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## Hope, Despair, and Human Rights

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## Hope, Despair, and Human Rights

### Abstract

Joshua Kurlantzick's "The Downfall of Human Rights" in Newsweek makes for a sobering read. The major Western states, he argues, are no longer interested in the promotion of human rights, but are instead focused on rebuilding themselves after the global recession. Kurlantzick notes further that the Obama administration avoids strong criticism of China, Russia, and other human rights violators because of its desire to demarcate itself from the previous administration's moralizing democracy promotion. To add to Kurlantzick's case for the West's lack of concern about human rights, one could cite the recent and blatantly human rights-violating anti-terror laws of several countries, the UK Conservatives' attacks on the Human Rights Act, and the abusive treatment of economic migrants and asylum seekers.

### Keywords

Human rights, United States foreign policy, Western world, War on Terror, Human rights advocacy

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## Hope, Despair, and Human Rights

by James Pattison

Joshua Kurlantzick's "The Downfall of Human Rights" in *Newsweek* makes for a sobering read. The major Western states, he argues, are no longer interested in the promotion of human rights, but are instead focused on rebuilding themselves after the global recession. Kurlantzick notes further that the Obama administration avoids strong criticism of China, Russia, and other human rights violators because of its desire to demarcate itself from the previous administration's moralizing democracy promotion. To add to Kurlantzick's case for the West's lack of concern about human rights, one could cite the recent and blatantly human rights-violating anti-terror laws of several countries, the UK Conservatives' attacks on the Human Rights Act, and the abusive treatment of economic migrants and asylum seekers.

However, I want to paint a less pessimistic view of human rights advocacy and, in doing so, present some grounds for optimism. But, before doing so, a clarification is necessary. The Neoconservatives did not tend to use the language of "human rights" to justify their policies, but favored much more the diffuse notions of "freedom" and "democracy." And, advocating democracy or freedom worldwide is not necessarily the same as human rights promotion. To be sure, proper respect for human rights entails democratic governance, but democratic governance—at least as the term is used in practice to denote the performance of free and fair elections—does not entail human rights. So, for all the Bush administration's talk of freedom and democracy, this talk did not lead to concern for human rights. On the contrary, history will remember the Bush administration as one of the worst in terms of human rights, given Guantanamo Bay, Abu Ghraib, the firebombing of Fallujah, extraordinary rendition, and the unflinching support for Israeli action in Southern Lebanon in 2006.

After the rampaging liberal imperialist rhetoric and practice of the Neoconservatives and support in many other Western states for the War on Terror, the West diminished its ability to act as a norm carrier for human rights. That is, it lost its credibility in the eyes of the international community to criticize other states' human rights violations and to highlight the importance of human rights more generally. The West, and the United States in particular, needs to win this credibility back. A less belligerent and moralizing foreign policy will be key. The United States needs to re-establish its reputation with actions, by showing the rest of the world that its criticisms of others' human rights records are not simply double standards. This does not mean that the United States and others in the West should now refrain from criticizing other states' human rights records when necessary on occasion. Rather, my point is that the United States and other liberal democracies should make their criticisms count by working hard to re-establish their reputations and avoiding the preaching and aggressive tone of the Bush administration.

In addition, it is important not to romanticize the recent past in terms of human rights advocacy. The 1980s saw egregious support for authoritarian, anti-communist regime states in Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa. The 1990s are often held up as the high point of humanitarianism, but saw devastating conflicts (largely ignored by the West) in Burundi, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and southern Sudan. The 2000s saw the West's War on Terror and support for human rights-violating regimes, such as Uzbekistan. Put in this context, the recent lack of interest in human rights that Kurlantzick points to is nothing new.

Moreover, the notion that there is currently a Western indifference towards human rights can be questioned. Indeed, Kurlantzick notes at one point that the Obama administration has made some recent moves to advance human rights, including strongly rebuking Zimbabwe and Iran. In fact, the Executive Director of Human Rights Watch, Kenneth Roth, has [recently claimed](#) that “[f]rom a human rights perspective, there is no doubt that the Obama White House has done better than the Bush administration.” More generally, the past decade has also seen the establishment of some notable international human rights mechanisms. In particular, the Human Rights Council, with its Universal Periodic Review mechanism, and the International Criminal Court offer some hope for the advancement of human rights protection worldwide, perhaps not with their direct rulings, verdicts, and procedures, but with their indirect effects of encouraging states to live up to their human rights responsibilities. To this we can add the notions of “human security” and the “responsibility to protect,” both increasingly employed in the international community to make clear that states have human rights responsibilities to both their own citizens and to those beyond the borders of their state.

None of this is meant to deny that substantially more should be done in terms of human rights advocacy worldwide. Nor is it meant to deny that there are many terrible human rights violations currently ongoing (some highlighted by Kurlantzick) and that the West is not properly responding to them. The point is that we need to avoid being overly pessimistic and a fatalism about achieving human rights. There have been some recent and notable improvements in human rights, and there will be some more advancements if we campaign and work hard to achieve them.

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*Dr James Pattison is a Lecturer in Politics at the University of Manchester. His research interests concern the moral issues raised when using military force abroad, including humanitarian intervention, the responsibility to protect, and the increased use of private military companies. His PhD on humanitarian intervention was awarded the Sir Ernest Barker Prize for Best Dissertation in Political Theory by the Political Studies Association in 2008. He has recently completed the book, [Humanitarian Intervention and the Responsibility to Protect: Who Should Intervene?](#), which has just been published by Oxford University Press (Spring 2010). He has also published various articles on the ethics of force, including for [Ethics and International Affairs](#), [International Theory](#), [the Journal of Military Ethics](#), [the Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy](#), [the Journal of International Political Theory](#), [the International Journal of Human Rights](#), and [the Journal of Social Philosophy](#). Before joining Manchester, he was a Senior Lecturer in International Relations at the University of the West of England, Bristol (from Sept 07-09). He has also spent time as a Research Affiliate at New York University and he was a temporary lecturer in the School of Geography, Politics, and Sociology at Newcastle University.*