From the 1960s to the Soviet Collapse* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

about human rights when they were combined with anti-Communism. This was not a political ploy but was based on a sincere opposition to Communism and a firm belief that it constituted the ultimate human rights violation. In the book, I describe Reagan's strong desire to counter human rights violations in the Soviet Union and argue that his personal commitment to Soviet Jewish emigration contributed to making it the dominant human rights issue in U.S.-Soviet relations. I also observe that Reagan harbored strong sympathy and admiration for persecuted Soviet Jews (122). Furthermore, as Rossinow notes in his review, I contend that Secretary of State George Shultz cared about human rights, albeit in a pragmatic fashion (72-73).

Probing the Reagan administration's motivations, Keeley asks, "but is it not also possible that conservatives, including some within the Reagan administration, had a different understanding of human rights than that of their opponents?" Indeed it is, as I seek to demonstrate throughout the book and especially in chapter 2, which outlines how the administration integrated human rights concerns into its larger foreign policy vision. The result, I argue, was a conservative human rights policy that defined human rights narrowly as civil and political rights and argued that the United States should focus on criticizing human rights violations in communist countries while ignoring abuses by American allies (47-82). Keeley goes on to observe, "Many ardent anti-Communists saw living under Communism not as *a* violation, but as *the* most egregious violation of human rights." Again, I find myself in agreement with Keeley since this is exactly what I argue in my book. In my survey of American attention to human rights in the 1980s, I write that many conservatives perceived supporting human rights and fighting Communism as essentially the same thing (41). In my discussion of the administration's perception of human rights, I argue that from Reagan's perspective, opposing Communism was itself a promotion of human rights. I quote him telling CBS News in March 1981, "The Soviet Union is the greatest violator today of human rights in all the world" (72).

The other reviewers differ in their assessment of my examination of a conservative human rights policy during the Reagan era. Rossinow argues that my effort to show that such a language or politics took hold securely in the administration is not fully realized, which he speculates might be because it cannot be documented. Franczak, on the other hand, declares that "after reading Søndergaard's book, I am convinced that contemporary American discourse around human rights is equally the legacy of conservative Republicans like Ronald Reagan and Jesse Helms as it is Jimmy Carter and liberal Democrats in Congress."

Both Franczak and Ruth address the abandonment of economic and social rights by American policymakers in the 1980s and the limited attention the book gives to these rights. Franczak observes that in the early 1980s there was an abrupt and bipartisan abandonment of social and economic rights. He expresses his understanding that conservatives took this approach but is left wanting an explanation for why liberals joined in. Similarly, Ruth would have liked to see more on economic and social rights to complement the emphasis on "violations of legal and political rights." I am sympathetic to these requests and, as I state in the book's conclusion, the downgrade of economic and social rights in U.S. foreign policy since the 1980s is a largely untold story that is worthy of further research (269). Franczak's own work marks an important contribution to our knowledge of economic and social rights in U.S. foreign policy during the presidency of Jimmy Carter.<sup>5</sup> Recently, I have undertaken a new research project on socio-economic human rights in Scandinavian diplomacy at the United Nations in the 1970s.<sup>6</sup> The limited attention to these rights in the present book is thus not a deliberate omission but rather a reflection of the lacking interest in such rights by its main characters. Relatedly, Ruth notes that I do not delve too deeply into the differences between socioeconomic aid, human rights, and humanitarian aid. This reflects the book's focus on case studies, where humanitarian aid is not a central element. Overall, I choose to see such requests as a reflection of

---

<sup>5</sup> Michael Franczak, "Human Rights and Basic Needs: Jimmy Carter's North-South Dialogue, 1977-81," *Cold War History* 18:4 (2018).

<sup>6</sup> Rasmus Sinding Søndergaard, <https://www.rasmussoendergaard.com/scanrights>, accessed September 17, 2020.. Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement no: 841332.

Ruth's observation that, "the best sections of Søndergaard's book showcase just how much there is left to unveil in what could be called "traditional" human rights histories of the late Cold War."

