

Just Pure Rhetoric?

Experts wonder about Washington's legitimate concern for human rights.

Ex-president Jimmy Carter has argued that Washington's concern for human rights is not "pure rhetoric". Dr. Rosario Green, specialist in foreign affairs and director of the Matías Romero Institute of Diplomatic Studies, affiliated to this country's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, argues that United States policy in human rights has lacked credibility and consistency. Her views:

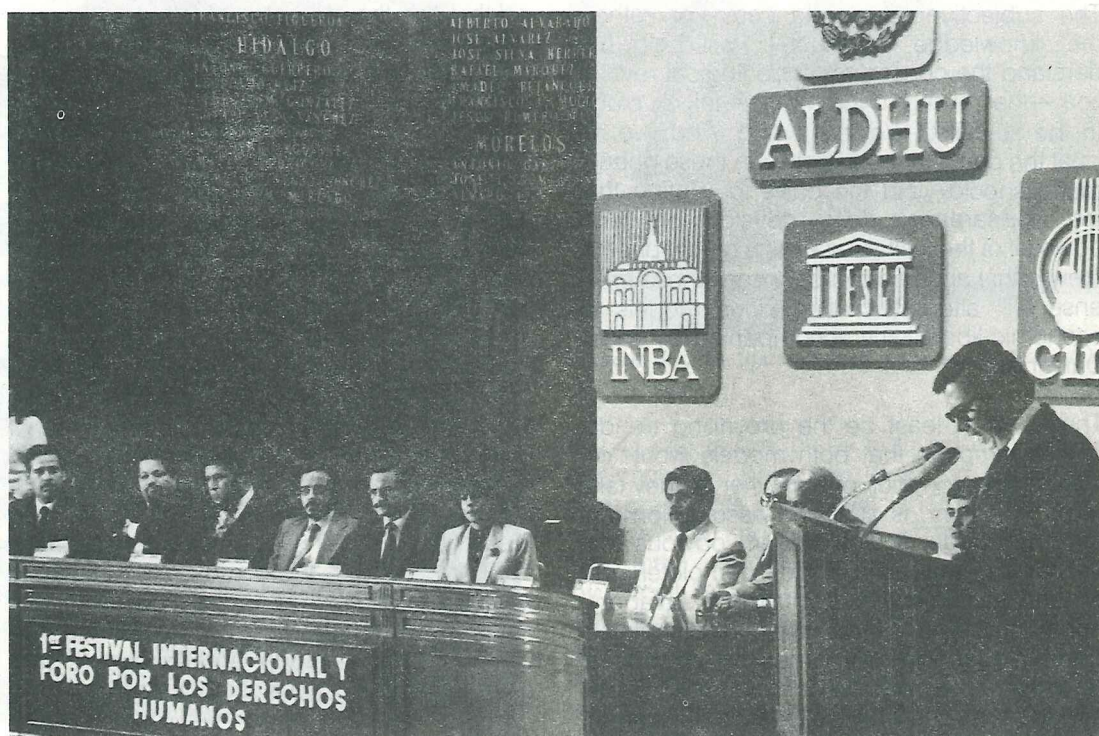
Three main areas of concern and interest have been consistently on the agenda between the United States and Latin America: economic, military, and political issues, the last of which have often been dealt with in the form of promoting democracy or, even more specifically, human rights. This is not to say that U.S. attention has always been focused on

these three aspects or particularly on the latter one, nor do we mean to insinuate that this sort of attention has always been directed at our countries.

To the contrary, we know that for better or for worse, the United States' interest in Latin America has traditionally been rather erratic. The distinctive mark of the relationship has been a sort of crisis-rapprochement-indifference cycle.

Whenever the United States has perceived a world-wide or regional -level crisis, or a critical situation in a specific country in the area that either threatens or endangers its national security—in whichever form it is being understood at a given time, be it threats from

Photo by Jesús Carlos



The First International Human Right Forum and Festival, in Querétaro, México.

extra-continental powers of from certain hemispheric situations— it has sought to redefine its relations with Latin America, the region the U.S. has always wanted to count on as an unconditional ally.

We should keep in mind that for many years Latin America, as seen from the United States, was limited to Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean, the area regarded as a security belt. It wasn't until the United States entered the Second World War that the alliance with all of Latin America, including more or less reluctant countries such as Argentina and

and interests. These governments were also profoundly anti-communist, all of which dissolved any concern the U.S. may have had concerning the direction Latin America was moving in.

This long period of indifference on the part of the United States didn't take place in a vacuum. Discontent was developing in many countries and being channeled not only against dishonest, repressive and un-patriotic rulers, but also against the country whose interest these men in power, and the *status quo* defended.



Photo by Marco A. Cruz/Imagen Latina

Campesinos imprisoned over land struggles in Puebla

Brazil, gained in strength. This also resulted in advancing the goals of international cooperation the region had been expounding since the beginnings of the Panamericanist Movement at the end of the XIX Century. New programs for economic and military cooperation appeared to complement the previously existing political collaboration.

Once the critical wartime situation was over, the rapprochement between the United States and Latin America once again slipped into indifference and remoteness. Programs for political, economic and military cooperation with Latin America seemed to fall behind as another region, Asia, appeared to pose greater security risks for the United States. The understanding became that it was necessary to contain the "advance of international Communism" in Asia. Latin America could bear being "abandoned", as most of its countries were ruled by "friendly enthusiastic allies" of the United States.

