
During a private meeting that took place on September 9, 1977, President Jimmy Carter and Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko discussed the subject of human rights. The former questioned the Soviet government’s decision to imprison the dissenter Anatoly Shcharansky and reminded the Foreign Minister that the provisions of the Final Act/Helsinki Accords (contents discussed below) gave the United States the right to raise the subject of Soviet human rights violations. Not impressed with Carter’s concern for “human rights,” Gromyko countered that “such questions have an infinitesimal significance” and “can only harm the climate of our relations.” He also questioned the American right to pass judgment on the “internal affairs” of other countries in light of the human rights violations that took place in the United States on a regular basis. Instead of dismissing Soviet complaints about U.S. internal behavior, Carter told Gromyko that “the concern you expressed about human rights in our country, as well as our public concern over this question in the Soviet Union, could lead to a broadening of human rights in both countries.” In the future, “I hope that both sides will exert [the] necessary restraint . . . [and] not allow” the issue of human rights “to spoil our relations.”

This exchange raises important questions about the role human rights played in U.S.-Soviet relations during Jimmy Carter’s Presidency. The existing literature on Carter’s human rights policies is diverse. Some works argue that he deserves credit for placing human rights on the national agenda and/or attempting to replace the “bipolar worldview” with a “post-Cold War foreign policy” that attempted to address important global problems such as poverty. While admitting that his administration took some steps to promote human rights in the Soviet Union, a number of these works describe how Carter abandoned his “world-order”

orientation in favor of a more traditional Cold War approach after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan that took place in December 1979. Some works recount his naïve belief that raising the subject of human rights violations would not weaken Superpower relations and/or condemn his growing unwillingness to challenge Moscow’s domestic conduct in a forceful manner as his term in office progressed. A number of these critics also contend that he failed to carry out a coherent approach to U.S.-Soviet relations. Other works defend the position that Carter remained committed to challenging Soviet internal behavior throughout his entire presidency. Several of these authors even argue that Carter and his subordinates used human rights as a way of engaging in vigorous ideological competition with the Soviet Union and integrated “moral values” into the framework of Cold War competition.

The existing accounts of Carter’s efforts to challenge Soviet domestic behavior have several limitations. More often than not, they do not reveal the complexities of the role human rights promotion played in his administration’s overall approach to transforming U.S.-Soviet relations. Many critical treatments also make the mistake of judging the executive branch’s commitment to promoting human rights in the USSR and supporting Soviet dissenters as function of what policy makers said in public on the subject; they also tend to overlook the steps that Carter


took to enhance the international credibility of U.S. human rights critiques. Just as important, any balanced judgment of Carter must take into account how Soviet leaders perceived human rights critiques as a threat to the continued existence of their multinational, multiethnic empire. Most existing accounts could also do a much better job of addressing how the activities of private citizens became an important element of the executive branch’s approach to weakening the international appeal of Soviet-style socialism.  

This article will address these issues by examining the Carter administration’s efforts to promote human rights in the USSR through the prism of a coherent approach to transforming U.S.-Soviet relations best defined as “reciprocal accommodation” or “reciprocal détente.” The use of this framework has a number of advantages even if Carter chose to abandon it after the Soviets invaded Afghanistan. Without ignoring the shortcomings of his policies, it shows that Carter had a vision of how to transform Superpower relations in ways favorable to U.S. interests even if he did not always articulate that vision effectively. It also provides an excellent way to tease out the complexities of how a general belief in the global appeal of human rights, a desire not to appear overtly anti-Soviet, and the importance placed on signing the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT) II influenced his administration’s human rights policies toward the USSR. In particular, it demonstrates how the administration both reacted to and worked to transform Soviet internal behavior. Confident in the larger trends of the Cold War, Carter and other officials used a mixture of careful, calibrated public and private acts, including the use of positive and negative inducements (i.e., carrots and sticks), to reduce the level of Soviet human rights violations. Not satisfied with just responding to what Soviet policy makers did, however, they also worked to make human rights violations a legitimate issue of international concern that no government, including the USSR, could afford to ignore.

The steps that Carter took to forge a “reciprocal accommodation [détente]” with the Soviet Union help reveal the limitations of suggesting that he wanted to create a “Post-Cold War” foreign policy. With a firm belief in inherent strengths of democratic government and the universal appeal of human rights, he played an important role in making the issue of human rights a fundamental aspect of Cold War competition. On numerous occasions, Carter and other officials challenged the international prestige of Soviet leaders by raising the subject of Soviet human rights violations and compliance with the Final Act in a wide variety of public and private forums. Executive branch officials also acted on the belief that the statements of politicians alone could not change Soviet domestic conduct. Well aware

that damaging information about governmental behavior could now flow across borders in a matter of minutes, they supported the efforts of private citizens aimed at raising international awareness about the plight of Soviet dissenters and human rights violations.

HUMAN RIGHTS, DÉTENTE, AND THE FINAL ACT (HELSINKI ACCORDS)

The subject of human rights became a contentious issue in U.S. foreign policy long before Jimmy Carter became President. As several scholars have pointed out, Richard Nixon and his Secretary of State/National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger chose not to challenge the human rights violations of the Soviet Union and authoritarian allies such as Chile. This decision grew out of the Nixon administration’s commitment to implementing a realpolitik version of détente (Kissinger-style détente). This approach called for protecting U.S. interests by reducing global commitments and working with other nations regardless of their domestic record in ways that either preserved or enhanced international stability. In the case of the USSR, Nixon and Kissinger acted on the assumption that forging a U.S.-Soviet “entente” represented the best way of strengthening international order and enhancing European security. To further this goal, they accepted the legitimacy of General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev’s government and vowed not to complicate relations by raising the subject of human rights violations.

The decision to ignore the human rights violations of authoritarian allies and the Soviet Union produced a wide variety of critics. Members of Congress and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) such as Amnesty International (AI) criticized the executive branch’s lack of morality and unwillingness to open up foreign policy making to more public scrutiny. The prevalence of these critiques helps explain why Congress passed series of laws from 1973 to 1976 that attempted to make the executive branch curb U.S. military and economic assistance to systematic human rights violators. In 1974, Congress passed the Jackson-Vanik Amendment to the Trade Reform Bill and the Stevenson Amendment to the Export-Import Bank Bill. These measures in effect placed a wide variety of economic penalties on the Soviet Union for restricting Jewish emigration.

The contents of the Final Act reveal the success members of the European community had in defying the wishes of the Superpowers in defense of their “multilateral” or “dynamic” version of détente. Signed by the United States, Canada, the Soviet Union, and thirty-two other European nations in August

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1975, the agreement pledged each signatory to follow a series of stipulations contained in four separate sections called “Baskets.” Basket I contained the ten guiding principles of signatory relations, including Principle VII. This provision stands out because it called on signatories to act in conformity with international human rights conventions and specifically called on governments to let private citizens exercise their basic human rights. At least in part, this provision inspired a small group of Soviet dissenters to create the Moscow Helsinki Watch Group, an NGO that worked to document Soviet compliance with the Final Act and convince Western governments to challenge Soviet human rights violations. As for the rest of the document, Basket II pledged each member to facilitate cooperation in fields such as economics and science, whereas Basket III called on each signatory to promote the free flow of information, ideas, and people among the participating states. In practice, these commitments proved difficult to ignore because the language of Basket IV resulted in a wide array of follow-up meetings beginning in 1977 that allowed signatories to discuss each others’ implementation records and undertake new commitments.

