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Maybe in the 22nd Century

Zahleh is a city in the Lebanon valley with a population of about 150 thousand, mostly Christians. It is in a state of siege by the Syrian army.

On December 15, the Syrian army attacked the city with heavy artillery shelling which killed many citizens. The Syrians now surround the city and are preventing the Christian militia forces in Lebanon from coming to its aid. Zahleh's citizens, helpless and cut off from the rest of the world, are awaiting further attack.

Have you read about Zahleh in your newspapers? Have you seen any marches in San Francisco, protesting the Syrian assault on Zahleh? The UN General Assembly will bristle with resolutions about Israel shelling PLO positions in Lebanon, but none about Syria shelling Zahleh.

The fact is that political considerations determine how any given person feels about any given violation of human rights. Those who were most vehement in their attack on the Shah's brutalities, have not commented on Khoumeini's, or vice versa. Indeed, some of those who screamed about the barbarism of South Vietnam's government, have been silent about the barbarism of North Vietnam. And vice versa.

And how about you? Do you feel a little more outraged about the shelling of Zahleh than about Israeli shellings of PLO positions in Lebanon,

which killed a certain number of innocent people? Well, there were different circumstances. Of course, there were; there always are. Political considerations cannot be so neatly divorced from human rights considerations--especially when some modern politics are exactly designed to extinguish human rights indefinitely.

That leads to a legitimate, excruciating dilemma for many of us in some of these situations. If we knew very well--from his own words--how brutal a Khoumeini regime would be, did that mean that we had to support the Shah? If we knew very well how barbarous the North Vietnamese government would be, did that mean that we had to support the brutalities of South Vietnam?

What about demanding more democratic practices from some governments over which we have influence? Well, we started to do that with the Shah, but it didn't help; the opposing barbarians were more determined than ever to take over. We tried to insist on a moderate policy for the El Salvador government, including land reform--but, among other things, the opposing factions, intent on power, wouldn't allow a moderate policy to prevail.

Or take another situation. Saudi Arabia is a feudal kingdom. If a "people's revolution," undoubtedly inspired from outside, threatens to topple this kingdom, should we take action to shore up the feudal lords? Should we begin to put forces there now? Or should we disdain "internal" interference," thus allowing a different kind of tyranny to take over, one which is inimical to the United States, and tied to all the world

forces inimical to the United States?

So what is a compassionate, well-meaning person to do? Urge a hands-off, plague-on-both-your houses policy? That would be a policy of abandonment, clearly designed to leave the field for the less conscientious, better organized, more intent politics of the extinction of human rights. The fact is that the forces inimical to both human rights and to the United States are gradually lapping over the world, even in this hemisphere.

Maybe there is nothing we can do about it. Maybe, in loss of nerve, we have failed to apply a political perspective to our human rights policies. Maybe we have failed to use American power until it is almost too late. Maybe we would rather not make difficult and nasty choices. Maybe we feel that it would be best to just let this civilization disappear; undoubtedly in the 21st or 22nd century, some civilization will emerge which will again be concerned with individual and group freedom.

Happy new year.