

State of Human Rights

Jimmy Carter
Dec. 10, 1992
Washington, D.C.

Mrs. de Menil, honorees, distinguished guests:

When our master of ceremonies stands here and says to the audience, "My name is Bernard Shaw, and I work for CNN," or to any audience in the world, it's one of the most ridiculous introductions of oneself I've heard since the 1976 Democratic convention, when I had worked for a number of months, had gained a majority of the delegates, and stood there and said, "My name is Jimmy Carter, and I'm running for president." You can see that famous people like Bernard Shaw have literally transformed the understanding of people around the world. Rosalynn and I in recent weeks have been in 10 African countries, and in Kazakhstan, and in Moscow. Everywhere we go, the leaders of those nations have their opinions shaped and their priorities rearranged by the superb production of news in an unbiased way by CNN and Bernard Shaw, and I want to express my personal thanks to him for being willing to be our master of ceremonies today.

As is the case with the news media, the human rights organizations are now collectively taking another look at ourselves. Annually, since the Carter-Menil awards began, I've been making a report, somewhat in fumbling terms, because of the complexity of the subject, about the progress of the human rights movement in the world.

I think with the advent of Mikhail Gorbachev, with glasnost and perestroika and the end of the Cold War, there is now a sense of potential fulfillment that has not been realized. And this next year, The Carter Center and others will be working broadly to try to improve the effectiveness of the human rights effort. I'll be very brief in outlining three points that we hope to achieve.

One is to bring the human rights organizations into a closer teamwork with each other, each one admirable in its own realm of interest, but quite often not communicating, not sharing, even sometimes competing for headlines and for funding. I think the opportunity for us to come together and work as a team sharing and dividing responsibility and complementing one another is an untapped potential for the future.

Another one is that most of us, even the most notable ones, such as Amnesty International, Americas Watch, the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, and others, basically are what we claim to be—that is, watch committees. We watch and observe, and after a crime is committed, then we try to expose it and do something about it. A preemptive approach, an effort to prevent crimes before they take place is a science yet to be tapped, but increasingly understood.

And a third point that might be very hopeful for 1993 is that the United Nations may finally come into its own as the preeminent human rights protection organization in the world. It has not, so far, realized any of the great expectations that people had for it in 1945 as a protector of human rights. And the reason for this has been that some of the major permanent members in the

Security Council have not wanted the United Nations to have any capability of looking inside their borders to ascertain what has been going on there. With the end of the Soviet Union as a superpower and its fragmentation into different countries, and now a much more aggressive and positive U.N. secretary-general in place—Boutros Boutros-Ghali—we can honor in 1993 his declaration that that's a year of human rights and strengthen and give vigor to the United Nations as a major human rights entity. So we look to the future not with despair, not with hopelessness, but with some anticipation of improvement.

Since 1986, every year on the anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Carter-Menil Awards have been made. We have tried, working with some of the major human rights leaders, to identify those who are most worthy of this recognition, from the Soviet Union, from South Africa, from Israel and the occupied territories—both Palestinians and Jews there—from Guatemala, from Sri Lanka, from Chile. You can see that we have looked beyond our own shores to find arenas of human rights heroism that are worthy of emphasis. It's a natural tendency for all of us to do what we have done—that is, to look beyond our own shores, to look to others as examples of human rights abuses that are most worthy of concentration. We have excused ourselves, as we look at human rights as a phrase in different ways. I remember when I was president, on numerous occasions, I would meet with the leaders of the Soviet Union, of China, and of other socialist or communistic countries and complain about their human rights abuses. And they would very quickly point out to me that they honored human rights in their own country as well or better than we did. I emphasized, as most all of you would do, the basic rights expressed in our Constitution—the right of free speech, the right of religion, the right of peaceful assembly, the right of movement around our country, the right to equality for the pursuit of happiness, the right of jury trial. It's a right of a democratic process. And they would say in return, we believe that the right of every person to have a home, the right of every person to have gainful employment, the right of every person to have health care are of even greater importance to a human being.

It was not easy for me to continue my criticism of them and at the same time explain the roughly 50,000 American citizens who sleep on the sidewalks of New York City every night, or the 6 or 7 percent unemployment rate in our own country, or a totally inadequate system of national health care. So, you see that we do tend to look at others, instead of at ourselves.