JIMMY CARTER, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND “RECIPROCAL ACCOMMODATION [DÉTENTE]”

A number of factors account for why Jimmy Carter decided to identify himself with the cause of human rights and embrace the Final Act during the later stages of the 1976 presidential campaign. Beyond the electoral and political calculations that numerous works have addressed, the U.S. Helsinki commission (staff and members) and letters from private citizens urged him to voice his support for Soviet dissenters and use the provisions of the Final Act to challenge the internal behavior of the communist signatories.\footnote{The U.S. Helsinki Commission is a joint executive-legislative committee that monitored and reported on each signatory’s compliance with the Final Act. For treatment of Carter’s decision to embrace human rights and the Final Act during the campaign, see Drumbell, \textit{The Carter Presidency}, 117–18; Njolstad, \textit{Peacekeeper and Troublemaker}, 228–29; Muravchik, \textit{The Uncertain Crusade}, 2–4; Elizabeth Drew, “A Reporter At Large: Human Rights,” \textit{The New Yorker}, July 18, 1977, 38; and Snyder, \textit{Human Rights Activism and the End of the Cold War}. To see a wide assortment of the letters that Jimmy Carter received about the plight of individual dissidents and the importance of human rights, see 1976 Presidential Campaign—Stuart E. Eizenstat, Box 23, Folder: Jewish Affairs, 10/76, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library (JCPL), Atlanta, Georgia.} Carter received similar input from his future National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski.\footnote{Snyder, \textit{Human Rights Activism and the End of the Cold War}, 83.} These words resonated with Carter given the lessons that he drew from U.S. civil rights movement, as well as his religious values and identification with Wilsonian principles. Along with deciding to support Soviet dissenters in public during the campaign, he came to accept the argument that embracing universal human rights standards and monitoring signatories’ compliance with agreements like the Final Act would put the United States in the best possible position to fulfill its historic role as a “beacon” to
the rest of the world.\footnote{13} Without falling victim to the pitfalls of excessive idealism, he hoped to use the issue of human rights violations and provisions of the Final Act as a way of engaging in effective ideological competition with the Soviet Union while laying the foundation for a day when all governments would feel obligated to respect the basic liberties of all private citizens.\footnote{14}

In addition to indentifying his campaign with the cause of human rights and praising the Final Act, Carter voiced some of the same concerns of Western European policy makers when he enunciated his desire to transform how United States approached the task of securing a détente with the Soviet Union. Much like Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, he viewed détente as a worthwhile policy on the grounds that it helped secure arms control agreements with the Soviets.\footnote{15} On the other hand, he believed that the easing tensions and opening the Eastern bloc to the outside world could “be an instrument for long-term peaceful change within the Communist system… and the rest of the world.”\footnote{16}

If the process of détente were to have any value, however, Carter argued that the Soviets would have to stop violating Helsinki Accords and supporting national liberation struggles in less developed countries. To accomplish these goals, Carter pledged to forge a more “reciprocal détente” with the USSR that would work toward reducing nuclear weapons and give the United States an equal advantage for every Soviet benefit.\footnote{17}

Carter’s public statements on behalf of Soviet dissenters and talk of forging a more “reciprocal détente” during the Presidential campaign could not help but raise questions about the role human rights would play in U.S.-Soviet relations once he entered office. As many works have pointed out, members of his administration took up their posts with different conceptions of how best to promote human rights across the globe and what specific governments to target. Despite having a number of different policy preferences, these individuals still managed to work together within the confines of a larger framework called “reciprocal accommodation [détente].”\footnote{18}

On the most basic level, this approach started from the assumption that maintaining Kissinger-style détente would only preserve the Cold

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\item \footnote{14} Gebhard Schweigler, “Carter’s Détente Policy: Change or Continuity?” \textit{World Today} 34, no. 3 (1978): 84–85.
\item \footnote{16} \textit{The Presidential Campaign of 1976}, Volume I, Part One, 116–17.
\item \footnote{18} For an account of these differences, see Glad, \textit{An Outsider in the White House}, 72; Njolstad, \textit{Peacemaker and Troublemaker}, 244; and Muravchik, \textit{The Uncertain Crusade}, 15. For a description of Cyrus Vance’s preference for “quiet” human rights diplomacy see, Cyrus Vance, \textit{Hard Choices: Critical Years in America’s Foreign Policy} (New York, 1983), 46.
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War “status quo” and not produce enduring improvements in Superpower relations. While negotiating arms control agreements with the Soviets remained an important objective, U.S. policy makers needed to convince Soviet leaders to accept an updated version of détente that also required each government to improve its human rights performance and promote the free flow of information and ideas across Cold War boundaries. Over time, the pursuit of a “reciprocal accommodation [détente]” would play a key role in creating a global order in which Soviet leaders would feel international pressure to address the issue of human rights violations and reach accords with the United States that dealt with important global problems such as the nuclear arms race and poverty.19

A revealing summary of this approach can be found in an internal memorandum that Brzezinski sent to Carter on December 28, 1978. According to this document, whose contents Carter analyzed, the executive branch’s “reciprocal accommodation [détente]” policy consisted of four main pillars: 1) containment; 2) resistance to indirect expansion; 3) ideological competition; and 4) and the creation of an [international] framework within which the Soviet Union can accommodate with, or face the prospect of isolating itself globally.” Once Moscow appreciated U.S. willingness to protect its “interests” in regions like the Middle East, Brzezinski told the President, the cumulative impact of developments as diverse as the “global yearning” for human rights, the weakening global appeal of Soviet-style socialism, and fissures within the Communist bloc meant that the Soviet Union would eventually have to move toward American positions on most basic issues or risk becoming a global irrelevance. With the larger trends in the Cold War favoring the United States, the Carter administration did not have to revert to a sterile policy of “confrontation” every time the Moscow did something that U.S. policy makers did not like. Instead, it had the luxury of being patient and using the issue of human rights to weaken the international appeal of Soviet Union while negotiating agreements with Moscow that served basic U.S. interests and farthered the policy of “reciprocal accommodation [détente].”20

PROMOTING HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE SOVIET UNION, JANUARY 1977 TO AUGUST 1978

The determination of Carter to pursue a “reciprocal accommodation [détente]” with the Soviet Union surfaced early in his presidency. In his first private letter to the Soviet General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev dated January 26, 1977, Carter explained his preference for improving “relations with the Soviet Union on the

19. For Brzezinski’s description of this “reciprocal accommodation [détente]” framework before he became NSA, see G. R. Urban, Détente (New York, 1976), 262–81. He mentioned his preference for using détente in ways designed to overcome the “status quo” in the Cold War on 263.

