

Jimmy Carter's Human Rights Policy: The Rhetoric and Reality in  
Cambodia and China

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As the 39<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, Jimmy Carter entered office confident in his human rights policy and his ability to reinvigorate the moral character of the United States. Although eager and well-intentioned, Carter had no idea how much satisfaction and defeat he would feel from the pressures of upholding this policy. He envisioned the United States reemerging as a world leader, not only in power and influence, but as a moral compass pointing the way toward more humanitarian-aimed politics. Carter's human rights policy attempted to combine two extremely opposing political theories: self-interest driven realism and a morally and philosophically driven idealism. These two contrasting ideologies played an immeasurable role in the success and failure of Carter's human rights policy during his four years in office. Carter attempted to combine these ideologies by insisting on formulating foreign policy consistent with the projected moral character of the United States. America's security and economic concerns abroad often restricted his adherence to the human rights policy. Nowhere is this better demonstrated than in U.S. relations in Southeast Asia and China. Carter's human rights policy took a back seat to the normalization of relations with China, and to U.S. interests in the region, instead of guiding the world in condemning the most egregious human rights violations of the Khmer Rouge.

The "enunciation of the concept of human rights constitute[d] a significant development in contemporary political ideology because it introduce[d] an ultimate concept as the governing principle for political action."<sup>1</sup> But this human rights policy raised more questions than it answered, particularly in its application in relationship to U.S. interests. Carter's campaign fueled his human rights policy, spearheading his run into the White House as the principle, and only somewhat defined policy for his administration. Through his campaign and earliest days as

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<sup>1</sup> John H. Patton, "The Concept of Human Rights in the Rhetoric of President Carter and His Administration: A Study of Form, Content, and Significance in Contemporary Political Ideology," p. 1, Human Rights Policy, 3/1/77-1/16/78, Speech Writer's Subject File, Human Rights, Staff Offices, Jimmy Carter Library (JCL).

President, Carter used the human rights policy to appeal to a nation that had been recently misled and lied to, with the promise to both restore America's faith in its government, as well as the world's faith in U.S. power and presence. His first speech as president set the tone for following the human rights policy as he declared that the "commitment to human rights must be absolute."<sup>2</sup> He then addressed the people of other nations saying that "you can depend on the United States to remain steadfast in its commitment to human freedom and liberty."<sup>3</sup> With such statements Carter set a tone for his presidency and planned to lead the nation away from the scarred years of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and into a more idealistic world where American morality would be the guiding force as the U.S. would meet "its obligation to help create a stable, just, and peaceful world order."<sup>4</sup>

It was easy for Carter to become entangled in the promise of idealistic policies. "Human rights came naturally" to him as a student of the "Jeffersonian/Wilsonian belief in the universal applicability of American ideals."<sup>5</sup> He repeated his confidence in human rights policy every chance he had. Four months after his inauguration the importance of "the strands that connect our actions overseas with our essential character as a nation," was again emphasized as important to "a foreign policy that is democratic, that is based on fundamental values, and that uses power and influence... for humane purposes."<sup>6</sup> Within the decade prior to Carter's Presidency, the U.S.—along with the world—underwent growing pains that Carter contributed to "the moral failure of U.S. foreign policy" as he "equated the betrayal of American ideals with the neglect of

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<sup>2</sup> Jimmy Carter, "Inaugural Address," 20 January 1977, [www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/documents/speeches/inaugadd.phtml](http://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/documents/speeches/inaugadd.phtml).

<sup>3</sup> Jimmy Carter, "United States Foreign Policy Remarks to People of Other Nations on Assuming Office," 20 January 1977, [www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=7144](http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=7144).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Frank Reuchel, "The Articulation and Synthesis of Jimmy Carter's human Rights Policy," Ph.D. diss., Georgia State University, 1990, 127.

