

Human Rights & Human Welfare

Volume 10
Issue 6 *May Roundtable: The Downfall of
Human Rights?*

Article 1

5-1-2010

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Recommended Citation

(2010) "May Roundtable: The Downfall of Human Rights? Introduction," *Human Rights & Human Welfare*: Vol. 10: Iss. 6, Article 1.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw/vol10/iss6/1>



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May Roundtable: The Downfall of Human Rights? Introduction

Abstract

An annotation of:

"The Downfall of Human Rights" by Joshua Kurlantzick. Newsweek. February 19, 2010.

Keywords

Human rights, United States, Western world, Financial crisis, War on Terror, Human rights advocacy

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The Downfall of Human Rights?

Article under review: [“The Downfall of Human Rights” by Joshua Kurlantzick. *Newsweek*. February 19, 2010.](#)

“The age of global human-rights advocacy has collapsed, giving way to an era of realism unseen since the time of Henry Kissinger and Richard Nixon. In the West, the failure of George W. Bush's moralizing style of democracy promotion, combined with the pragmatism inspired by the global financial crisis, has made leaders far more reticent to assert a high profile on rights issues.” This quote is the essence of Council on Foreign Relations Fellow, Joshua Kurlantzick's recent article in *Newsweek*. According to Kurlantzick, the United States and leading Western states are no longer interested in promoting human rights; instead, they focus on overcoming the financial crisis and building international alliances to pursue their strategic interests. The author pictures an even darker road ahead for human rights advocacy, one in which “the changing global balance of power may now prevent human rights from ever gaining the international attention it did in the 1990s and early 2000s.”

Has the rise of China and the changing balance of power negatively affected international human rights regimes? Has the global financial crisis weakened the international human rights agenda? On what grounds is it possible to claim that the “downfall” of human rights is upon us? Our panelists analyze these questions in light of the history of the human rights movement, along with President Obama's human rights policy. The contributors emphasize that it is important to generate a balanced assessment on the future of human rights advocacy, highlighting that there are at least three relevant factors that give us hope for a more optimistic view of the future of human rights.

First, after the devastating international effects of the Bush administration and the global coalition of the “War on Terror,” Western states need to reestablish their credibility as human rights promoters. International human rights regimes are a good example of an area in which Western democracies are taking the lead for human rights protection worldwide, recovering part of the international legitimacy that they lost in recent years. The United States rejoined the United Nations Human Rights Council; the International Criminal Court is now in place and working after a difficult start; and the European Court of Human Rights—to mention one regional mechanism—continues to increase its influence.

Second, the incremental changes in human rights protection take shape in many different forms—not just in interstate relations, as Kurlantzick points out. The history of the human rights movement has been rooted in the work of local and international NGOs, as well as scholarly research, that have sought to shape the international agenda and raise international human rights standards worldwide.

Third, the improvement of human rights does not happen overnight, and it is by no means without setbacks. The recent past of human rights advocacy, which is Kurlantzick's point of reference, is full of human rights atrocities worldwide. The 1990s witnessed devastating conflicts in Burundi, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and southern Sudan. The 2000s saw the West's “War on Terror,” including torture and prisoner's abuse in Guantanamo Bay and Abu

Ghraib. Put in this context, the recent lack of interest in human rights is nothing new. The protection of international human rights will continue to be a campaign fraught with struggles and obstacles, but it is also one that brings fundamental human rights advancements.

These issues and others are considered in this month's Roundtable.