In effect, for years many of the countries in the region were governed by family or oligarchical-style military dictatorships that strongly defended North American values

Just as World War II had done earlier, the Cuban Revolution marked a breaking point and a new rapprochement. Political, economic and military cooperation programs were again set up. On the one hand, they were framed by the Alliance for Progress, whose political goal of "avoiding another Cuba at all costs" was dressed up in promises of assistance that never completely came true. On the other hand, Civic Action and Counterinsurgency programs were successfully put into effect, using the army to carry out civilian activities such as vaccination and literacy campaigns in rural areas. Their purpose was to detect guerrilla groups and their bases of support, as well as their ongoing strategies, arms caches, etc. and also to contain discontent and insurgent activity in urban areas.

The goal was to provide arms and training for Latin American armies and police forces, thus enabling them to detect and prevent the development to movements that might lead to "a Cuban style" revolution.

The strategy was complemented by President John F. Kennedy's ideas on the causes of revolution and by his insistence on promoting

mexican profiles

democracy and social justice in our countries.

Yet the instrument he used for this purpose proved to be inconsistent. Even though he tried to rely on the practice of recognizing governments and providing them with aid programs associated to their legitimacy, he finally ended up recognizing *de facto* governments that had sometimes even supplanted *de jure* governments. This came about according to the U.S.' convenience at a given moment, subordinating specific interests to any effective regard for democracy and human rights in Latin America.

This policy yielded meager results and was thus virtually abandoned, a familiar attitude in the midst of a new North American pull-back from the region once the "Cuban crisis" had

been overcome. Furthermore, the region's destiny seemed secure because of strengthened anti-communist alliances. In fact, during the 60s military dictatorships were fortified or reinstalled in many of our countries, making any kind of promotion of the defense of human rights by the U.S. government unthinkable both in practice and as policy.

Years later the Democratic administration of James Carter tried to rescue a degree of moral legitimacy for the United States both within its own borders and abroad. During his campaign for the presidency, Carter insisted that the human rights issue was not mere rhetoric and that his government would take a stand on this whenever and wherever it was deemed convenient to do so. This policy was enacted early on in the administration's term



Photo by Jesús Carlos

The mother of someone who has disappeared in the struggle so that all may turn up alive

when Secretary of State Cyrus Vance announced on February 24, 1977, that Uruguay Ethiopia and Argentina would be censured for their repeated violations of human rights. Yet in practice, policy remained conditioned by specific interests and by U.S. national security, both of which help explain why aid to South Korea, for example, never ceased, nor were ties broken off with any of the region's southern-cone dictatorships.

The Reagan Administration also took up the subject of human rights, although in a less direct manner than Carter had done. Its emphasis has been on censuring and combating what the administration defines as totalitarian regimes, or totalitarian traits of certain regimes, rather than addressing human rights violations per se. Nonetheless, the results have been basically the same: incongruity and lack of credibility. Both Reagan and Carter blamed some and exonerated others while conditioning censure and sanctions to North American interests and security. Their hand was weighted against countries like Grenada and Nicaragua which were perceived as greater threats because of the internal processes they were undergoing, and both were even accused of being totalitarian and thus, of shunning or violating human rights.

Curiously enough, the list of those censured by the Republican administration and by different sectors of the U.S. public (and which, naturally, include the two mentioned above), comprises countries regarded as "constitutionally established" by the international community because of the existence of a working system of guarantees and human rights. This, of course, contradicts the peculiar North American point of view.

Besides recognizing the fact that the protection of rights is always perfectible, we must also realize that many opinions for or against protecting rights are value judgements entailing interpretations that favor some rights over others. This is particularly the case with mutually limiting rights, such as those of the individual vis a vis collective rights. But above all, many criticisms can be considered unilateral judgements because they are not properly reported to the institutions that take notice of and oversee the protection of human rights. Rather, this type of censure distorts the image of states that have not been marked by the international community as particularly persistent violators of human rights.

As we have to a certain extent pointed out, this is the type of situation that exists between the United States and Nicaragua, as an example. When the U.S. unilaterally determines that the Sandinistas violate all kinds of human rights, it should be kept in mind that this view of things has not been backed up by the international community.

In the same vein and to give an example that is closer to home, the immense freedom of ex-

pression enjoyed in the United States has often entailed harmful consequences for Mexico, a situation supported by the existing power relations. This is the case for what we in Mexico perceived as a contemptuous and deceitful campaign unleashed in the U.S. press against our country. Although it didn't always seem to be supported by the U.S. government, nothing was done to limit or put a stop to the campaign, and this took place precisely in the name of freedom of expression. No wonder the Mexican Ambassador to the United Nations called the week of October 19-25 1986, the "Week of Infamy", referring to articles that appeared in *The New York Times*, and to which we may add the equally slanderous pieces in the *Chicago Tribune*.

This example of things is as injurious to the Mexicans under attack as it is to the North Americans being deceived. Among other things, it illustrates the difficulties involved in interpreting human rights from the different angles that each culture sees them. These difficulties seem to fall into two main orders of things.

The first order, which we can call *jurisdictional*, has to do with relations among states as well as with relations between states and international organizations. In this vein it is worth pointing out that powerful states that pass judgement on others for not respecting human rights are not always exemplary in respecting the norms of international law nor the resolutions and agreements that the community of nations has created for itself in order to deal with this and other issues.

We might call the second order of difficulties *substantive*, and it deals with the material, cultural and political heterogeneity between states that we touched on before. Although this factor doesn't prevent general adherence to declarations and conventions on human rights, it does limit their being understood in the same way or their being fully respected, even if the political intent to do so is present.

More to the point. Under what set of values can we define the right to an adequate lifestyle? How can the necessary levels of welfare be guaranteed under critical circumstances or when at an historical disadvantage vis a vis the levels considered desirable? How can a state maintain certain types of guarantees when it's being attacked or threatened by others? Where do you draw the line when freedom of expression is confronted with the right not to be deceived, provoked or abused, or when it is framed by certain communal customs handed down through history?

These are some of the questions that must be answered, both in general and in the context of relations between the United States and Latin America. ★

Rosario Green