<sup>6</sup> Jimmy Carter, "Address at Commencement Exercises at the University of Notre Dame," 22 May 1977, [www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=7552](http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=7552).

human rights.”<sup>7</sup> Carter wanted to turn the tide on the demoralizing years of war and secrecy of American government. His administration fully backed a human rights policy as Deputy Secretary of State Warren Christopher explained during the first year; “We believe our underlying principles must be reflected in American foreign policy if that policy is to have the support of our people and if it is to be effective. Reflecting this conviction, the promotion of human rights has become a fundamental tenet of the foreign policy of the Carter Administration.”<sup>8</sup> With the Carter administration’s commitment to human rights, and the president’s determination to lead a morally sound nation in international relations, Carter fully charged forward into a realistic world, wielding idealism as his most powerful weapon.

While Carter was busy winning votes in America, the Khmer Rouge reshaped the Cambodian social, political, and geographical landscapes. Within hours after seizing the capital city of Phnom Penh on April 17, 1975, leader of the brutal regime, Pol Pot, forced the inhabitants from the city into the countryside. This forced relocation of people—including hospital patients, teachers, doctors, the elderly and extremely young—left many “dead or abandoned along the roads.”<sup>9</sup> Those who reached the countryside then faced what the CIA called ‘extraordinarily harsh methods to ensure a docile and compliant population, purged of the corrupting influences of the past,’ employed by a regime that neglected human rights in the pursuit of revolution.<sup>10</sup> The “‘planned’ massacre of tens of thousands of people” and the “‘systematic’ effort by the

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<sup>7</sup> Reuchel, 127.

<sup>8</sup> Speech, “Human Rights, Principle and Realism,” Warren Christopher, 9 August 1977, Chicago, Illinois, Drop by Meeting Commemorating 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Declaration of Human Rights, 2/6/78 [1], Box 3, Donated Historical Materials- Hendrick Hertzberg Speech Files, JCL.

<sup>9</sup> David Chandler, *A History of Cambodia* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2000), 210.

<sup>10</sup> “Cambodia: The First Year,” 29 June 1976, p. 1, embedded in Memo, Human Rights Violations in Cambodia, 21 September 1977, NLC-28-12-9-2-7, JCL.

Cambodian government to wipe out the upper and middle classes” continued as Carter took office, becoming an issue that his administration inevitably had to face.<sup>11</sup>

Human rights, rhetorically and in theory, was a strong and stable weapon that supplied the Carter Administration’s arsenal with a common theme that could be evenly applied to every foreign policy decision. In practice, though, Carter’s human rights policy was extremely fragile and lacked consistency. The term ‘human rights’ offers broad and diverse interpretations depending on the context in which it is applied. Defining the term is not a simple act because “vagueness is the root of its rhetorical power.” This vagueness offers the ability to further conflicting agendas based on the chosen definition.<sup>12</sup> This makes defining human rights a “theory issue,” and it allowed Carter to “implement[ ] polic[ies] in ways that allowed him maximum flexibility and diplomatic maneuverability.”<sup>13</sup>

Muddled by “over fifty covenants, conventions, resolutions, statements of principle, codes of conduct, and declarations about human rights on a global level,” as well as numerous non-governmental agencies that interpret and support human rights within their own context, the application of human rights policies offer varying degrees of interpretation.<sup>14</sup> Even the Carter Administration’s definition and application of human rights policy changed over time, varying from person to person and between different situations. Carter stated in his memoirs that “this policy would not be painless, nor could it be based on a blind adherence to consistency,” and that “the world cannot be improved by one dramatic act or by one nation’s transient policy; the

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<sup>11</sup> James Reston, “The Tragedy of Cambodia,” *New York Times*, 11 January 1978, A19.

<sup>12</sup> Mary E. Stuckey, *Jimmy Carter, Human Rights, and the National Agenda*, (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008), 81.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, xxiv, 107.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 127.

wheels of justice turn slowly- often very slowly.”<sup>15</sup> Carter appreciated the difference between idealism and pragmatism. Presidential Directive 21-40 proclaimed that “the policy shall be applied globally, but with due consideration to the cultural, political and historical characteristics of each nation, and to other fundamental U.S. interests with respect to the nation in question.”<sup>16</sup> Carter understood that there were limitations to his human rights policy and, although determined to make a difference, he recognized that the inconsistencies were a necessary evil to enable gradual change in worldwide human rights abuses.