basis of reciprocity, mutual respect and advantage.” After reaffirming his goal of eventually eliminating nuclear weapons, he wrote that “the most important first step [in this process] must be the urgent achievement of an agreement on” SALT II. Once he finished listing the other areas where the Soviet Union and the United States could work together to promote peace, he reminded Brezhnev that:

[W]e cannot be indifferent to the fate of freedom and individual human rights. We represent different social systems, and our countries differ from each other in their history and experience. A competition of ideals is inevitable between our societies. Yet this must not interfere with common efforts towards formation of a more peaceful, just and humane world.21

The Soviet government’s decision to arrest a wide array of dissenters during the first three months of 1977 tested the Carter administration’s commitment to challenging Soviet human rights violations. In the short term, Carter and his top-level subordinates stood firm. After the well-known Soviet dissenter Andrei Sakharov’s personal letter to Carter appeared in the New York Times, the President chose to send him a personal reply, a gesture that made international headlines.22 Not unaware of Soviet sensibilities on the issue, Carter and Vance raised the subject of human rights violations and the arrest of the dissenter Alexander Ginsburg when they meet with Soviet representatives in early February.23 One month later, Carter and his Vice President Walter Mondale chose to hold a private meeting with the Soviet émigré Vladimir Bukovsky without offering the Soviets any explanation other than the U.S. government’s general concern for human rights and sympathy for individuals whose governments had persecuted them (Figure 1).24 Not intimidated by Soviet displeasure with this meeting, Carter used public forums to defend his administration’s efforts to raise the issue of Soviet human rights violations and monitor Soviet compliance with the Final Act.25

As part of a larger effort to engage in peaceful competition with the USSR, the Carter administration took some steps to combat the unwillingness of UN

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22. “Letter to Andrei Sakharov, by Carter,” http://america.eb.com/america/article?eu=413245 (accessed January 10, 2004); and Department of State Telegrams to Moscow Embassy and Moscow Telegrams to Department of State, Subject: Sakharov Letter, BM, Box 78, Folder: 3/77, JCPL.

23. Carter read reports from the U.S. embassy in Moscow that explained just how much Soviet leaders hated human rights criticisms. For example, see telegram, “Moscow Embassy to President,” February 1977, BM, Box 78, Folder: 3/77, JCPL; and Memorandum for ZB, “US Government Initiatives on behalf of Human Rights in the USSR,” April 17, 1980, 2-4, Staff Office, BEA, Box 4, Folder: HRD and BOR, 2/80-12/80, JCPL.

24. For an excellent treatment of this episode, see Njolstad, Peacemaker and Troublemaker, 232.

institutions to challenge the human rights violations of communist countries. On February 11, a U.S. representative raised the issue of the dissenter Yuri Orlov’s arrest in the General Assembly. Over the course of the next month, both U.S. officials, including President Carter asked the United Nations Human Rights Commission (UNHRC) to “request information from the Soviets on the arrest and detention of dissidents.” Refusing to let this issue drop, members of the executive branch once again asked the commission to take a closer look at the problem of Soviet human rights violations on March 7, 1978.26

Once again hoping to enhance the U.S. ability to engage in effective ideological competition with the USSR, Carter voiced his support for strengthening American international broadcasting capabilities. In March 1977, he announced that Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and Voice of America needed sixteen additional 250 kilowatt transmitters for broadcasts to Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Discounting the objections of the German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, he defended the modernization of U.S. radios on the grounds that

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Western broadcasts had become “a vital part of the lives of the peoples” living in the Eastern Bloc and were consistent with the language of the Final Act.27

The importance that Carter placed on ideological competition helps account for why he approved several of Brzezinski’s proposals for covert propaganda actions inside the USSR. Always interested in engaging in effective ideological competition with the Soviets, the National Security Advisor called for the creation of programs that would strengthen the clandestine distribution of dissident literature and works that elucidated the history and cultural practices of Soviet ethnic minorities.28 Even though the State Department “whittled down” the scope of these proposals through bureaucratic infighting, members of the National Security Council still managed to carry out programs that increased “the quantity of dissident and Western . . . literature smuggled into Eastern Europe and the USSR.”29

While engaging in peaceful ideological competition remained an important goal, Carter and Brzezinski became concerned that too many observers had failed to grasp the complexities of their overall effort to forge a “reciprocal accommodation [détente]” with the USSR. The preoccupation of the international and domestic media, Brzezinski wrote to Carter on February, 19, 1977, inevitably raising the “question of whether you are right or wrong in commenting directly on the issue of Soviet” human rights violations. The visibility of this concern only complicates our efforts “stimulate a serious discussion on the central and concrete issues in the U.S.-Soviet relationship.” To educate the public about the administration’s goals, Brzezinski urged the President to deliver “a broadly gauged statement to the effect” that the U.S. government’s human rights policy “is based on principle and that our concerns are applicable to all nations” and did not just consist of “anti-Soviet tactics.”30

These words resonated with Carter. During his private meeting with Bukovsky on 1 March, he reiterated his intention “to avoid singling out the Soviet Union for criticism” in hopes of convincing all countries in the world to embrace the cause of human rights—a point of view that he also made during public speeches and in his second private letter to Brezhnev.31 On 17 March, he delivered a speech at the

27. “Memorandum for Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski,” July 29, 1977, BM, Box 9, Folder: 2-12/77; Memo, Paul B. Henze (PH) to William Hyland, “RFE/RL Transmitter Modernization—Instructions to Ambassador Stoessel,” BM, Box 9, Folder: 2-12/77. See also The Department of State Bulletin, April 25, 1977, 423.
29. Ibid., and Memorandum from PH to ZB, “CIA Report on Results of Stepped-Up Publishing and Distribution Effort to USSR & Eastern Europe,” December 18, 1978, National Security Affairs (Horn/Special), Box 3, Folder: 12/78, JCPL.
United Nations that reiterated the U.S. commitment to the cause of human rights and strengthening international human rights institutions.\textsuperscript{32} Following the advice of the NSC staffer Jessica Tuchman, Carter also attempted to enhance the credibility of the U.S. human rights criticisms by announcing his intention to seek the ratification of five international human rights agreements, including the covenants on Civil and Political Rights (CAPR) and Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ESACR).\textsuperscript{33}

Carter also took some steps designed to make the United States a more credible human rights model. To improve the U.S. Final Act compliance record, he removed “all restrictions on travel abroad by American citizens” and relaxed visa restrictions that excluded foreign groups because of their political beliefs.\textsuperscript{34} On 30 March, he voiced his intention to improve the international image of the United States by securing ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment.\textsuperscript{35} He also took steps to combat Soviet arguments that political prisoners existed in the United States. At Carter’s urging, the Justice department investigated and eventually filed a series of legal briefs (i.e., habeas corpus petitions) in federal court on the behalf of the defendants in the “Wilmington Ten” case, a controversial court decision in North Carolina in which ten African-American civil rights activists were imprisoned for arson without compelling evidence of their guilt.\textsuperscript{36}

Along with taking steps designed to improve U.S. domestic behavior, members of the Carter administration worked to illustrate the universal nature of their human rights campaign by addressing the violations of noncommunist countries. For example, Carter helped secure the repeal of the Byrd amendment in 1977, a move that allowed the United States to comply fully with the United Nations Security Council’s trade embargo on “Zimbabwe-Rhodesia.”\textsuperscript{37} His administration also used a wide variety of public and private forums to challenge the human rights violations taking place in Latin American countries and allies such as the Philippines. On September 6, 1977, Carter went so far as to criticize the widespread abuse of human rights taking place in Chile during a press conference that


\textsuperscript{34} Third Semiannual Report by the President to the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (Washington, DC, 1977), 4.

