

SENTIMENTALITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

"Sentimentality" in literature refers to superficial emotionalism, and is the mark of a bad writer. Sentimentality in foreign affairs is just as superficial but a lot more dangerous. The "human rights issue" in foreign affairs, of deep concern to Jews, provides some prime examples these days.

If you told a Congressman, for example, that the U.S. should break off with Saudi Arabia *because* it is an oppressive regime, you would be guilty of sentimentality -- and less than convincing. That's because you really want the U.S. to break off with the Saudis for other reasons: its enmity to Israel and to American national interest.

Saudi Arabia continues to oppose American policy in the Middle East and Lebanon by supporting the Soviet clients, the PLO and Syria. (AWACS indeed!) If the Saudis acted otherwise, you would not so vehemently raise its appalling human rights record.

Those who say, for another example, that the U.S. should stop supporting the present government of El Salvador *because* it is violating human rights, are also unconvincing. There is nothing more transparently superficial than the sentimental proposition that we should shun any foreign power which is less than democratic and humane. We just have to consider our alliance with the Soviet Union against Nazi Germany. Were we wrong?

There are few people left anywhere who would defend the human rights record of the Stalinist regime with which we were allied. In the history of the world, there have probably never been so *many* people imprisoned without due process. Masses of Soviet citizens were killed, tortured, packed into concentration camps and otherwise brutalized by their government. In one illustrative episode, the leading Jewish poets and writers of the Soviet Union were exterminated as a group in the basement of Lubyanka prison.

Yet we embraced this sadistic regime as an ally in World War II. *And, of course, we were right to do so.* The distinction between "authoritarian" and "totalitarian" regimes,

now so fashionable in Washington -- the difference being a matter of changeability -- does not apply. The Soviet Union was a totalitarian regime, and yet we properly supported it.

The principle of "lesser evil" might have applied. The Soviet Union generally massacred people for political, and sometimes religious reasons. The Nazis massacred people also for racial, ancestral reasons, crossing a certain farther line of bestiality which involved even the smallest infant.

But there was another determinative factor. We *needed* the Soviet Union. Its citizens were heroically engaging the enemy with which we were at war. The Soviet regime was not fighting for human rights, which it ground underfoot. The Soviet Union was not fighting for the free world, which it despised. But in fighting its former Nazi allies for its own reasons of survival, the Soviet Union was making survival possible for the free world in which lay the only hope for human rights.

So, we properly supported the Soviet Union whose violations of human rights were unspeakably more massive than anything that can be charged to Saudi Arabia or El Salvador; or Argentina or North Vietnam.

The point is not a cynical one. It is not that we should be indifferent to violations of human rights in the rest of the world. To the contrary, keeping the banner of human rights high is exactly what the survival of this country and of the free world is all about. We should apply leverage for human rights wherever and whenever we can -- whether in the Soviet Union or in our own client states. We should apply trade, technology and other instruments of foreign policy whenever they can sensibly advance the state of human rights abroad.

In line with that, it is the most mawkish sentimentality to believe that the principles of human rights can be advanced or survive without the survival of the U.S. and of the free world. It is sentimental -- and unconvincing -- to talk idealistically about foreign

Earl Raab

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policy in the Middle East or elsewhere without doing so within the larger context of the survival of the U.S. and the free world.

And it is symptomatically sentimental to propose that the U.S. should never support a country whose human rights are not in order. Painfully, and with effort bent to alter the matter, we may have to support such a country when the survival of human rights in the world seems to require it.

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