The reviewers also engage with the individual chapters of the book with particularly favorable assessments of the chapters on the CHRC and South Africa. According to Ruth, "the detailed history" of the CHRC is what will be of most interest to those who study Congress and its impact on human rights legislation. Keeley notes the "chapter on the CHRC is valuable because it not only shows that human rights was a popular issue, but also how malleable the concept was." On the chapter on South Africa, Rossinow writes, "Søndergaard provides a rounded narrative of this episode, one that builds on existing scholarship on protest activity but that pulls together a fuller, more authoritative brief account than we have had before." Keeley states that she "found this one the most convincing in understanding why particular members of Congress opposed U.S. foreign policy on human rights grounds."

Regrettably, Keeley believes, I misquote her when I refer to her work in my chapter on Nicaragua. The sentence that she takes issue with comes at the end of a paragraph where I discuss a group of liberal Democrats, many of them Catholic, who opposed Reagan's Nicaragua policy. It reads: "Finally, [Edward] Markey, [Edward "Ted"] Kennedy, [Christopher] Dodd, and Peter Rodino were all liberal Catholics, who, as Theresa Keeley has demonstrated in her analysis of the intra-Catholic conflict over US Nicaragua policy, tended to share the views of the Maryknoll Sisters" (226). Keeley objects, "Although I appreciate Søndergaard's use of my work, he gives me credit for arguments I did not make. I did not analyze any of these men, their religious beliefs, or their possible connection to the Maryknoll Sisters." Naturally, I am sorry that Keeley believes I misquote her work. I did not mean to suggest that Keeley made a claim about the individuals in question, but rather that her work demonstrates that liberal Catholics as a group tended to share the views of the Maryknoll Sisters on the situation in Nicaragua.<sup>7</sup> I acknowledge that my imprecision allowed for a misunderstanding.

Finally, a case-study approach will always lend itself to a discussion of selections. Rossinow makes an argument for including a case study from South America, where, as he notes, events played out differently than in Central America. He contends that an extended comparison of U.S. policy toward Central and South America under Reagan's presidency would be welcome. As I acknowledge in the book's introduction, one could certainly have chosen other case studies, including several South American candidates such as, for instance, Chile or Argentina (12). Yet, one book can cover only so much and I believe my choice of Soviet Jews, South Africa, and Nicaragua is warranted. First, they mattered a great deal to a great number of Americans—from policymakers in Washington to ordinary Americans mobilizing in the streets. Second, they represent considerable diversity in geography, types of human rights abuses, Cold War positioning, human rights policies, and executive-legislative relations, which allows the book to demonstrate inconsistency and shifting alliances in policymakers' commitment to human rights (11).

In *Reagan, Congress, and Human Rights*, I try to demonstrate how partisanship, ideology, race, religion, and a range of personal preferences and ambitions informed and often determined American policymakers' positions on human rights (264). In particular, I highlight the importance of institutional infighting between the Reagan administration and members of Congress. It is not my intention to imply that it all came down to pure opportunism—although I believe there was plenty of it. Rather I have aimed to show how "the elusive nature of human rights meant that they could be adapted selectively to claim moral authority for preexisting policy goals" (230). Human rights were widely invoked in debates on American foreign relations in the 1980s, but the embrace of human rights was rarely consistent and always shaped by the agenda and outlook of those doing the talking. I believe, Rossinow captures this well when he writes, "More broadly, human rights talk appears to have been selective and opportunistic for almost everybody in elected office during the Reagan era. This is an important conclusion and it is one that Søndergaard allows, albeit gently."

---

<sup>7</sup> Theresa Keeley, "Reagan's Real Catholics Vs. Tip O'Neill's Maryknoll Nuns: Gender, Intra-Catholic Conflict, and the Contras," *Diplomatic History* 40:3 (2015): 533.

In conclusion, I would like to once express my gratitude to the reviewers for taking the time to engage with my book.