\textsuperscript{35} PPOP, 1977, Volume 1, 545.


took place immediately after his personal meeting with General/President Augusto Pinochet (Figure 2).  

The steps that Carter took to illustrate the universal nature of the U.S. human rights campaign could not change the reality that Soviet leaders viewed human rights criticisms as a direct attack on their right to rule. In February 1977, KGB Chairman Yuri Andropov reported that “ideological centers and Zionist organizations” have involved “the new Carter administration and prominent senators” in treacherous “anti-Soviet activities.” Brezhnev shared Andropov’s evaluation of U.S. behavior. Fearing that Carter wanted to undermine the foundations of Soviet power, he sent the President a letter that criticized his interference in Soviet “internal affairs” and correspondence with “an apostate [Sakharov] who has proclaimed himself an enemy of the Soviet state.”

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40. See Anatoly Dobrynin, In Confidence: Moscow’s Ambassador to Six Cold War Presidents (New York, 1995), 391.
However much Brezhnev and Andropov hated the Carter administration’s human rights campaign, they still took a wide variety of steps to defend the Soviet government’s domestic behavior and treatment of dissenters. To cite a few examples, Soviet officials praised their government’s human rights record and attacked that of the United States during a debate with American private citizens and Carter administration representatives that the NBC network aired on June 12, 1977. Confident that the updated Soviet constitution of 1977 contained the proper mixture of mixture of “civic duties” and “democratic freedoms,” Brezhnev agreed to submit a report to the United Nations Human Rights Committee in January 1978 that outlined how Soviet human rights practices now conformed to the requirements of all international agreements, including the Final Act.41 As they worked to strengthen the international reputation of Soviet-style socialism and challenge the U.S. government’s human rights record, Soviet officials took a number of steps to satisfy concerns about their treatment of dissenters during the preparatory and main meetings of the Belgrade follow-up conference (June 1977 to March 1978). Although Soviet authorities had arrested high-profile dissenters such as Orlov and Shcharansky for monitoring Soviet compliance with the Final Act in early 1977, they could have arrested more dissenters than they actually did, as the total number of known dissident arrests in 1977 represented “the lowest figure since 1965.”42 Not wanting to create more problems for themselves than they already had, Soviet leaders also refrained from putting Helsinki monitors such as Shcharansky on trial until the Belgrade meeting ended.43 To satisfy the concerns of the Carter administration and members of the U.S. Congress, Brezhnev agreed to allow a substantial rise in Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union, which peaked at over fifty thousand in 1979.

The flexibility that the Soviets showed on the issue of Jewish emigration seemed in short supply when Vance went to Moscow in March 1977 for SALT II negotiations. The meeting went downhill in a hurry even though the Secretary of State kept his pledge not to raise the subject of human rights. This failure grew out of Carter’s decision to have Vance present a “deep cuts” proposal (fallback one as well) based on his preference for reducing nuclear weapons rather than the earlier negotiated “Vladivostok agreement” of 1974 that only limited the growth rate of each side’s nuclear arsenal. Feeling betrayed by this departure from the Vladivostok formula that he had done so much to promote at home against opposition within the military ranks and the Politburo, Brezhnev denounced Carter’s

human rights criticisms and directed Soviet negotiators to dismiss Vance’s proposals and not make a counteroffer.44

While some accounts argue that Carter moderated his efforts to promote human rights in the Soviet Union after Vance returned from Moscow, the overall thrust of his administration’s behavior paints a more complicated picture. From one angle, administration officials continued to highlight the universal and even-handed nature of their human rights campaign. Yet, at the same time, Carter held fast to the position that this universal campaign would not overlook what took place in the USSR. On 13 June, he told a reporter that “if this policy touches the Soviet Union and they [sic] interpret it as intrusion, so be it.” “I don’t believe,” he continued, “that there is a single leader who” does not worry about how domestic audiences and “observers from other nations” view his/her government.45 Behind closed doors, he wrote to Brzezinski on 8 July that “I see no need to change” how this administration has gone about promoting human rights across the globe.46

This comment has special relevance because one day earlier Carter had approved Presidential Review Memorandum (PRM)-28, an internal study that represented the first real systematic attempt to lay out how the executive branch officials should approach the task of promoting human rights in other countries. This document confirmed the appropriateness of balancing human rights promotion in the USSR with other competing interests, as well as not singling out Soviet leaders on the world stage for their repression of dissent. It also reaffirmed that the United States had every right to monitor Soviet compliance with the Final Act. At least in part, the document endorsed this position because the promotion of human rights “supports the growth in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe of democratic forces which may in time contribute to the development of more open societies.” It also assists in the philosophical debate with the USSR “as to the type of society worth developing.”47

The importance that Carter and other officials placed on pursuing peaceful ideological competition with the Soviet Union led them in the direction of supporting private efforts on the behalf of human rights. Instead of seeing NGOs as a threat to the bureaucratic discretion of executive branch officials, PRM-28 praised how these groups raised “international... and national awareness” about “human rights concerns” and governmental violations of the Final Act. Not discounting the

potential political benefits of supporting such activities, it recommended that the State Department Bureau and other agencies encourage and work with private groups to raise “international awareness” about the issue of human rights.48

These sentiments were not mere window dressing. A wide array of officials encouraged and supported nongovernmental human rights activities. In October 1977, Carter sent a short note to the Chairman of Global Affairs for the National Council of Catholic Laity congratulating his organization for raising “public awareness” about the appalling level of governmental human rights violations still taking place in the world.49 Two months later, Public Liaison Officer Joyce Starr encouraged private citizens to hold executive branch officials accountable for their behavior on the grounds that private groups kept “the U.S. government honest” and provided up-to-date information for “government insiders [who] do not have all the answers.”50 Carter confirmed the importance of encouraging and supporting transnational human rights activities in March 1978. After reviewing several drafts of Presidential Directive (PD)-30, which became the official administration guidelines on human rights promotion in February 1978, he added language that called on officials to work with “private groups” such as “Amnesty International” to raise international awareness about human rights issues.51

This insight deserves attention because private citizens and Congress played an important role in shaping how the Carter administration handled the Final Act follow-up meeting in Belgrade. Under intense Congressional and public pressure to stand firm on the issue of Soviet human rights violations, Vance ordered U.S. delegates to work with NGOs and the U.S. Helsinki Commission to show Soviet leaders that they could not pull away from Belgrade “without suffering public and political criticism here and in Europe.” Heeding the advice of the Commission, Vance endorsed the argument that NGOs could help the U.S. delegation challenge communist governments’ intolerance for diversity and pluralism by holding public press conferences and passing out nonofficial literature in Belgrade. He even asked the delegates to “thank” NGOs for keeping “us honest when bureaucratic expediency creeps into decision-making” and “informed by bringing to

48. PRM-28, 10 and 59–63.
49. Telegram, JC to AI, October 1977, Human Rights/Amnesty International Collection, Box 1, Folder 1977, National Security Archive (NSA), Washington, DC; and Letter, JC to Mr. Ford Niehaus, October 14, 1977, Office of Public Liaison (OPL), Box 54, Folder: Human Rights, Interreligious Task Force—10/77, JCPL.
light detailed concerns related to the Helsinki Accords [Vance’s italics and emphasis].”

