

State of Human Rights Address

Jimmy Carter

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No one could participate in a ceremony like this, with Mr. Nelson Mandela, with Mrs. Dominique de -Menil, with the honorees from The Rothko Chapel Awards and with the memory of the martyred Jesuits without feeling a need to reassess our commitments to the alleviation of human rights suffering around the world.

So, this morning for a few minutes I want us to look at ourselves. It is the powerful and secure on whom rests the fate of those who are weak and vulnerable.

On this 50th anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor, we remember that although our country has indeed been involved in combat, for many years since the Civil War we have been fortunate in escaping on our soil the ravages of warfare being felt this very moment by many people throughout the world.

Although historic in nature, wars between sovereign nations are rare, but, so far as I know, there has never been a war between two democracies. Among those committed to freedom, there's an element of equality, of shared philosophy, a sense of brotherhood and sisterhood that helps to preserve peace.

This good fortune for our country has not prevented, however, our being involved in wars in foreign lands. Just within the last decade we have given tacit approval to Israel's invasion of Lebanon, sent U.S. Marines into that troubled land and conflict, bombed and shelled villages around Beirut, orchestrated the Contra war in Nicaragua, invaded Grenada, invaded Panama, and led the multinational force that attacked and destroyed Iraq in the recent Gulf War. Also, knowingly or inadvertently, the United States helped to finance the death squads responsible for the assassination of the Jesuit priests whom we honor today.

The tragedy is that, under modern circumstances, innocent civilians are the ones most likely to suffer in a war zone, and not their oppressors whom we have declared to be our enemy.

Whether some or all of this strife and suffering could have been avoided by stronger reliance on peace efforts was, in every case, hotly debated. The fact is, that democracy itself does not prevent direct involvement in conflict and human suffering.

At The Carter-Menil Human Rights Prize ceremony two years ago, I described civil disputes as the major cause of human rights abuses. Most often, conflicts and the resulting human suffering come from human rights violations themselves brought about by ethnic divisions, racial and religious discrimination or hatred of one's own neighbors just because they happen to be different.

Dramatic events in the Soviet Union have brought about the end of the Cold War and the resulting freedom in Eastern Europe. Democratic elections in Namibia, Nicaragua, Zambia, and the partial dismantling of apartheid in South Africa have brought new hope for international

respect for human rights. However, this good news has been overshadowed by violence and oppression of minority ethnic groups by regimes controlled by dominant majorities.

Ethnicity as a social and political force should not be underestimated. The commitment of people to their own native languages, their own customs, and their own religions is too fundamental and pervasive to be eliminated even by totalitarian oppression over decades or generations. We have seen this in the Soviet Union. Such differences among neighbors, even in the absence of an oppressive regime, are often too intransigent to be resolved or even to be responsive to dialogue or mediation.

Human rights organizations have long publicized increasing problems of ethnic abuses, but for many years these efforts have been largely ignored. Amnesty International has recently documented the persecution of Palestinians in Kuwait and territories occupied by Israel. Violence in Kashmir and Punjab states, abuse of East Timoreans by the Indonesian army, harsh martial law imposed on Tibetans in Lhasa, large-scale extrajudicial executions in Sri Lanka, and the historic suffering of Armenians are all too rarely recognized in the distant and largely unconcerned Western industrialized world.

More recently, however, the terrible persecution of the Kurds in Iran, Iraq, and Turkey was belatedly acknowledged, because it was one of the justifications for launching the Gulf War. The destruction of Croatian communities and cultural life by neighboring Serbs is now making front page news and is deeply troubling to a European community that sees this tragedy as a possible harbinger of similar violence in other nearby nations.

Ethnic violence and its resulting human rights abuses are especially difficult to prevent or alleviate. Quite often, the oppressors are not officials of the state, but private citizens who act with such fervor and political strength that public officials are reluctant or unwilling to protect those under attack.

Even constitutional guarantees, protective laws, and independent courts are not effective. With large and powerful citizens' groups acting in concert with the state, which is often the case, there is no effective counterforce to whom an appeal for justice can be made.

Foreign action is often restrained because the oppressive ethnic group will most likely have influential defenders and supporters among American citizens and citizens in other countries whose families have close ties to the oppressors.

Ethnic persecution is more insidious than we like to admit, because so many of us in this very room are guilty of some form of racism or discrimination. As the great historians Will and Ariel Durant said, "Almost all groups agree in holding other groups to be inferior to themselves."

This pervasive human trait was used by Adolf Hitler to convince Germans of their status as a master race, endowed with the right as superiors to perpetrate the Holocaust on millions of innocent Jews, plus Poles, Slavs and Gypsies. The same belief that different kinds neighbors are ethnically inferior has been the foundation on which apartheid has been built and maintained as a justifiable legal and public policy in South Africa.