We have made a historical struggle since the glorious founding of our nation. We finally abolished slavery and slowly, but reluctantly, granted a modicum of equality to African Americans and other groups and to women, who finally got the right to vote, and to young people who were old enough to go to war but not old enough to cast a ballot for their leaders who would send them to war. Since that time, we have been proud of ourselves, but it's still not appropriate for us to rest on our laurels.

As the preeminent human rights force in the world, therefore, it's very important for the United States on occasion to take a look at ourselves. This has not been a pleasant discipline for us. It's not easy to look at our own policies on human rights and to see how in that self-assessment we might strengthen our own voice.

This year, the 500th anniversary of Columbus' first discovery of a new world, is an appropriate

time. The United States is a country of indigenous Americans, of former slaves, of immigrants, and of refugees. We've long debated the civil rights issue involving our black citizens. I was part of that as a Southerner. But it's only been recently that we have been willing to acknowledge the culpability of our own European ancestors and ourselves in dealing with the rights of native Indians, of indigenous Americans.

This has been slow coming. And it's still embarrassing even for me to look back at old movies that were so popular when I was a child, Wild West movies, where every Indian was looked upon as a savage, almost subhuman, and where the death of these Native Americans on the screen was most often greeted in the audience with cheers or laughter. You can see it's embarrassing to say this, but that was part of our culture not very many years ago.

I've been proud to point out that my own family is the seventh generation that has owned the same land, which we still farm. And I point out that our ancestors were the first owners of this land, having settled it in 1833, just a couple of years after the Indians who had lived there, the Yuchi tribe, were forced from their native lands by federal troops, concentrated for a couple of years in Alabama, and then forced on the Trail of Tears to the Oklahoma Territory. Almost half died on that journey.

These kinds of realizations by people who live in west Georgia and other settled parts of the United States, which is almost all of it, are still a very painful memory, one that we tend to push aside and don't quite want to acknowledge. George Miller has given a beautiful presentation of the current elements of discrimination that all of us share as American citizens against Native Americans, who deserve our admiration and our care and our partnership on an equal basis.

When I was president, I remember a very difficult issue that arose in the state of Maine. The Passamaquoddy tribe, the Penobscot nation, had an altercation with the state of Maine, and contrary to most treaty arrangements, which had been ignored and approved in their being ignored by the courts, the Passamaquoddy tribe had proven almost without a shadow of a doubt that they actually owned about half the state of Maine, inhabited by villages and farms of their predominantly white neighbors. It was a difficult question, not for Georgians, but for Maine, and, of course, Maine was part of my responsibility when I was in the White House.

So I took a personal interest in it. And we brought in distinguished mediators and eventually negotiated a satisfactory agreement between the Indians on the one hand and the white citizens of Maine. It was ratified by the Congress.

There was a lot of prediction at that time because there was a substantial monetary payment made to the Indians: "Oh, they don't know how to take care of their income. This money will be wasted in a few years.' earlier this year, I just happened to be watching PBS, and I saw a special program on what the Passamaquoddy Indians had done with these funds. They had totally transformed their existence. They had made very wise investments on the stock market. They had started numerous thriving businesses. And the welfare characteristics of their own people had been totally transformed for the better. It was one of the most glorious success stories that I've ever seen in the history of our country.

I was not quite so successful in another effort, which has already been mentioned, concerning the religious rights of Indians. I approved a law that was passed in 1978. Let me just quote briefly from a comment that I made when the law was passed. This was the American Indian Religious Freedom Act. I said at that time, this legislation is designed, and I quote, "to protect and preserve the inherent right of American Indian people to believe, express, and exercise their traditional religions"—an almost trite statement that any American would approve, to let people exercise their own religion.

Since then, though, the law has not been honored. Federal agencies, despite the law, have not issued directives for it to be implemented. And in the last few years, the federal courts have ruled that state laws that contradict this federal law on Indians' religious rights take precedence. And now there's a struggle, in which George Miller is involved, to modify the law and to make sure that this revision is clarified, at least to give the native Indians the right to worship freely.