Armed with information provided by private citizens and the U.S. Helsinki Commission in Belgrade, U.S. delegates took other a number of steps to engage in effective ideological competition with the USSR. To enhance the credibility of U.S. human rights critiques, Carter signed CAPR and ESACR just before the main session of this meeting began. During the plenary sessions, U.S. delegates went out of their way to outline the steps that their government had taken to improve its Final Act compliance record, including Carter’s efforts on behalf of the ERA. The Head U.S. delegate Arthur Goldberg also explained how the provisions of the Helsinki Accords and other international documents nullified the position that human rights critiques represented an unwarranted interference in a nation’s internal affairs.

Unfortunately for U.S. delegates, the expression of these sentiments could not prevent the Warsaw Pact nations from blocking the signing of a concluding document that made specific references to the problem of human rights violations. While regrettable, this shortcoming needs to be put in perspective. In an international forum, U.S. delegates chose not to follow the advice of Western European politicians who feared that paying too much attention to Soviet human rights violations would only raise Cold War tensions and jeopardize the further strengthening of détente in Europe. Defying diplomatic conventions against naming specific names, U.S. delegates described how the Soviet government’s imprisonment of dissenters such as Yuri Orlov and Ukrainian Helsinki monitors


proved its inability to tolerate nongovernmental activities sanctioned by the Final Act.56

Some critics have overlooked the Belgrade conference because of the administration’s preference for using careful, calibrated public and private acts to show U.S. displeasure with Soviet internal behavior. After the Kremlin began arresting fewer prominent dissenters in the summer of 1977 in preparation for the Belgrade conference, Carter responded by making fewer specific references to Soviet human rights violations than he had in the past. When the Soviets continued to show “restraint” toward dissenters and kept allowing Jewish emigration levels to rise, he chose to defend his commitment in public by making periodic references to U.S. conduct at the Belgrade conference and his administration’s efforts to raise international awareness about human rights violations. Facing charges that the U.S. human rights campaign had become less active, Brzezinski advised the President in October 1977 that he “might have to speak out again publicly on the issue [of human rights] to disabuse the Soviets and ... head off domestic charges that you are backing off human rights.” Instead of heeding this advice, Carter told him not to worry because Soviet attacks on the U.S. delegation in Belgrade “are helping” the image of the United States as an even-handed human rights defender.57

This sort of language help show how Carter’s ideological underpinnings and commitment to forging a “reciprocal accommodation [détente]” shaped U.S. efforts to promote human rights in the USSR. At least in part, Carter stuck to this calibrated strategy because he feared that any sharp deterioration in U.S.-Soviet relations would only make the Kremlin more prone to crack down on dissident activities.58 Given the inherent strengths of democratic governments and the universal appeal of human rights, he saw no reason why the United States should give up on the larger task of forging cooperative links with the Brezhnev regime in vital areas such as arms control. Carter’s firm belief in the lessons of the U.S. civil rights movement and the transformative power of promoting ideals also predisposed him to continue a calibrated strategy. This point of view comes across in the same speech that he used to dismiss Americans’ “inordinate fear of communism.” Reminding the audience “not undervalue the power of words,” he explained

56. For a similar argument, see Snyder, Human Rights Activism and the End of the Cold War, Chapter 4; and Thomas, The Helsinki Effect, 146. The wealth of information the U.S. delegation had about conditions in the Soviet Union and individual dissenters comes across in the USHCF. See Untitled Hand written notes, Box 37, Folder: Belgrade, Human Rights, RCSCE, USHCF, NA.


how “totalitarian” regimes persecuted “dissidents” for the words that they used and the ideas they espoused.\(^{59}\)

Beyond these considerations, Carter and other officials also continued to identify with the argument that Soviet leaders would have little choice but to transform their domestic and intentional behavior over the long term.\(^{60}\) To cite one example, even after the harsh Soviet reaction to the Carter administration’s human rights campaign and Vance’s SALT II proposals took place, Brzezinski remained optimistic about the future trajectory of U.S.-Soviet relations. On June 24, 1977, he told the President that “the Soviets have applied varying tactics to neutralize” dissent, “but it continues.” Since the problem of Soviet human rights violations had now become a global issue, “the U.S. . . . has the power to greatly aggravate the Soviet dilemma.” Even if Moscow’s behavior does not change in the short term, Brzezinski assured the President, “we still have most of the high cards [necessary] . . . to shape Soviet policy” in ways favorable to U.S. interests. Expressing his general agreement with this line of argument, Carter wrote “good” on the first page of the report.\(^{61}\)

The belief that members of the Brezhnev regime would have little choice but to moderate their behavior over the long term or accommodate themselves to U.S. human rights criticisms proved a profound misjudgment. Once the Belgrade conference concluded, the Soviet authorities tried and convicted a wide array of dissenters and refuseniks (Jews who wanted to emigrate) for various offenses related to monitoring Soviet compliance with the Helsinki Accords.\(^{62}\) These actions raised the question of how Carter would show Soviet leaders U.S. displeasure with their internal behavior. Having rejected the option of linking progress in SALT negotiations to Soviet domestic and international behavior, Carter and Vance used public and private forums to impress upon Soviet leaders that “continued” human rights abuses would anger the U.S. public and possibly undermine ratification of a completed SALT II treaty.\(^{63}\) During his famous address at the U.S. Naval Academy that took place on June 7, 1978, Carter went so far as to

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criticize the Soviet government for favoring an approach to détente that gave it the right to imprison human beings for simply voicing non-official opinions and expanding its influence abroad through “military power and assistance.” Obviously not happy with Moscow’s behavior, he reiterated his belief that the Soviets needed to embrace a more “reciprocal” version of détente that would widen cooperation between the two nations, limit nuclear armaments, “permit the free movement of people and expression of ideas” across Cold War boundaries, as well as enhance each government’s respect for basic human rights.64