Many American accepted and supported Carter’s human rights policy, but when he “raised sensitive issues, such as human rights, that previous presidents had skirted, he quickly discovered that the rest of the world was less than eager for moral lessons from the United States.”<sup>17</sup> Yet, Carter claims in his memoirs that “when we heads of state were alone our conversation was primarily about two subjects: human rights and the relationship between the rich and poor nations of the world.”<sup>18</sup> This may be interpreted as Carter’s retrospective view of conversations he had with other heads of state, spotlighting the importance that he placed on, and felt for, his human rights policy. But no matter how enthusiastic and motivated Carter and his administration were in applying human rights policy, U.S. interests superseded morality more often than he wanted in his presidency. Nowhere is this more evident during the Carter Administration than in U.S. policy pertaining to Cambodia.

Upon entering office, Carter implemented a human rights review intended to analyze the effectiveness of his human rights policy in transforming human rights standards around the

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<sup>15</sup> Jimmy Carter, *Keeping the Faith: Memoirs of a President* (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 1995), 147, 155.

<sup>16</sup> Presidential Directive 21-40, 17 February 1978, Box 100, Vertical File, JCL.

<sup>17</sup> *Congress and the Nation*, Volume 5, 1977-1980 (Washington D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1981), 32.

<sup>18</sup> Jimmy Carter, *Keeping the Faith*, 182.

world. A report assessing the human rights performance during the first half of Carter's presidency suggested positive results:

Over the past two years the human rights situation worldwide has improved, but in several countries deteriorated. Worldwide trends indicate significant patterns of change. Since January 1977 there have been human rights improvements in 41 countries, where 2 ½ billion people live.... The causes of the changes cited above are complex. Increased U.S. attention to human rights practices have contributed to a global climate of greater sensitivity to the issue and to the heightened concern of a large number of countries.<sup>19</sup>

Yet, within this celebration of an effective human rights policy, the report also states that “conditions... continue to be deplorable in Cambodia, where Western influence generally has made no impact.”<sup>20</sup> The situation in Cambodia received little attention from the Carter Administration, and in proportion to other areas of the world, very little attention from the media and the American people. Although “the administration’s comments on Cambodia grew stronger and stronger as it acknowledged verified reports of extraordinarily inhumane treatment during 1977 and 1978,” the administration failed to act upon its rhetoric.<sup>21</sup> The American people were overwhelmed with issues that immediately pertained to their wallets and well-being and affected domestic policies in a much greater way than did the human rights violations in Cambodia. Globally, they “could easily overlook the Cambodian atrocities amid such [previous] events” as the fall of Saigon and the Kampuchean navy’s seizure of the cargo vessel the *Mayaguez*.<sup>22</sup>

Specific instances of media coverage concerning the brutality in Cambodia were few as reported by the organization, Accuracy in Media. In 1976, the group found that the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* printed only nine and four stories concerning Cambodia,

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<sup>19</sup> “Human Rights Performance, January 1977- December 1978,” p. 1-2, embedded in Memo, Inderfurth to Brzezinski, 1 December 1978, NLC-11-3-7-10-8, JCL.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p.1.

<sup>21</sup> Reuchel, 267.

<sup>22</sup> Sheldon Neuringer, *The Carter Administration, Human Rights, and the Agony of Cambodia* (Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1993), 18.

respectively. In comparison to other countries (Chile, for example, being the subject of 58 stories in the *Washington Post* and 66 in the *New York Times*), Cambodia seemed a lesser issue in relation to U.S. interests.<sup>23</sup> The Administration seemed focused on more pressing issues of national interest, and rightly so. With the lack of media interest, combined with only a handful of letters from the American people seeking answers concerning Cambodian refugees, the importance of intervening in Cambodia slipped below that of those issues in which the American media and public primarily focused.<sup>24</sup>