You can say that we do have a tendency to rationalize. Even when we face the fact that indigenous Americans and Native Americans all over the entire Western Hemisphere are abused, what do we do about it? In a ludicrous, ridiculous way, we blame Christopher Columbus. We don't blame ourselves. We don't blame our own government. We don't blame it on our own policy. We don't blame our own prejudices. We blame a man who came over here 500 years ago, who never set foot on this land, who never encountered a member of the advanced civilizations of the Maya and Aztecs in Central America and South America and was not responsible at all for his successors who came here—European soldiers and fervent Christians, who destroyed the culture and ended the lives of the people who we now, in retrospect, admire. So to blame Christopher Columbus is a foolish way for us to try to keep the blame from ourselves. The Indians have struggled for a long time. Our honorees today organized 22 years ago, and, as you know, our indigenous Americans or native Indians have won very few legal battles in the courts of our country.

The other group that I want to mention are the immigrants, who have come here from many countries for various reasons, some to escape the potato famine in Ireland, others to get out of debtors prisons and to find religious freedom here from England, others to escape a communist regime in Cuba, some to avoid anti-Semitic actions in the former Soviet Union, many from Southeast Asia to escape oppression and discrimination in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. And I think in all cases, there has been a combination of seeking to escape oppression and also seeking a better life, better income, better stability, and a closer-knit and undisturbed family life.

Americans are proud of the words of Emma Lazarus inscribed on the Statue of Liberty. And I think I could say it by heart, but I don't want to make a mistake. This is just one phrase: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free."

The fact is that our doors are open very selectively, quite often depending on the daily changes in policy from the American State Department or the White House. If we condemn a regime, as is the case, for instance, with Castro's Cuba, then entry from Cuba into our country is not a very complicated matter. I don't particularly deplore this.

But when we officially endorse a regime, as has been the case for the last 10 or 12 years in

Guatemala or El Salvador, and deny that there are any death squads and praise the benevolence of these recipients of major grants of American taxpayers' money, then for someone to leave those countries and come to this country is a very, very difficult task indeed. I'm not going to dwell on specifics, but I just want to talk briefly about one family with which I happen to be familiar. It's still not safe for me to give this person's name. I'll call him Dr. Julio. Dr. Julio came from a prominent family in Guatemala. He got his medical degree. He decided that instead of ministering to his fellow fairly wealthy and affluent Guatemalans, he would cast his lot with the indigenous people, the Indians of that country.

It became known to the death squads of the military that Dr. Julio knew a lot about the Indians in the mountains. And they demanded that he turn over his medical records to them so that they could get the names of men whom he had treated. He refused to do so. They continued to harass him. One day, Dr. Julio was going from one village to another with his assistant, and his assistant had his wife and three daughters with him. Soldiers surrounded them, and they grabbed the assistant and said, "Dr. Julio, we're going to show you what will happen to you if you don't give us your medical records." He pled with the soldiers not to injure his assistant. They put a pistol to his head and blew his brains out with his wife and children watching.

The next morning, Dr. Julio was back in his office, and a neighbor came down the street screaming, "Dr. Julio, the soldiers have got your 2-year-old son." Dr. Julio ran out in the street and got some neighbors. They overtook the soldiers, and almost miraculously, they got the 2-year-old son back safely.

That evening, Dr. Julio and his family went into hiding, and after a long and very tortuous journey from Guatemala up to our country, crossing our own border with great difficulty, they arrived in northeast Georgia, and they visited with a group, where Rosalynn and I have been several times. This was Jubilee Partners in northeast Georgia. And Jubilee Partners took him in and protected him, but he couldn't stay here because the American authorities said that there is no repression in Guatemala; you don't qualify as a refugee. So, he was forced to go to Canada. There was a constant inter-relationship then between Jubilee Partners in northeast Georgia and the Canadian consul general in Atlanta. Canada had opened its doors to people like Dr. Julio.

This is a very serious case, but it doesn't illustrate the worst cases, because Dr. Julio was Latino, and he could speak Spanish. But the people who are persecuted much more, whom he was trying to treat or care for, were Indians who could not speak Spanish. And that timidity that comes from a lack of language knowledge is a very great impediment to someone to seek asylum in another country. Of the 1,400 families that have been given temporary asylum at Jubilee Partners, only six have been native Indians from Central America. So, you see, there's a very serious problem here with the refugee issue.

Well, in addition to political factors and language factors, there is no doubt, in my mind at least, that there is an element of racism or racial insensitivity in our immigration policies. I cannot imagine our having the same policy toward Europeans or even Cubans that we have recently adopted toward Haitians. Still, in the seas of the Caribbean, U.S. Navy and coast Guard ships find overturned boats, on several occasions, with the of babies or children lashed to the boats, so

that the waves would not wash them overboard, or huddled in lockers, where their parents placed them to be protected.