Unhappy with the continued repression of dissent taking place in the Soviet Union, Carter moved in the direction of using “sticks” to shape Soviet internal behavior when he cancelled a cabinet member’s trip to Moscow scheduled to take place on May 30, 1978. When this action failed to halt the high-profile trials of dissenters that took place in the summer of 1978, Brzezinski informed Carter that his “credibility on human rights is now at stake,” especially since the Soviet government had sent the President thousands of postcards asking him to free all U.S. political prisoners.65 On 12 July, NSC Staffer Jessica Tuchman sent Brzezinski a memorandum warning about how Congress might pass punitive measures that would make the executive branch look weak. In her opinion, “political realities demand a rethinking of your desire to calibrate [author’s bold] the U.S. response so as to save stronger actions for later sentencing and subsequent acts.” “If we wait it will be too late,” she lamented. “Congress will have preempted all but the most extreme steps” and we “will reap nothing but a political loss.”66 This advice prompted Brzezinski to advise Carter that he should consider “limiting either some exchanges with the Soviets or the flow of U.S. technology to the” USSR.67

After reviewing Brzezinski’s recommendations, Carter chose to use words and punitive measures to show U.S. disapproval of Soviet internal behavior. One day after the SALT II negotiations that took place in Geneva from 12 to 13 July ended, Carter issued a public statement that read: “We are all sobered by this reminder that, so late in the 20th century, a person can be sent to jail simply for asserting his basic human rights. The struggle for human liberties is long and difficult, but it will be won. There is no power on earth that can long delay its progress.”68 He also cancelled or deferred a wide variety of executive branch meetings and scientific exchanges with the USSR, although his administration refused to cancel cultural

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exchanges designed to open up the Soviet Union to the outside world. Perhaps influenced by possible Congressional preemption, Carter agreed to adopt the National Security Council’s longstanding plans for tighter restrictions on U.S. trade with the Soviet Union.

Unfortunately for Carter, these gestures did little to appease critics who argued that pursuing arms control negotiations proved the President’s unwillingness to challenge Soviet behavior in any sort fundamental way—a point of view that the U.S. Representative to the United Nations Andrew Young strengthened when he spoke about the existence of political prisoners in the United States. While many critics have overstated how the Carter administration abandoned its effort to promote human rights in the Soviet Union, they have every reason to argue that its approach to U.S.-Soviet relations ignored some basic realities. Carter was not so naïve as to think that promoting human rights would make the USSR a liberal democracy overnight, but he nevertheless viewed human rights as the basis for an international ideology capable of uniting disparate nations, including the Soviet Union, in a common effort aimed at improving the treatment of private citizens. Such a viewpoint failed to place enough weight on the how Moscow’s fear of dissent and nationalist uprisings shaped their attitudes toward human rights. Even more important, as we will see below, Carter should have also viewed moderation in Moscow’s behavior as a function of Soviet policy makers’ willingness to create democratic institutions and place specific limitations on the power of the Soviet Communist Party (CPSU). Instead of adopting this view, he held to the position that a mixture of calibrated responses would eventually convince rational Soviet leaders to create a less repressive state—a view that increased Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union only fueled as his time in office progressed.

THE LIMITS OF “RECIPROCAL ACCOMMODATION [DE´ TENTE ],” SEPTEMBER 1978 TO JANUARY 1981

The behavior of the Carter administration after the visible dissident trials that took place in the summer of 1978 seemed to confirm the argument that the U.S. executive branch would moderate its human rights critiques to facilitate the signing of an arms control treaty with Moscow. When the Soviet authorities began

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69. Garthoff, Détente and Confrontation, 674; and Drumbell, The Carter Presidency, 126.
70. See Brzezinski, Power and Principle, 323. See also Njolstad, Peacemaker and Troublemaker, 273–77.
72. For an account how Carter attempted to balance idealism and realism when promoting human rights, see Peterson, Globalizing Human Rights, 33–35.
73. Tony Smith makes a similar argument. See America’s Mission, 264–65.
74. I find Joshua Muravchik’s arguments on this subject convincing and well-argued. See The Uncertain Crusade, 53–74.
showing more “restraint” in arresting dissenters, some top-level administration officials concluded that Soviet-U.S. relations had improved. For example, during a meeting that took place in November 1978 with a group of Senators before their scheduled trip to the Soviet Union, Vance expressed his opinion that U.S.-Soviet relations had improved in recent months. “The dissident trials have left [a] bad aftertaste,” he conceded, but the “problems of the summer have largely abated.” To substantiate this argument, he spoke of the increasing rate of Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union and the recent increases in U.S.-Soviet trade.75

Convinced that moderation had taken place in Soviet internal behavior and the signing of a SALT agreement would improve superpower relations in ways that created a more peaceful world, Carter and other officials strove to create a climate that facilitated the completion of these often contentious and difficult negotiations.76 The President ended the boycott on all high-level meetings not related to arms control when he sent a delegation to a Soviet-American trade conference in Moscow on December 10, 1978. Even though a framework for restricting the flow of U.S. technology to the Soviet Union existed on paper, Carter decided to use trade as a way of reinforcing positive Soviet behavior. During his trip to Moscow, the Secretary of the Treasury Michael Blumenthal announced U.S. approval for all “outstanding requests for export licenses” related to “oil and gas production equipment.”77 To encourage the continuation of increasing rates of Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union, Vance and Blumenthal informed Dobrynin that the executive branch would attempt to waive the requirements of the Jackson-Vanik amendment after the Vienna Summit meeting took place in June 1979.78

In addition to encouraging positive Soviet behavior, executive branch officials also continued to take steps designed to raise international awareness about the human rights violations of noncommunist countries, especially in Latin America. The United States supported a UN resolution in December 1978 that asked the UNHRC to investigate the issue of “disappeared [desparecidos]” persons in Argentina, which it did the following year. Along with supporting this endeavor, the Carter administration also backed the creation of the Inter-American Human Rights Court (IAHRC) in 1979. After coming into existence, the IAHRC

investigated and issued reports on the human rights violations taking place in nations such as Chile, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Argentina.\textsuperscript{79}

Even though Carter agreed to use calibrated responses to encourage positive Soviet behavior and address the human rights violations of noncommunist countries, he remained committed to engaging in peaceful ideological competition with the USSR. Consistent with his “reciprocal accommodation[dé\textsuperscript{t}ente]” framework, he went out of his way to explain why ratifying SALT II would enhance the ability of the United States to outshine the Soviets in the eyes of the rest of the world—a view that helps explain why he chose not to link progress in arms control negotiations to Soviet internal behavior. On May 19, 1979, he warned an audience that not concluding the agreement “would give the Soviets an enormous propaganda weapon to use against us.” “They would be identified,” he argued “in their own mind and maybe in the minds of many nonaligned countries around the world as a peace-loving nation.”\textsuperscript{80} Five weeks later, Carter reassured the audience that maintaining approximate military parity with the Soviet Union served U.S. interests quite well. In defense of this position, he argued that “the Soviet Union is a totalitarian government . . . [based on idea] that the citizen ought to be subject to the mandates of the state,” whereas Americans believed in human dignity and that citizens “ought . . . to control the government.” “So, in a peaceful competition with the Soviet Union,” he continued, “we have all the advantages to prevail.” “That is an important element of the SALT treaties.”\textsuperscript{81}

