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## Hope over Experience?

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## Hope over Experience?

### Abstract

Writing about US human rights policy from the outside is always a disconcerting experience. All bets are off, and all assumptions are turned on their head. Assumptions from the South looking North are that, rhetoric aside, US interests rarely if ever feature human rights protection and promotion in first place. What's more, they have very frequently featured the opposite: dirty tricks, torture and rendition were sadly familiar to students of Latin American history long before Guantanamo. The Clinton years went some way towards reining in the more blatant contradictions of the 1980s, but they also set in train the easy and often misused equation between US style democracy and rights that paved the way for "preventive" regime change under Bush. US invocations of freedom have always, in other words, been selective even within its shores and often seem quite irreconcilable with the reality of its actions beyond them.

### Keywords

Human rights, Barack Obama, Policy, United Nations (UN)

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## Hope over Experience?

by Cath Collins

Writing about US human rights policy from the outside is always a disconcerting experience. All bets are off, and all assumptions are turned on their head. Assumptions from the South looking North are that, rhetoric aside, US interests rarely if ever feature human rights protection and promotion in first place. What's more, they have very frequently featured the opposite: dirty tricks, torture and rendition were sadly familiar to students of Latin American history long before Guantanamo. The Clinton years went some way towards reining in the more blatant contradictions of the 1980s, but they also set in train the easy and often misused equation between US style democracy and rights that paved the way for "preventive" regime change under Bush. US invocations of freedom have always, in other words, been selective even within its shores and often seem quite irreconcilable with the reality of its actions beyond them.

Read in this key, the objections raised by Bret Stephens to Obama's lukewarm, or selective, human rights performance in office come under the heading of non-surprises. US economic interests have taken first place? Rhetoric has not been matched by reality? It's more difficult to govern than to make promises? None of this is unexpected, unless perhaps you were one of the many who projected onto Obama the long-postponed realization of the (North) American Dream. The illusions were not restricted to US shores: the Nobel Prize committee shared the precipitate enthusiasm.

Most of what Obama has and has not done is quite explicable if you stick to what politicians really do—and are supposed to do. As he himself points out in his speech to the UN, his job is not to save humanity from itself but to represent US interests on the world stage. So when Stephens castigates the policy of "engagement" with Burma, he may well be right to do so. But his reasoning—that the military junta will only try to turn all US overtures to their own advantage—is somewhat flawed. All states, everywhere, seek to maximize their advantage on the world stage. The job of international regimes is to tame or redefine national interest(s), showing how the sum of individual choices is not always mutual advantage.

If US aims really stretched beyond individual messianism to pursuit of the common interest—as defined by all—the US would not seek to bend others to its ever-changing will. The option for genuine multilateralism, for leading the way in accepting the binding nature of international law and refusing to invoke the veto option whenever national interests are trimmed, is always there. But the US has consistently refused to take it. This is where Obama could make a difference, but it's unlikely that even Democrats, let alone Republicans, will let him. The US wants, first and foremost, to keep control and be seen to be keeping control. The "Free Tibet" and "Save Darfur" bumper stickers in one sense only perpetuate the myth that Tibet is ours to free, Darfur ours to save.

The Chinese know better: they will sit out US self-belief in the solid conviction that the next century is theirs. Roosevelt's post-war conclusion that the US had learned to be "citizens of the world" seems precipitate when viewed from here. Few if any in the US would agree that China should call the shots on the world stage. But what is so different? The US has done so for as long as it was able. The "winner takes all" logic that served the US so well when it was winning will

work to its disadvantage once in decline. If the strongest, wealthiest, most vigorous state is free to shape the world in its own image, moral content is irrelevant. If no state is free to do that, then we need to see the emerging outlines of the common moral framework, and a demonstration from the current “front runners” that they really believe it is for all.

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