In December of 1978, Carter announced the projected normalization of relations with China to take effect on January 1, 1979. This announcement fell upon mixed emotions concerning the long-awaited diplomatic relations with China. Many believed this to be a critical move in U.S. interests abroad, and especially in Southeast Asia. Carter's National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, acknowledged in his memoirs that "normalization of relations with China was a key strategic goal of the new administration" upon entering the White House.<sup>25</sup> Immediately following the Camp David Peace Accords in September of 1978, Secretary of State, Cyrus Vance, points out that the following day he and Carter met with the Chinese Ambassador "to discuss a critical issue about normalization of relations with China."<sup>26</sup> This relationship held not only a symbolic and monumental importance in U.S. history; it also advanced U.S. securities and interests in Asia.

As the relationship developed between the U.S. and China, the Carter Administration fully understood the importance of nurturing its growth. In Carter's address to the nation

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<sup>23</sup> Memo, Brzezinski to Carter, 9 December 1977, p. 6, NLC-SAFE-16A-41-89-1-3, JCL.

<sup>24</sup> CO81 General 1/20/77-1/20/81, Box CO-40, White House Central Files-CO-81, JCL. This folder contains the various letters written to members of the Carter Administration from a handful American citizens.

<sup>25</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser 1977- 1981* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985), 196.

<sup>26</sup> Cyrus Vance, *Hard Choices: Critical Years in America's Foreign Policy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), 13-14.



announcing normalization, he emphasized that the supreme purpose for both nations was for “the advancement of peace,” and that the normalization of relations would benefit both nations culturally and commercially.<sup>27</sup> Carter also expresses his view that the normalization of relations would contribute to a peaceful settling of relations in both Asia and throughout the world.<sup>28</sup> Although the diplomatic relationship between the U.S. and China claimed its roots in the advancement of peace and prosperity, geopolitical considerations must be examined as well, especially in relation to the lack of implementation of the human rights policy within Cambodia.

The reality of the normalization of relations with China forced a heavy shift toward realism in Carter’s foreign policy. Carter set out to tackle human rights with a policy based on idealism and “the relevance of ethical norms to relations among states.”<sup>29</sup> The vision of foreign policy laid out in Carter’s campaign and early rhetoric was “built on morality, American ideals, and humanitarian world order politics.”<sup>30</sup> Carter was convinced, arguably naively, that the idealistic nature of his human rights policy would overcome issues of the inherently realistic pursuit of national interests that directed the familiar concerns in international relations. “The whole of what the Carter administration said and did reveal[ed] a policy synthesis adjusted to the limitations of the world as it was, but guided by the principles that describe[d] how it ought to be.”<sup>31</sup> The dualistic nature of the human rights policy led the administration to consider each nation and situation individually, inevitably creating an evolving policy that enabled the

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<sup>27</sup> Jimmy Carter, “Address to the Nation on Diplomatic Relations Between the United States and the People’s Republic of China,” 15 December 1978, The American Presidency Project, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=30308>.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid; Jimmy Carter, “Diplomatic Relations Between the United States and the People’s Republic of China Remarks at a White House Briefing Following Address to the Nation,” 15 December 1978, The American Presidency Project, [www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=30310](http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=30310).

<sup>29</sup> W. Julian Korab-Karpowicz, “Political Realism in International Relations”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2013 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), forthcoming URL: <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2013/entries/realism-intl-relations/>.

<sup>30</sup> Reuchel, 128.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 320.

administration to consider its placement among a larger perspective of foreign policy, and adjust as necessary.

The shift in the rhetoric of U.S. policy toward national interests raised many questions concerning human rights violations in Cambodia. “Pol Pot’s regime was despicable, but it was allied with China, which the United States now supported.”<sup>32</sup> This meant that the administration had to consider China and its support of the Democratic Kampuchea within a different context than that of an unaligned U.S.-China policy. Although the administration initially spoke out about China’s close ties to the Khmer Rouge, the subject of Cambodia and human rights quickly faded after normalization occurred.<sup>33</sup> Brzezinski referred to the combination of principle and power within U.S. foreign policy as an integral part of a “successful American foreign policy.”<sup>34</sup> The principle lay in the human rights policy, while the power, arguably the most important aspect concerning U.S. national interest and security, undermined principle in all occasions concerning Cambodia. But the question remains whether or not the human rights policy would have been applied to Cambodia in the absence of normalization of relations with China.