Still committed to exploiting the issue of human rights as an ideological weapon, executive branch officials stepped up their efforts to use “quiet diplomacy” to defend individual dissenters and show U.S. disapproval of Soviet human rights practices.\textsuperscript{82} These efforts bore fruit when the administration traded two convicted Soviet spies for ten Soviet political prisoners, including Ginsburg, the Baptist minister Georgi Vins, and two Jews who had been sentenced to death for their attempts to reach Israel by hijacking an airplane in 1970. After this exchange took place, Carter held a private meeting with Vins and later attended church with him (Figure 3).\textsuperscript{83} In addition to signing SALT II, Carter also raised the issue of Soviet human rights violations during one of his private meetings with Brezhnev during the Vienna Summit that took place in June 1979.\textsuperscript{84}

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\textsuperscript{80} PPOP, 1979, Vol. I, 904
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., \textit{Volume II}, 1916.
\textsuperscript{82} See Memo for ZB, “US Government Initiatives on behalf of Human Rights,” 4-5, BM, Box 29, Folder: 4/79-4/80, JCPL.
After the Summit ended, the Carter administration once again took steps designed to enhance the credibility of the U.S. government’s human rights criticisms. The State Department used the semiannual Final Act compliance reports required by Congress to describe the myriad of steps that the U.S. government had taken to implement the agreement, including the use of affirmative action programs to remedy racial and sexual discrimination. After holding a series of internal debates, Carter ordered his subordinates to help the U.S. Helsinki Commission write a comprehensive report on the American Final Act compliance record called *Fulfilling Our Promises*. In November 1979, he once again attempted to strengthen the international credibility of the United States on human rights issues by asking the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to reconsider endorsing the international human rights covenants that he had signed and then submitted for ratification the previous year.

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The Carter administration also continued to raise the subject of Soviet human rights violations in UN forums and encourage private citizens to hold governments accountable for their internal behavior. When the UNHRC resumed meetings in February 1979, the U.S. delegate Edward Mezvinsky submitted “responses to complaints raised against the U.S. by private organizations in the” UNHRC. After showing how the U.S. government accepted the right of private citizens to monitor how governments behaved at home, he asked the commission to investigate and report on the arrests of twenty-two dissenters in the USSR.\textsuperscript{88} Carter also sent executive branch representatives to a conference in Warsaw entitled “Peace and Human Rights.” At his meeting, the U.S. representative Jerome Shestack described the plight of numerous dissenters and attacked the Kremlin’s decision to move hundreds of them out of Moscow in preparation for the 1980 Summer Olympics. These efforts helped produce a concluding document that made a specific reference to how NGOs needed to play a larger role in “safeguarding peace and the respect of human rights and fundamental freedoms.”\textsuperscript{89}

The expression of these noble sentiments could not hide the reality that Soviet leaders had no intention of “democratizing” or even “liberalizing” Soviet-style socialism. By March 1979, ten of the original members of the Moscow Watch Group had been arrested or forced into exile. Near the end of the same year, the overall dissident arrest began to climb after the Soviet authorities launched a systematic campaign that at least in part aimed at eradicating nonofficial activities before the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow took place. With few tangible benefits to show for his “concessions” on the issue of human rights, Brezhnev chose to let Jewish emigration rates decline from the record high 1979 level of 51,320 to 21,471 the following year, a figure that would further plummet to 914 by 1986. As part of a larger effort to off break up the links that Soviet private citizens had forged with Western NGOs and private citizens, the Soviet General Secretary accepted Andropov’s recommendation to exile Andrei Sakharov to Gorky, a town off limits to foreigners.\textsuperscript{90}

Not aware of the U.S. public’s growing disillusionment with Soviet international behavior and continued repression, Carter moved toward granting China MFN trade status without extending the same privilege to the Soviet Union. He also criticized Moscow’s insistence on harassing and arresting the members of organizations “established to monitor compliance with the Helsinki agreement” in August 1979.\textsuperscript{91} Superpower relations declined further in the latter half of 1979 when the U.S. Senate hesitated to ratify the SALT II treaty and U.S. policy makers

\textsuperscript{89}. Letter, Armand Hammer to Ed Muskie, July 25, 1980, Amnesty International Files, Box 1, Folder: Documents Released on Appeal (1), NSA.
\textsuperscript{91}. \textit{PPOP}, 1979, Volume I, 1352.
became increasingly concerned about Soviet efforts to spread communism in the Horn of Africa. The goal of forging a “reciprocal accommodation [détente]” with Moscow officially died when Carter called the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan the greatest threat to world peace since World War II, approved a wide array of penalties on the Soviet Union, including a decision to let the official U.S.-Soviet cultural exchange agreement to lapse, and asked the Senate to delay considering the ratification of SALT II.

The downfall of Carter’s “reciprocal accommodation” framework does not mean that his administration stopped carrying out activities designed to support dissenters and engage in effective ideological competition with the USSR. On more than one occasion, Carter and other officials delivered public statements about the problem of Soviet human rights violations. After the Soviets exiled Sakharov, the U.S. delegates managed to convince the UHNRC to “defer further consideration of the Sakharov case” until its next session rather than dropping the issue as it had done previously. During the first phase of the Madrid follow-up meeting (November 13 to December 19, 1980), U.S. delegates went out of their way to cite specific Soviet human rights violations and raise issues such as the persecution of national minorities in the USSR. The efforts of Co-Chairperson Max Kampelman played a role in the decision of Western European delegates to speak more openly about Soviet human rights abuses than they had in Belgrade.

Just like some officials in the Carter administration wanted, top-ranking Soviet officials expressed unease with the successes the U.S. government had in enlisting the support of private citizens and Western European governments in the task of human rights promotion. Such a position comes across in an internal memorandum Andropov authored that outlined how the Soviet government should combat the activities of AI. To justify such a campaign, he described how this organization worked with the “secret services of the USA, England, and other imperialist governments” to blacken the international reputation of the “USSR” and other “socialist countries.” Even more troubling, the Carter administration “intends to use representatives of ‘Amnesty International’... at the Madrid summit” to portray the Soviet Union and “other socialist countries” as systematic human rights violators that needed to transform their domestic orders.

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These words were just the type of sentiments that Carter had hoped Soviet leaders would utter behind closed doors when his Presidency began. In many ways, they confirmed his basic belief in the inherent superiority of democratic nations over their communist counterparts, a theme that he returned to during the final months of his Presidency. On the eve of the 1980 election, he told an audience that “the failure of communism has been demonstrated by the fact that the Soviets don’t have a single nation on earth . . . that want[s] to have the same kind of government that exists in the Soviet Union.” In contrast, “there are dozens of nations now shifting over to the American form of government, which shows that in the long run, we’ll prevail.”

