

Umberto Tulli, 2020. *A Precarious Equilibrium: Human Rights and Détente in Jimmy Carter's Soviet Policy*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. 224 pp. £80.00
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If one would associate Jimmy Carter's presidency with one single term, that would undoubtedly be "human rights." Indeed, human rights were "probably Carter's most important legacy" (2). The question, however, that constantly attracts attention as well as divides scholars and pundits in their interpretations is about the actual effectiveness of the human rights policy of the 39th president of the United States. Did he manage to move American foreign policy in a post-Cold War direction where human rights were the centerpiece of a universalist approach or was it just a means to reinvigorate the ideological confrontation between the US and the Soviet Union? Umberto Tulli's *A Precarious Equilibrium: Human Rights and Détente in Jimmy Carter's Soviet Policy* is a welcome and refreshing addition to these debates.

Tulli structures his book around three main themes. First, he examines the place of human rights within the Cold War context. Second, he discusses the interplay between Carter's human rights policy and détente with the Soviets; and lastly, in close connection with the latter, he engages with Carter's efforts to communicate his vision and his policy to the domestic American political environment that was hostile to détente. Thus, by applying an "intermestic approach" Tulli strives to provide to the reader with the complexities of the interplay between international and domestic politics (5). The book is divided into five chapters. Chapter one provides a comprehensive overview of the emergence and the role of the concept of human rights in American foreign policy with an emphasis on Congressional politics. The second chapter focus on the 1976 presidential election. Tulli correctly notes that Carter was a latecomer in the cause for human rights. He was rather attracted to them as a coherent campaign theme along the way, with a view to compete with the fellow Democrat candidate in the primaries, Senator Henry "Scoop" Jackson. Human rights proved to be a winning card in the elections. To distance himself from the contested and highly criticized amoral foreign policy approach of Nixon and Kissinger, Carter made human rights a central tenet of his vision for a new foreign policy. The benefit of this cause was twofold. First, it reinvigorated the US with a new moral compass. Second, it was appealing to both liberals and conservatives, albeit for completely different reasons. The former supported the universal implications of such a benevolent policy whereas the latter considered it as an extra ideological weapon against the Soviet Union. This electoral euphoria, however, was too good to be true. As the author discusses in chapters three, four, and five, even though human rights were appealing to everyone, in

the end they satisfied nobody. The book is at its strongest in revealing the complex relationship between human rights and détente in the bipolar Cold War relationship between Washington and Moscow. Even though Carter and his foreign policy advisors denounced their predecessors' "linkage" approach in their negotiations with Moscow, they ultimately replaced it with a newer, more efficient (according to their estimations) human rights-based version. With one eye on Congress, where détente was under scrutiny, and the other eye on the Kremlin, Carter aimed to create a virtuous circle: "the more the Soviets respected human rights, the more détente would have been approved in the United States; the more détente continued, the more respect for human rights would have become a reality in the system" (195). As Tulli convincingly argues, however, that was not the case. From a rich pool of archival material the author reconstructs the multi-sourced criticisms and reveals the flaws of that policy-making. Senators and Representatives laid the obstacles for the White House. Ultimately, Tulli demonstrates how the ill-fated and structurally flawed conception of Carter's Cold War human rights policy resulted in a rather vicious circle where the more the White House openly discussed Soviet human rights violations, the more the Soviets became skeptical towards détente; the more the White House cooled down and resorted to quiet diplomacy, the more that domestic critics accused the US president of abandoning his commitment to human rights.

On a more critical note, even though the author recognizes the differences between Carter's two top foreign policy advisors, National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski and Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, he tends to underestimate the effect that these had in the formulation of a coherent and structured foreign policy. Even though it was not Soviet related, Vance's resignation due in part to his disagreements with Brzezinski is ignored in the narrative. A more thorough discussion of how this rivalry affected Carter's judgment would have offered even more depth to an understanding of why the Carter administration projected an image of confusion, especially in the second half of the administration. Additionally, the discussion of Carter's policy towards Eastern Europe would have benefitted from more contextualization as in the book it is argued (based on Presidential Directive 21) that it was the Carter administration which aimed to foster more differentiation within the Eastern bloc. However, such a policy of differentiation was already active since Nixon's first term, which aimed to reward Eastern European regimes that would be more independent internationally, such as Yugoslavia and Romania. What Carter actually did was to add the regimes that were more "liberal internally" to the list of the beneficiaries (Hungary and Poland). Nonetheless, whether human rights trumped strategic interests in that area can be attested by Nicolae Ceausescu's official

reception at the White House in 1978, thus continuing Nixon's and Ford's practice. Lastly, on a more technical note, the excessive use of bloc quotations, despite bringing the reader closer to the sources, at some points hinders the flow of the narrative.

In sum, Tulli's book makes a significant contribution to the burgeoning literature on Carter's foreign policy. The analysis of the book oscillates between the intentions and perceptions of Carter and his administration and the results of his policy in practice. Carter's ambition to enhancing US standing in the Cold War based on the combination of human rights and détente depended on a precarious – even unattainable – equilibrium which was doomed to fail. Nevertheless, the successful introduction of the theme of human rights in international politics is something that could be credited to Jimmy Carter in conjunction with a long line of activists and the victims of human rights violations themselves.

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