

Human Rights Are American Rights
Talk at City Hall for UN Human Rights Day, 12/10/03

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We are celebrating the 55th anniversary of an important event in modern world history – the adoption by the infant UN in 1948 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Declaration was among many other things a gift to the world from Eleanor & Franklin Roosevelt, & through them from the American people. It has been as influential in world history as were the French & American Revolutions of the late 18th century, a bright torch of freedom offering hope to oppressed peoples everywhere. It invited the leaders of the whole world to engage purposely & patiently in the hard work achieving for all the best fruits of ancient struggles for justice some of which had been waged first right here in the US. And the world heard that message of potential liberation loud & clear.

The Universal Declaration played a large role in fueling the struggles of people in dozens of African & Asian countries to put an end to colonialism & declare themselves independent between the 1940s & the 1960s -- just as we ourselves had done in 1776. It has inspired the partially violent but mostly nonviolent struggles against the cruel system of apartheid in South Africa, & more recently in Israel & Palestine. It inspired a peaceable struggle against racial oppression & segregation in the US Civil Rights Movement, & the struggles for women's, gay & lesbian, Latino, disabled, & immigrant rights that the Civil Rights Movement in turn has made possible in this country. It helped fuel the peaceful democratic revolutions of the 1980s & 90s against Communist autocracy & against right-wing military dictatorships in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, the Philippines, South Korea, Indonesia, Chile, Argentina & elsewhere.

The Declaration has guided the new theologies of liberation in Christian, Muslim, Jewish & Buddhist countries, the exemplary Landless Workers' Movement & Workers' Party

that recently elected Luis Inácio da Silva or Lula to the presidency of Brazil; & the tremendous proliferation of grassroots political movements for social, economic & environmental justice, often led by women, in virtually every country on the globe. We are all deeply indebted to the visionary diplomats who drafted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights midst the ruins of a war-torn world, when today's senior citizens were young.

But despite the enormous contribution of Americans to the inspiration & drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the role of the US government in the elaboration & implementation since 1948 of the promise of human rights is not one we can be proud of. The original Declaration had first to be drafted in committee, then signed by a representative of the head of state, & then ratified by legislative action in each country. That was accomplished here in America without too much difficulty under Harry Truman. But the same process has had to be followed for each of the supplementary human rights agreements, known as Covenants, that have been drafted under UN auspices since 1948.

The International Covenant on Civil & Political Rights, corresponding fairly closely to our own Bill of Rights, was passed & ratified by a majority of nations, & entered into force in 1976. It was signed by President Carter in 1977, but remained unratified by the US until 1992. The more controversial International Covenant on Economic, Social & Cultural Rights, also signed in 1977, has never been ratified by the US. The Conventions on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination & Against Torture & Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, operative since 1969 & 1987 respectively, were ratified by the US only in 1994, & then with reservations. The Conventions on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, & on the Rights of the Child & were signed by our Presidents in 1980 & 1995, but have never been ratified by Congress. The shameful stories of our country's role in the negotiations for an international agreement against land mines, for a pact to slow down the process of global warming, & for the establishment of an International Court to try individuals for crimes against humanity, are well known to all.

With that history behind us, a history of the systematic obstruction of international efforts to achieve & put into practice a new international standard for the observation of human rights, it is curious to note that despite all of our concern about the threat to civil liberties from the Patriot Act, & our opposition to the Bush Administration's militarization of society & foreign policy, we dissenting Americans have had very little to say in recent years about the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Not even the Democrat candidates for the Presidency have said much about it (though the commitments of Dennis Kucinich are clear enough in this realm, if only the media would focus attention on them!). I think that by neglecting this subject we have been missing a major political opportunity.

The opportunity is evident on two fronts: 1) the Republican & also the Democratic leadership of our country should be dogged at every opportunity, by folks familiar with the Declaration & its several Conventions. We should ask why our representatives generally drag their feet & practice obstruction in international human rights negotiations, today & over the past half-century. We should flood Congress with requests for clarification of the reasons for each interminable delay in the ratification process for a signed Covenant -- in the process raising public awareness of the emerging international standards for human rights, & the role of our country in preventing their development & implementation around the world.

2) But more important than that, we should be working day by day to raise public awareness of these standards, so we can demand their implementation in our own country. Human rights are every American's rights; but in practice a great many of our people are denied them. This could be the subject of a productive study group, forum or series of public lectures. But rather than ranting on about the present systematic denial to Americans of the most basic human rights, as the world is coming to understand them, let me end by taking you back to the period of our history just prior to the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, & to the great President who helped inspire it. On January 11, 1944, when our nation was still stretched to its limits by the massive

effort to defeat the armies of Germany & Japan on battlefields stretched around the world, Franklin Delano Roosevelt had this to say to Congress about his human rights in the postwar world:

We have come to a clear realization of the fact that true individual freedom cannot exist without economic security & independence. “Necessitous men are not free men.” People who are hungry & out of a job are the stuff of which dictatorships are made.

In our day, these economic truths have become accepted as self-evident. We have accepted, so to speak, a second Bill of Rights under which a new basis of security & prosperity can be established for all – regardless of station, race or creed. Among these are:

The right to a useful & remunerative job in the industries or shops or farms or mines of the nation;

The right to earn enough to provide adequate food & clothing & recreation;

The right of every farmer to raise & sell his products at a return which will give him & his family a decent living.

The right of every businessman, large & small, to trade in an atmosphere of freedom from unfair competition & domination by monopolies at home or abroad;

The right of every family to a decent home;

The right to adequate medical care & the opportunity to achieve & enjoy good health;

The right to adequate protection from the economic fears of old age, sickness, accident, & unemployment;

The right to a good education;

All of these rights spell security. And after this war is won, we must be prepared to move forward, in the implementation of these rights, to new goals of human happiness & well-being.

America's own rightful place in the world depends in large part upon how fully these & similar rights have been carried into practice for our citizens. For unless there is security here at home there cannot be lasting peace in the world.

If the Democrats & other Americans of 2004 are really looking for a program with which to confront the Republican political juggernaut, they could do a lot worse than to start with those words, & with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, & with the several liberating Covenants that have been drafted since 1948 to help give it substance..