The belief that the United States would “prevail” over the Soviet Union in the coming decades influenced the behavior of NSC staffers who drew up plans that endorsed the strategy of “competitive engagement” as a way of exacerbating Soviet domestic weaknesses during the 1980s. In a memorandum that he sent to Brzezinski entitled “Dissidence in Eastern Europe and the USSR-Are We Doing Enough,” Paul Henze regretted that the U.S. government had not yet done enough to institutionalize policies designed to support dissenters or strengthen U.S. international broadcasting capabilities. He urged the executive branch to devote more resources to “book and publication programs for Eastern Europe and the USSR.” Increased funding, he believed, would enable the United States to “exploit the new opportunities for penetrating the communist world with ideas and information which are constantly developing.”

In September 1980, the U.S. General and NSC staffer, William Odom, sent Brzezinski a memorandum outlining how the United States should go about completing the transition from Era I (1945–1975) to Era II (1980s and 1990s) of East-West relations. Beyond citing Soviet human rights violations, the next Carter administration could “do a lot more on the nationality question within the USSR.” “In an age of nationalism,” he wrote, “there is nothing permanent about Soviet ‘internationalism’ and . . . borders—something we can imply and encourage others to say explicitly.” Since Soviet-style socialism “suffers from enormous centrifugal forces,” a “shock could bring surprising developments within the USSR, just as we have seen in Poland.” Reflecting on this insight, Odom declared that “the dissolution of the Soviet empire is a not a wholly fanciful prediction for later in this century.” Perhaps thinking about all the advantages that U.S. leaders held over

their Soviet counterparts, Carter wrote “Very Interesting” in the margins of this memorandum.99

CONCLUSION

Carter’s reaction to this memorandum raises important questions about how to evaluate his administration’s efforts to promote human rights in the Soviet Union. Nothing can hide one basic fact: Carter’s “reciprocal accommodation [détente]” strategy failed to prevent Soviet officials from violating human rights on a large scale and imprisoning dissenters for questioning their government’s policies. This reality raises the question of whether or not Carter’s efforts to promote human rights in the Soviet Union should be considered a failure. As this article has argued, Carter made a number of mistakes. He overestimated moderation in Soviet internal behavior during his time in office and underestimated just how much Soviet leaders viewed human rights critiques as a direct attack on their right to rule. He also sometimes downplayed the issue of Soviet human rights violations to facilitate the completion of SALT II.

Before passing judgment, however, we need to keep in mind that Carter would not have been more successful transforming Soviet internal behavior by implementing harsh economic sanctions for the imprisonment of dissenters or linking progress in the SALT II negotiations to specific human rights improvements. He also would not have done more to help dissenters by only using “quiet” human rights diplomacy to curb Soviet human rights violations. The latter argument downplays just how many Soviet dissident leaders wanted Carter to speak out on their behalf and praised his willingness to raise the subject of Soviet human rights violations; it also overlooks the myriad of political complications that would have arisen from Congressional critics and private citizens who expected Carter to challenge Soviet violations of the Final Act and defend Soviet dissenters in public forums. Both arguments also make the mistake of overestimating the amount of influence that the United States could ever have had on Soviet policy makers who felt obligated to root out nonofficial activities so they could maintain the ideological conformity needed to keep their multinational, multiethnic empire bound together.

The limited influence that the U.S. government had on Soviet internal behavior raises the possibility that Carter’s human rights policies only really succeeded in undermining the continuation of détente with the USSR by putting Soviet leaders on the defensive and making the conclusion of agreements such as SALT II more difficult than they should have been.100 After all, evidence suggests that top-ranking Soviet officials viewed Carter as a tough ideological opponent who worsened Superpower relations by raising the subject of Soviet human rights violations in

100. For an example of this sort of view, see Glad, An Outsider in the White House, 76. See also Dobrynin, In Confidence, 387.
public forums throughout his Presidency. The argument that Carter’s human rights critiques primarily weakened U.S.-Soviet relations is nevertheless shortsighted for several reasons. It glosses over the reality that the SALT negotiations would have been contentious no matter what given the Soviet desire to sign an agreement more consistent with the Vladivostok formula of 1974 than the proposals that Vance presented in March 1977. It also understates how specific Soviet policies designed to wage the Cold War more effectively such as flooding weapons into Africa and deploying the SS-20 missile would have worsened Superpower relations even if Carter had said nothing about Soviet domestic behavior.

Emphasizing how Carter’s human rights policies undermined Superpower relations looks even more shortsighted when viewed in light of the “diversification of power” that took place when human rights became a global concern during the 1970s and 1980s. For all his missteps, Carter recognized that exploiting the issue of human rights and the language of the Final Act enhanced the ability of the United States to engage in effective ideological competition with the USSR and elucidate the weaknesses of Soviet-style socialism. Until he placed a wide array of penalties on the Soviets for invading Afghanistan, Carter also followed the sound proposition that the United States would do little to improve the lives of Soviet dissenters and promote democratic changes in the USSR by completely abandoning détente and carrying out “confrontational” policies aimed at isolating and intimidating Soviet leaders. Without arrogantly dismissing concerns about U.S. human rights practices or ignoring the advantages of forging cooperative links with Moscow in ways that served U.S. interests, he defended a truly “dynamic” (i.e., reciprocal) conception of détente that linked the enhancement of international peace and security to improvements in governmental respect for basic human rights. By taking this approach, the Carter administration amplified the voices of dissenters such as Andrei Sakharov who argued that the Cold War would not end until internal reform took place in the Soviet Union.

When viewed in this light, Carter accomplished far more than preparing the “moral ground” for Ronald Reagan’s “harsh characterizations” of the Soviet Union as one author suggests. By exploiting the language of the Final Act

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101. Several former Soviet officials such as Ambassador Dobrynin made this point in the following conferences whose transcripts are available at the NSA: SALT II and the Growth of Mistrust, Conference #2 of the Carter-Brezhnev Project, NSA, 210, 327, 24, 66, 97; and The Collapse of Détente: From March 1977 Moscow Meetings to the December 1979 Invasion of Afghanistan—The Launch of The Carter-Brezhnev Project, NSA, 20.


104. This position takes issue with recent works that emphasize how Western Europeans deserve most of the credit for forging a “dynamic” conception of détente that aimed at “liberalizing” the Soviet bloc and “overcoming Cold War confrontation.” For a different view, see Angela Romano, “Détente, Entente, or Linkage?” 716–17.

and encouraging private citizens to challenge Soviet internal behavior, he bequeathed to his successor a framework well-suited for rebuilding U.S.-Soviet relations in ways consistent with basic U.S. values and interests. Ronald Reagan admitted his debt to Carter on the eve of the 1988 U.S.-Soviet summit in Moscow when he reminded an audience in Helsinki that the United States and Soviet Union had “developed a broad agenda . . . linked directly to” the stipulations of the Final Act. In this new era of Cold War competition, he continued, the Final Act had played an important role in showing the failures of totalitarian regimes promising a “perfect world.” “Once it was the democracies that doubted their own view of freedom and wondered whether utopian systems might be better. Today the doubt is on the other side.”