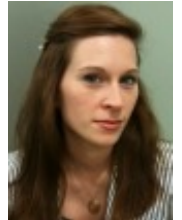


Book Review: Reclaiming American Virtue: The Human Rights Revolution of the 1970s

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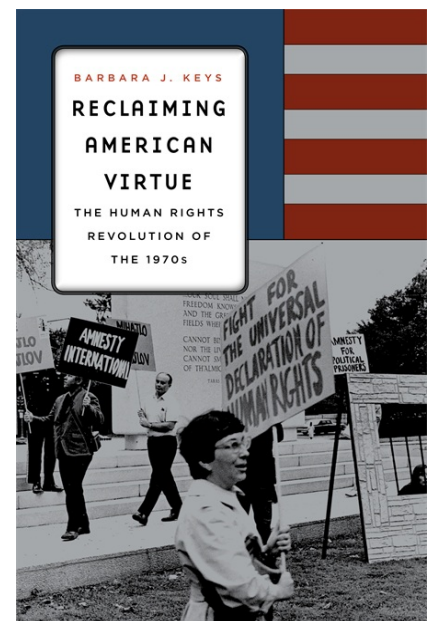
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In this forthcoming book, **Barbara J Keys** considers how the American commitment to international human rights emerged in the 1970s not as a logical outgrowth of American idealism but as a surprising response to national trauma. Keys' focus on the American perspective offers a unique examination of an aspect of the human rights movement that is so often overlooked: the need to not only look at what concepts we embrace, but why we embrace them, writes **Kristen Perrin**.



Reclaiming American Virtue: The Human Rights Revolution of the 1970s. Barbara J. Keys. Harvard University Press. February 2014.

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America's history with human rights is overwhelmingly fraught. The list of abuses both at home and abroad is shamefully long for a country espousing values such as freedom and equality. Many domestic historical abuses are well known, most notably suffered by those of a heritage that was not white European. Inequalities exist that have become entrenched in American society, to a degree that has made their problems a constant backdrop to political life. American human rights abuses outside the US are numerous, and controversies surrounding military actions in places like Vietnam have long been resonating in political discourse. There is much to answer for, and this has created a guilty collective consciousness that for many has yet to find resolution. Guilt, however, is not a benign emotion and over time will always have some impact on perceptions.

It is therefore not a wasted endeavour to look to the turning point in American perceptions on human rights, asking why it occurred when it did, and what this meant for the evolution of the movement. The beginning of America's popular commitment to human rights is commonly understood to be the 1970s. In her book *Reclaiming American Virtue: The Human Rights Revolution of the 1970s*, **Barbara J. Keys** takes a look behind the movement, revealing the climate that led to the popular embrace of human rights. This perspective is timely, and sits well among other literature on the evolution of human rights. Indeed, retrospectives on human rights movements in the 1970s seem to be seeing a resurgence in academic literature, as this publication sits alongside Jan Eckel and Samuel Moyn's more international take on the era, *The Breakthrough: Human Rights in the 1970s*, published only last month. Keys' focus on the American perspective offers a unique examination of an aspect of the human rights movement that is so often overlooked: the need to not only look at what concepts we embrace, but why we embrace them.

She does this by subtly highlighting ideas that those interested in human rights would do well to remember. First, that human rights are *dynamic* – that is, though the concepts themselves define as fixed and natural, our understanding of

them is constantly changing, and this very often has as much to do with events as it does philosophies. And second, that the embrace of human rights is *political*, and rhetoric surrounding it must therefore always be viewed as such.

Her chapters pace well, starting with pre-1970s issues, beginning first with post-war events and their impact on the emergence of the basic human rights concepts in the American mind-set, and the mark made by the civil rights struggles of the 1960s. Interestingly, Keys concludes that the 1970s were the decade for human rights movements in America because civil rights issues were more pressing during the 1960s, making human rights synonymous with this single domestic struggle. She states, 'Only as civil rights problems faded from the national agenda could Americans credibly invest human rights with a different meaning' (p 47).



The number 2857 bus on which Rosa Parks was riding before her arrest. The bus is on display in the Henry Ford Museum. Credit: [Thomas Merton](#) CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

The Vietnam War subsequently stood apart as a particular national trauma, adding to the scars of an already guilty populace. In her third chapter, Keys delves into the impact of the war on the American psyche, making room for what she terms 'a search for a new morality in international relations' (p 49). While one might think that the anti-war sentiment that existed during the conflict would have launched the human rights movement, it was only after the war that the movement could take hold in any concrete way. The reasons for this appear to be both political as well as psychological. Keys notes that human rights as liberal foreign policy was more than just unrealistic while the war raged on, and although several violations of human rights became sensations in the news (including the Mai Lai massacre), and hearings were held by veterans to expose the atrocities committed throughout the conflict (the Winter Soldier Investigation in 1971), most Americans reacted with indifference or excuses, while the Nixon administration worked to undermine these allegations.

The Nixon-McGovern presidential race did much to solidify human rights discourse in America, and although McGovern walked away defeated, the aspirations for America that he articulated during his campaign remained in the minds of many human rights advocates, and were eventually brought back into the political limelight by Jimmy Carter in 1976. But where McGovern's perspective allowed the guilty conscience of Americans room to fester, Carter took a more optimistic avenue to spin human rights into an embraceable concept – that the everyday American need not take on the burden of guilt from the actions of former presidents, but project his or her own natural goodwill outward to other nations.

The book balances the liberal viewpoint with the conservative angle on human rights, underlining the interesting fact that both sides took up the human rights mantle to promote their political aims, (albeit under different guises), and therefore both can be credited for shaping and popularising the cause. In her fifth chapter, Keys outlines how the conservative standpoint focused on human rights as an anti-communist tool, using Soviet dissident language as the jumping off point for criticizing the backward nature of the communist treatment of people. This aligned well with conservative American values, which linked freedom with morality and virtue.

Keys dutifully examines the decade's timeline further, charting the rise of Amnesty USA and other human rights lobby groups, and the challenges faced by politicians trying to balance the foreign policy needs of a global hegemon with the virtuous expectations that were quickly becoming entrenched in the minds of individuals. Her approach is engaging and her writing style effective without being overly steeped in dry detail, which makes this book easily appealing to not only political scientists and historians, but to anyone with the slightest interest in the American journey towards human rights.

The book also succeeds in refraining from outlining American 'successes' on the human rights front, and thus avoids cliché in terms of the weighing of successes vs. failures that can be so common in human rights literature. By looking to understand the genesis of the human rights movement alongside the wounded fabric of the American consciousness of the time, this book allows the reader to truly grasp how such movements take hold, and what impact they may or may not be allowed on foreign policy decisions. As such, it is important to take such information forward in terms of the current problems facing America's political roadblocks to truly embracing the human rights agenda while it navigates the changing nature of its global power.

Kristen Perrin is in her final year of PhD study at University College London in the School of Slavonic and East European Studies. Her primary research interests are in theories of conflict, genocide, transitional justice and human rights. Her thesis examines transcripts from the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), applying a mixture of sociolinguistics and social psychology to witness testimony from both victims and accused. [Read more reviews by Kristen.](#)