

A Realistic Perspective on Human Rights in the School Curriculum

When human rights are taught in the context of the values of Western civilization, history and literature become more relevant than a bumper sticker approach to issues.

Human rights are a vital concern of free men and women, especially since the emergence of totalitarianism in our century. Totalitarian regimes, as the name implies, aim to control the entire lives of their subjects. They are more terrible, more efficient, and far more difficult to remove than any tyrannies of the past or any nontotalitarian dictatorships of the present. The power of the state, equipped with the apparatus of modern bureaucracy; techniques of espionage, thought control, and brainwashing; monopoly of education and information; and instruments of incarceration, torture, and extermination, can go far beyond infringements of human rights.

Violations of human rights are not limited to totalitarian regimes, of course. There are dictatorships in

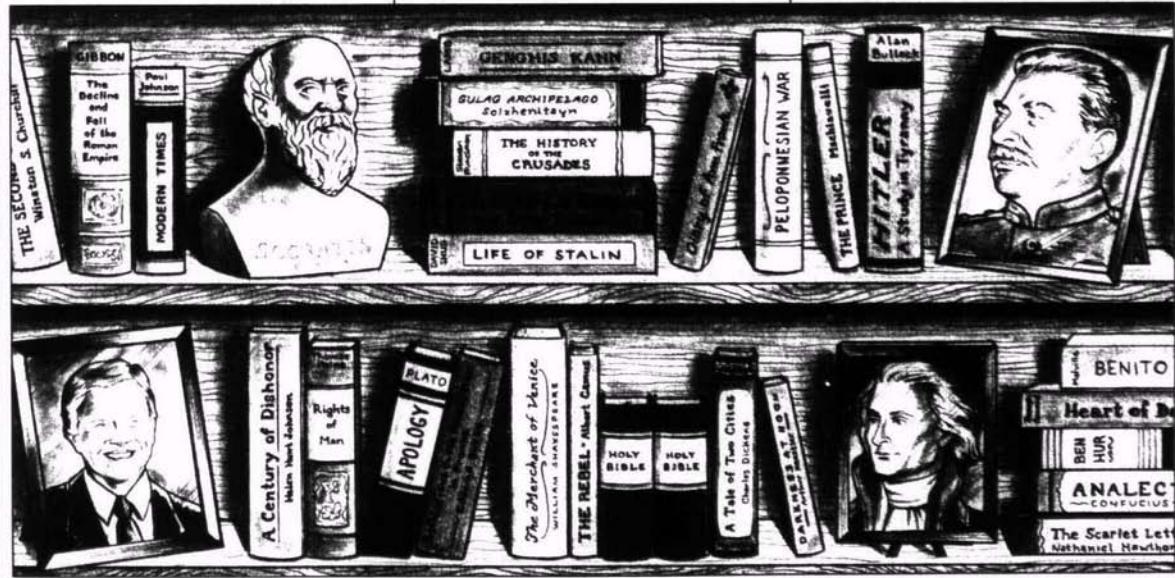
scores of countries that, without having attained totalitarian perfection of repression, commit grave violations of the rule of law and pay little regard to human dignity and freedom. Even the constitutional democracies are occasionally accused of infringing human rights.

Human Rights and Political Controversy

One difficulty in teaching about human rights is created by partisan controversy in the United States: to what extent should we consider the human rights policies and actions of a foreign government when deciding whether the United States should become allied with or aid that country? The controversy was intensified when President Carter announced that hu-

man rights would be the guiding principle of U.S. foreign policy. This pronouncement was criticized by some as being too simple; the interests of the United States would often outweigh the imperfect record of a friendly country in the matter of human rights.

A further criticism of Carter's policy was that it was applied with a double standard. Since the United States could do little to influence communist governments, and since it was often desirable to avoid exacerbating relations with the Soviet Union and its allies, American spokespersons seldom drew attention to the outrages against human rights that many asserted were a daily occurrence in the Soviet bloc and in other communist states such as Cuba. On the other hand, it was asserted, the U.S. did not hesitate to criticize governments friendly to the United



Select Reading List on Human Rights

Morality and Foreign Policy: A Symposium on President Carter's Stance, edited by Ernest W. Lefever, Washington, D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1977. Includes papers by Jimmy Carter, Jeanne Kirkpatrick, Daniel Moynihan, Eugene Rostow, Henry Kissinger, and others.

Dictatorships and Double Standards: A Critique of U.S. Policy, by Jeanne Kirkpatrick. Washington, D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center. Reprinted from *Commentary*, November 1979.

"The trivialization of Human Rights," by Ernest W. Lefever, and "A Reappraisal of the Human Rights Doctrine," by T. E. Utley, both in *Policy Review* (Winter 1978), published by The Heritage Foundation.

"Human Rights and American Foreign Policy," a symposium. Short articles from many points of view, including Zbigniew Brzezinski, Noam Chomsky, Midge Deeter, Nathan Glazer, Sidney Hook, Eugene McCarthy, Bayard Rustin, and others. *Commentary* 72, 5 (November 1981). For readers' comments on this symposium, see *Commentary*, February 1982.

"Human Rights and American Power," by Samuel P. Huntington. *Commentary* 64, 3 (September 1977).

"Are Human Rights Universal?" by Peter L. Berger. *Commentary* 64, 3 (September 1977).

Prejudice and Discrimination, in the series *Concepts and Inquiry*, by the science staff of the Educational Research Council of America. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1973, 1977. Concerned with human rights in the United States, this 7th grade textbook and its accompanying teachers' guide was selected as the best book on human rights by the Mid-Atlantic States Social Studies Council.

Constitutional Democracy vs. Utopian Democracy, by Raymond English. Washington, D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center, Essay 42, 1983.

