

President Carter and human rights: the contradiction of American policy

by Louis Balthazar

It is not surprising that President Carter has had to tone down his campaign on international human rights. There are so many obstacles standing in the way of such a policy and it is so inconsistent with the exigencies of American diplomacy that it is difficult to see it as anything but a self-indulgent declaration of principle more appropriate for less crisis-filled times or for the early months of a President's administration.

However, it would not be correct to conclude that this direction in American foreign policy is merely a chance event. Neither the left, in vociferously denouncing its "hypocrisy", nor the right, in laying emphasis upon its lack of realism, really defined the true nature of America's foreign policy. Grand statements of principle on foreign policy tend to be generally somewhat hypocritical. This is true for most countries. On the other hand, the United States does not have a monopoly on unrealistic policies. But idealism in foreign policy is a characteristically American trait, a sort of given constant of the American style. Carter's policy on human rights is an expression of this national style.

Professor Balthazar teaches at Laval University and is engaged in a study of Canadian-American relations. Although he is a co-editor of International Perspectives, the views expressed in this article are purely his own and are not intended to reflect the policy of the Department or to state an editorial position for this magazine.

Long-standing obsession

A mood of idealism marked the founding of the American nation. The early American settlers believed that they had found the conditions for an ideal kind of life, and this conviction was a principal factor in their triumphant emancipation from British rule.

This belief was soon translated into a foreign policy characterized by stubborn isolationism. As early as 1796, Washington, in his farewell address, urged his countrymen to remain aloof from the vagaries of European diplomacy, which were considered immoral.

When Presidents William McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt defended a more interventionist policy a century later, they did so in the name of a sacred mission that consisted in extending the notion of "Manifest Destiny" overseas. Their successor, Woodrow Wilson, justified American participation in the First World War on the basis that there was a moral obligation "to make the world safe for democracy". The same was true for Franklin D. Roosevelt during the Second World War.

Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, the great proponent of hard-line anti-Communism in the 1950s, was still motivated by moralism when he became the self-styled promoter of a philosophy that saw the world in strict black-and-white terms and of a dream (never realized) of freeing the captives of Eastern Europe.

John F. Kennedy, in a new

style, appealed in his turn to the conscience of America in committing his country to "bear any burden, pay any price" for the defence of the "free world".

After the dreadful ordeal of a long and humiliating war in Vietnam, the stigma of the Watergate scandal and an interlude of *Realpolitik* with Kissinger, Jimmy Carter, candidate and President, was guaranteed domestic success with his promise to inject a new morality into foreign policy. The man who had not travelled in Washington's political circles, the self-made man from Georgia, was going to come to the defence of human rights throughout the world. Despite all the problems and contradictions inherent in this policy, it was welcomed almost everywhere in the United States with open arms. "It is so refreshing," people were saying in 1977. At last the nation could have a clear conscience again and its former idealism could be restored. It is as if the United States cannot survive long without a moralistic policy. Even so, the contradictions are quite obvious: this moralism does not in any way eliminate the pursuit of very real interests that are more self-centred than charitable, if not at times rather sordid.

Conditions

Is this American moral will therefore an illusion, an ideological superstructure that helps persuade the American people to accept the immoralities of a foreign policy centred on capitalist exploitation? Not