Many considerations must be taken into account when examining U.S. human rights policy in relation to security and geopolitical interests in Southeast Asia, primarily the timing of the Khmer Rouge coming to power, the inauguration of Jimmy Carter, and the normalization of relations with China. In September 1977, Brzezinski received a memo concerning the situation in Cambodia. It implied that the atrocities committed by the Pol Pot regime mostly occurred prior to the Carter Administration’s taking over. “Most of the upheaval and the executions that

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<sup>32</sup> Kenton Clymer, “Jimmy Carter, Human Rights, and Cambodia,” *Diplomatic History*, 27, No. 2 (April, 2003), 256.

<sup>33</sup> Most mentions of Cambodia are within short paragraphs embedded within a larger human rights discussion. In relation to China, see: Memo, Vance to Carter, 26 January 1977, NLC-15-42-5-14-9, JCL; Memorandum of Conversation: Indochina, 26 January 1979, China-Sino-Vietnamese Conflict [11/78-2/16/79], Box 10, Geographic File, Brzezinski Collection, JCL; Memorandum of Conversation: US-Thailand Relations, 27 June 1978, NLC-11-5-5-12-6; and “Trends in Communist Media,” 19 July 1978, NLC-17-127-15-1-6, JCL.

<sup>34</sup> Brzezinski, 6.

did take place, occurred in the first year. The past year has been relatively quiet, except for reports of a purge with mass executions and arrests which apparently took place in March.”<sup>35</sup>

Although the administration continued to closely observe the events taking place within Cambodia, commenting in 1978 that “the human rights situation in Cambodia is indeed abominable,” no action was taken.<sup>36</sup> The argument remains that Cambodia’s relatively small size geographically, and inability to project power meant that the country was “not perceived by Carter as being vital to American security.”<sup>37</sup> In addition, the lack of any formal or informal relationship between the United States and Cambodia suggested that the U.S. held no influence over the actions of the Khmer Rouge within Cambodian borders.

The inability, or unwillingness, of the Carter administration to respond to the human rights violations in Cambodia garnered much criticism from Carter’s opponents and supporters alike. The vigor for human rights policy decreased throughout Carter’s presidency. One critic accused the members of the administration of being “much more critical of right-wing dictatorships than those of the left.” This raised the fear that the “domestic criticism of the period of ... virtual silence on Cambodia” would discredit the human rights policy abroad.<sup>38</sup> As the administration struggled with the importance of the human rights policy and its applicability in Cambodia, it began a humanitarian campaign to send aid to Cambodia following the 1978 Vietnamese invasion and seizing of Phnom Penh. First Lady Rosalynn Carter visited refugee camps along the Thai border in late 1979, “to dramatize the American commitment to relief-and

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<sup>35</sup> Memo, Jessica Tuchman to Brzezinski, 26 September 1977, p. 1, NLC-28-12-9-2-7, JCL.

<sup>36</sup> Memo, Far East/Mike Oksenberg to Brzezinski, 12 April 1978, p. 4, NLC-10-10-6-12, JCL. The U.S did, however cut off aid to Cambodia, but this occurred prior to Carter’s presidency and was only carried through during his administration.

<sup>37</sup> Neuringer, 3.

<sup>38</sup> Memo, State Department to Brzezinski, 4 May 1978, p. 2, NLC-15-11-8-40-1, JCL.

Mrs. Carter's energetic involvement was a significant factor in galvanizing the U.S. response."<sup>39</sup> These humanitarian concerns involved the U.S. in the relief effort of a brutalized Cambodia, yet allowed the country to remain unaffected by Carter's human rights policy.

