

# Human Rights & Human Welfare

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Volume 10  
Issue 8 *August Roundtable: Human Rights and Foreign Policy*

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Article 1

8-1-2010

## August Roundtable: Human Rights and Foreign Policy Introduction

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### Recommended Citation

(2010) "August Roundtable: Human Rights and Foreign Policy Introduction," *Human Rights & Human Welfare*: Vol. 10: Iss. 8, Article 1.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw/vol10/iss8/1>



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## August Roundtable: Human Rights and Foreign Policy Introduction

### Abstract

An annotation of:

"A humane nation is a safer nation" by Tom Porteous. The Guardian. July 7, 2010.

### Keywords

Human rights, United Kingdom foreign policy, United States foreign policy

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## Human Rights and foreign policy

Article under review: [“A humane nation is a safer nation” by Tom Porteous. \*The Guardian\*. July 7, 2010.](#)

In 1977 the United States President, Jimmy Carter, affirmed “America's commitment to human rights as a fundamental tenet of our foreign policy,” a statement that created high expectations for US international actions and fostered great controversy regarding how and under what circumstances states should give priority to human rights considerations in their foreign policy. A few weeks ago, the UK's foreign secretary, William Hague, said that human rights should be the “irreducible core” of the United Kingdom's foreign policy. Thirty years after Carter's statement, it is true that human rights have greater prominence in contemporary foreign policies of more states than at any other time. But it is no less true that in few countries (if any—certainly not in the US or the UK) are international human rights even close to the top of foreign policy priorities. This month's Roundtable discusses the realities and the limits of states' human rights foreign policies, taking the example of the UK as presented by Tom Porteous's piece published in *The Guardian*, “A humane nation is a safer nation.”

Porteous presents three reasons for having a human rights-friendly foreign policy for the United Kingdom. First, promoting human rights and the rule of law is a good way to secure some of the UK's most important foreign policy objectives, including preventing armed conflict and political extremism, and fostering economic development and political stability. Second, championing respect for human rights and the rule of law sets a good example and is good for the UK's international reputation. And third, the UK is involved in a multifaceted struggle against Islamist militancy that needs to be tackled not by military means alone. In the words of Porteous, “The ideological battle for hearts and minds is just as important, and victory on that front depends on the strictest adherence to human rights standards and the laws of war.”

Our panelists agree on the positive consequences for states that decide to promote international human rights. One additional benefit of adopting a human rights-oriented foreign policy that is highlighted by our contributors is the creation of moral, legal, and political interdependence that can deepen democracy at home. As Brysk notes, “Humanitarian foreign policy turns a spotlight on the very inconsistencies and hypocrisies Porteous chronicles for his own aspiring promoter state—and in some cases, improves them.” Human rights-oriented foreign policy helps democracy promotion and security at home and abroad.

However, our panelists also point out the possible “wrongs” of pursuing an international human rights policy that is based solely on rhetorical commitments. Matching words and deeds is even more pressing when human rights concerns have been identified as the heart of all other relevant policy considerations. The possible dangers are even more striking when governments decide to use human rights language without concrete substance or, even worse, when they use it as a means to reach other foreign policy objectives.

Thus, the concrete and more difficult question is how a country like Britain should promote human rights given its domestic and international constraints. Our contributors explore some possible areas for further concrete action, including international aid, development promotion,

and international justice. However, prudence in establishing overly grand policy pronouncements seems to be an important first step for human rights promotion worldwide.

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