When I was inaugurated president, there were 7 million refugees in the world. There are now 30 million. It is obvious that the United States cannot open its door to large numbers of people who come here for a better life, so we have narrowly defined what a refugee is. When I was president in 1978, we adopted the international definition of a refugee. A refugee is, quote, "someone who has a well-founded fear of persecution." And that phrase "well-founded" is what is presented to immigration officials to determine: Is that person really a refugee or is that person seeking a better economic existence?

It's a very stringent definition. The crucial element, however, is a hearing so that our immigration officials can ascertain in each case: Does this person have a well-founded fear of repression? No longer are Haitians permitted to have a hearing, and so, as far as I know, they're the only people in the world who are deprived of a hearing before our own immigration officials. They are automatically returned to their country.

Our government's policy has been that there is no repression among these returned Haitians. Human rights groups take a different attitude. This is an Amnesty International report issued just three months ago, and I quote:

Extra-judicial execution, severe ill treatment amounting to torture, and arbitrary and illegal arrests continue unabated.... People are forced to hand over money to prevent torture, to secure improved prison conditions, or simply to obtain release from prison. Lawlessness pervades. Human rights abuse is part of most Haitians' daily life.¹

Oppressive groups carry out a wide range of abuses with total impunity. The ordinary citizen is left no other protection than hiding or paying ransom money. The opportunity to seek asylum abroad has been thwarted by the action of the U.S. authorities, where most of the asylum seekers have tried to flee. Haitians still live in a permanent state of fear, while their oppressors are free to kill, torture, and terrorize with impunity, and continue to make money out of their repression. And a more recent Americas Watch report estimated that more than 1,000 Haitians have been documented as killed.

Well, let me close my comments by just giving a brief additional personal report from Haiti. I've been to Haiti seven times in an effort to bring about an honest election there. The people lined up shortly after Baby Doc Duvalier left, that next fall, to try to vote. And as they lined up, the Tontons Macoutes, supported by the military, entered a courtyard of a schoolhouse and opened fire with their weapons. Thirty-four people standing in line to vote were killed. So, after that, the Haitians were very reluctant to go back to the polls. We went there several times to try to encourage them to have an honest election, and we finally got the OAS and the United Nations to join in this effort. And, somewhat reluctantly, the Haitians agreed to try again. It was a beautiful election. It really was. The people registered to vote. The candidates qualified freely. The military held themselves in check, under the leadership of a general named Abraham, and on election day, the people turned out in great numbers, as has been pointed out earlier.

¹ *Haiti: Human Rights Held Ransom*. AMR 36/41/1992 (August, 1992)

About a month or so before the election, a surprising candidate emerged, Jean. Bertrand Aristide, a young Catholic priest, who was looked upon as having almost miraculous protection from God because he had been spared the efforts of the assassination squads. And on election day and election night, when all of us international observers were there, there was no question about the outcome of the election. Against 11 other formidable opponents, Father Jean-Bertrand Aristide received 67 percent of the vote.

The celebrations were euphoric, and excitement and emotion most high. And I was there, along with my wife and others, to hear a remarkable acceptance speech by Father Aristide, then President Aristide, who pointed out that human rights violations were over and that an avalanche had come to change the lives of Haitians, and he said that a marriage was going to be performed between his administration and the military, It was just a few months later that the military took over,

And now, the key to the Haitian refugee question is not just to open our doors, but to have our own powerful country use the same kind of influence that we used in starting the Persian Gulf War to liberate Kuwait, and that we now are exhibiting in Somalia, to bring some restoration of constitutional authority and democracy and freedom in human rights to Haiti.

Early this week, I received a call from Father, now President, Aristide, who pointed out that people are still being killed, and that there's a new wave of terrorism in the form of disappearances of college students who have dared to criticize the regime. This brave man should be returned to be president. And I would like for President Aristide to stand for a moment. (Sustained applause.)

Thank you, Mr. President.

Well, to close my remarks, let me say that we honor these two organizations that relate directly to our own country. And I don't think it's unwise every now and then to take a look at ourselves and to reassess the policies of our own government and to reassess our own personal attitudes toward others who might be different from us or have strong differences with us. I think in that process we'll strengthen our own voices and our own actions in bringing about a dream which we all share: to enhance human rights for all people in all countries throughout the world, including our own.

Thank you very much.