Periodic reports on human rights in various countries: every year the U.S. Department of State publishes *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices*, a country-by-country commentary. Private organizations also producing annual reports are Freedom House, Amnesty International, and Americas Watch.

States, such as those in Argentina, El Salvador, the Republic of South Africa, Iran, Chile, and Pakistan. The critics claimed that this double standard destabilized friendly governments and gave comfort, if not aid, to subversive aggression subsidized and directed by Soviet agents. In short, they argued, our support for human rights throughout the world must not obscure the principal consideration in our foreign policy: the national interest, the power, and the prestige of the United States.

The Perils of a Trendy Curriculum

"Human rights" is something of a slogan or shibboleth—like nuclear freeze, or antisexism, or many other enthusiasms that have shimmered into our classrooms and textbooks in recent decades. The temptation to add fashionable topics to the curriculum is understandable. Such topics prove that teachers are abreast of the times; they also stimulate students. "We're studying nuclear war instead of the boring campaigns of the Civil War"; or "The problem of human rights in the world today is much more relevant than the Declaration of Independence."

There is, however, a triple danger in this bumper sticker approach to edu-

cation that emphasizes such "relevant" and "newsworthy" topics as zero population growth, women's liberation, nuclear freeze, or human rights. First, such enthusiastic diversions inevitably dilute the main curriculum of basic information and skills. Second, newsworthy topics, especially those with morally indignant overtones, tend to be distorted by emotion; their treatment in classrooms may be propagandistic or psychologically manipulative rather than rational and critical. Third, the introduction of such special topics out of the context of human history and the permanent human predicament may actually inhibit students' acquisition of balanced, critical views of social, political, and moral issues. For example, if we teach that human rights are the ultimate test of political legitimacy and the basic objective of foreign policy, we are liable to encourage students to assume that the overthrow of a despotic regime is desirable regardless of the consequences. Yet the successors to the despots may be still worse tyrants. Is, for example, the Khomeini regime an improvement over the Shah for Iranians who long for the freedoms we take for granted?

In recent years, South Africa has been the target of human rights activities. That country's policy of apartheid

and consequent riots of protest are reported in America's news media. Those who seek retaliation for these violations of human rights advocate the withdrawal of American investments and the imposition of an American economic boycott. However, the consequences of such actions may be to lower the standard of living for black Africans and lead to destabilization of a country of immense strategic importance to the West.

Teaching about morally important issues such as human rights or nuclear deterrence must be carried out in the full, realistic context of politics, taking into account, as far as possible, the total and long-term consequences of political decisions.

Human Rights in Context

"Human rights" should not be set up as a special course in the high school curriculum. Nor should particular case studies of the violation of human rights, such as the Holocaust or the relations between American Indians and European colonists, be studied in isolation. These matters are in the same category as the campaigns of Genghis Khan and Tamerlane, Stalin's and Mao's extermination policies, the recent massacres in Cambodia, and a hundred other examples of man's inhumanity to man. Any case studies in human rights should be part of the general studies in history, social studies, and literature required of all students.

The topic of human rights arises inevitably when teaching American history, world history, current events, American government, and international relations. Less inevitably, but quite probably, it will intrude in classes in literature. One cannot read *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Oliver Twist*, *Benito Cereno*, *Heart of Darkness*, *The Scarlet Letter*, and many other classical works without stumbling on the question, "What are human rights, and how can they be protected?"

The most important conclusion that students should draw from the study of attacks on human rights in our time and in history is the desirability of constitutionally democratic forms of government in all countries. However,

thorny questions face students and teachers who agree with me. How can democracy be brought to cultures without traditions of the rule of law and of political and religious tolerance? How can democracy survive if there are bitter ethnic divisions, class conflicts, or grinding poverty and perhaps starvation? How can the Western democracies focus their efforts to propagate democracy and respect for human rights at a time when the prevalent trend seems to be for experiments in democracy in "new nations" to degenerate into one-party dictatorships that in turn may become totalitarian?

Students can learn that violent revolution is not the only way to combat violations of human rights. A few despotic regimes have, even in our time, been replaced without foreign intervention by more or less democratic regimes. The military junta in Argentina stepped down voluntarily; in El Salvador, a military dictatorship has been replaced by an elected government; in India, Indira Gandhi gave up power peacefully after a period of dictatorial rule; in Portugal, the long

dictatorship of Salazar gave place to a democratic regime, as did the autocratic rule of Franco in Spain. There is, therefore, some hope that nontotalitarian regimes will grow toward constitutional freedom much as the absolute monarchies of sixteenth century Europe moved in the long run toward representative government. If it is true that totalitarianism is the ultimate enemy of human rights, then students should be encouraged to consider what governmental policies would best support the movement away from totalitarianism and toward democracy and respect for human rights.

Simple Truths, Difficult Solutions

By what values and attitudes... do students learn to measure themselves? The ideals of America, which are also those of Western civilization with its heritage of Judeo-Christian moral principles and Roman and Greek political philosophy and legal institutions, are the values on which human rights are founded. Although we have never fully attained these ideals, our

practical approximations to them are the hope of the future. We must hope that the rising generation will appreciate the ideals and be prepared to fight and die in their defense as former generations have done. The price of liberty is not only eternal vigilance; it is also self-sacrificing courage. To preserve human rights, one must be prepared to risk the basic right—the right to one's own life.

American values and attitudes were once to be found in school books, especially histories and literary readings, typified by McGuffey. It is not merely coincidental that respect for human rights has declined in many parts of the world at the same time that American and West European societies, and especially their intellectual and academic echelons, lost confidence in traditional ideals. The defense of human rights begins in the hearts and minds of people fortunate enough to possess those rights. □

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