Another matter of concern is that indigenous groups in many nations are still deprived of basic human rights following centuries-old robbing of their inherited cultures and property. In some countries, including our own, the discrimination against American Indians is so deeply ingrained

in our social structure that it is no longer seriously challenged. In other countries, like Guatemala, Nicaragua, Brazil, and Peru, violence continues because indigenous people are still demanding recognition of their rights.

In too many cases, ethnic discrimination is hidden and perpetuated by subtle means, most often under the guise of unavoidable social and economic circumstances. It is convenient for us to claim that poverty and its ramifications are either an inherent state of some minorities or that their suffering is too intransigent to be eliminated or alleviated. This permits us to maintain our own ascendent status in a discriminatory society with a reasonably clear conscience.

I grew up in the Deep South, where racial segregation and discrimination were maintained under our own existing laws. Leading politicians and jurists, and even religious scholars, were almost unanimous in their defense of this racism, basing their arguments on carefully selected words from the U.S. Constitution and even the Holy Bible.

The use of vicious police dogs in Birmingham, Alabama, against black children was approved by many neighbors over in Georgia as a necessary force to "keep them in their place."

We now see horrendous suffering in Sudan, based on discrimination by a fundamentalist Islamic regime against the religious beliefs of constituent groups. We deplore these two examples and many others as terrible examples of discrimination, some from the past and others still with us.

However, and listen to this, the most prevalent and unacknowledged discrimination is by the rich and powerful against the poor and the weak. Most often, there is an ethnic distinction between these two groups—the rich and the poor.

We take for granted our basic human rights to a home, to gainful employment, the development of our minds through education, a nutritious diet, a healthy environment, protection against preventable diseases, and the prospect for our children to have a productive life. We assume that when we make a decision it will have some impact on the future, at least in our own personal lives. There is nothing wrong with these assumptions or with our insistence on them for ourselves and our families.

However, we tend to ignore the plight of others who have none of these rights or assurances—homes, jobs, education, food, health care, influence, or hope for a better future.

We do not need to look to the slums of Calcutta, to the deserts of Sudan, or the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro for examples of this deprivation of neighbors within sight of affluent leaders, who make the decisions for society. Particularly in the last decade, the poverty rate has been rapidly increasing among African-Americans and other minorities in the United States. Forty-five percent of my nation's black children now live in poverty. Forty percent of black makes are functionally illiterate, and among younger adults, one-fourth are now in prison or on probation. Their chance of being killed by violence is greater than it was for the average soldier who went to Vietnam.

There is a sense of hopelessness among two groups, which has prevented a reversal of these embarrassing trends in my country and in others: first, the lack of hope among suffering families and a belief among many of the most powerful political leaders that no social programs will be fruitful and that nothing can be done about the plight of the poor.

Increasingly, many Americans share with developing nations the ravages of insensitivity to the suffering of those who are different. I recently visited Janeiro in Zambia where 23 percent of the babies are born with the AIDS virus. That's shocking. But 20 percent of the babies born at Grady Hospital in Atlanta, Georgia, are already addicted to crack cocaine.

It is not sufficient for us merely to enumerate the human rights abuses in different lands. Suffering can be just as severe if caused by neglect as if deliberately perpetrated by despotic rulers. Only with the willingness to share our wealth, security, and influence with others can we hope to alleviate the suffering that we deplore.

We are embarking on an experiment in Atlanta to see if some of these disturbing trends can be reversed. In knowing our own neighbors, we can better understand those who are suffering in other nations.

After the First and Second World Wars, we failed to ensure that the League of Nations and the United Nations were empowered to preserve the peace or protect human rights. Now, with the end of the Cold War, we have another chance to move toward a more civilized world.

Let me share a few more quotes from Will and Ariel Durant: First of all they said, "Civilization begins where chaos and insecurity end."

"Civilization is not something inborn or imperishable, but must be acquired anew by every generation.... History teaches us how slight and superficial a structure civilization is and how precariously it is poised upon the apex of a volcano of poor and oppressed barbarism, superstition, and ignorance."

And finally they said, "Civilization is a precarious labor of a minority."

We ourselves enjoy the blessings of knowledge, security and influence, and we are at least partially aware of the suffering of others. As self-anointed human rights leaders, it may be that we are the minority—the rich and powerful minority—on whom world civilization depends. If we add the courage of Nelson Mandela and the Jesuit martyrs to our present strength and influence, then a world of peace and human rights, God willing, will someday be ours.