Critics remained unimpressed by the effort Carter made to employ the human rights policy in Cambodia.<sup>40</sup> "In the end, Jimmy Carter's human rights policy proved to be unsatisfactory to both realists and idealists because rather than ardently embracing either extreme the Carter Administration attempted to strike a balance between national interests and morality, or between power and principle," as Brzezinski put it.<sup>41</sup> This was the dilemma of placing a human rights policy as the leading policy in dealing in international relations. The balancing act between idealism and realism was (and still is) one that was easily tipped in favor of prevailing self-interest. "Geopolitical factors and national security interests" played a major role in the Administration's "fashioning its human rights policy."<sup>42</sup> Ultimately, realism and self-interest became the defining factors that shaped human rights policy, an antithesis to Carter's fervent approach to foreign policy as a presidential candidate and newly sworn in president.

Carter thoroughly believed in his human rights policy. Although he maintained confidence in its applicability, he also realized the implications of introducing human rights as the "soul" initiative in foreign policy. Even with its enthusiastic integration, the human rights policy would never become the "sole determining factor in defining national interest."<sup>43</sup> This did not deter the administration's attempt at what Brzezinski called "attacking the problems at their most basic level," whereas "the United States would thus become engaged in shaping a world

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<sup>39</sup> Brzezinski, 127.

<sup>40</sup> This applied to the human rights policy, in general. Much of the criticism of the human rights policy applied to various instances of selectivity, not exclusively in Cambodia.

<sup>41</sup> Reuchel, 10-11.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 254-255.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 321.

more congenial to [its] values and more compatible with [its] interests.”<sup>44</sup> In Southeast Asia, though, the compatibility of interests seemed to overwhelm the congeniality of values.

To give first priority to the geopolitical advantages inherent in normalizing relations with China, however, belied the Carter Administration’s insistence that concern for human rights was the primary determinant in its foreign policy. To many, the policy of seeking to normalize relations with China without calling on its government to pressure the Khmer Rouge seemed hypocritical.<sup>45</sup>

In fact, the Carter administration’s blatant disregard for human rights abuses in Cambodia appeared most prominently with its 1979 vote to seat the Democratic Kampuchea, headed by Pol Pot, as the formally recognized government of Cambodia within the United Nations. Secretary of State, Cyrus Vance, lamented this decision in his memoirs saying, “there are times when your obligations as a senior government official force you to take a position which, although essential for our national interests, is at the same time extremely distasteful.”<sup>46</sup> He then confesses the importance of siding with the ASEAN nations, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, China, France, the United Kingdom, and other European nations in this vote, as not to isolate the U.S. from its allies. This vote represented “the only decision consistent with [the] overall national interests, although, as expected, the vote soon became a subject of criticism from both the Left and the Right.”<sup>47</sup>

Self-interest and geopolitical considerations exceeded the importance of enforcing the human rights policy in every instance within Southeast Asia. Carter’s human rights policy did not have the strength to defy the institutionalized realism that existed in American foreign policy. The issues of Carter’s administration, while many were not limited to it alone, required policies that would take effect upon implementation. The human rights policy promised long term

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<sup>44</sup> Brzezinski, 123.

<sup>45</sup> Clymer, 254.

<sup>46</sup> Vance, 124.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 126-127.

success, but was unable to provide transformations that the world needed immediately. The immediacy of policies based in realism was more easily quantifiable than those spread out over a long period of slow, implemented change. In foreign policy and government, the payoff is expected almost instantly. In Cambodia, there was no other option for implementation of Carter's human rights policy. The Carter administration saw the enormous potential in normalizing relations with China, and if that meant leaving Cambodia to its own self-determination, the members of the administration were willing to tip the balance in favor of self-interest and realism. The human rights policy should not be discredited, although the claims of its leading the administration's foreign policy were hollow. It was a policy that was considered when dealing with other countries and one that raised awareness around the world for human rights. In this way, the human rights policy was extremely successful. It may not have satisfied the intended role, but it accomplished the goal of prompting attention to human rights in international policies and furthering the considerations of individual rights and liberties worldwide.

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