The epochal and historic shift of global power from the West to the East is having a profound and seismic effect upon the affairs of the world—especially within the Indo-Pacific region. Since the end of WWII, when the U.S. assumed a position of global economic and security leadership, vacated by a victorious but declining British Empire, America has been an advocate for Human Rights and Political Freedom. Put simply, Human Rights and Political Freedom represent a singular dual-policy which are, without argument, today, the foundational and fundamental principles underwriting U.S. foreign policy. This irrefutable fact is now being challenged by the rise of China. Conversely, the People’s Republic of China simply does not perceive these political “concepts” as having any discernible importance or relevance to its own governmental practices, or for Chinese society itself. Thus, presently, a deep philosophical and political chasm has developed between America and China. The essential key to keeping Human Rights and Political Freedom as relevant factors in the lives of those living in the Indo-Pacific is for the United States to maintain its national power. If America’s base of power is allowed to decline or be diminished, for whatever reasons, its advocacy and influence to promote Human Rights and Political Freedom will be severely undermined as the 21st century unfolds.
citizens than any other society. As a consequence, any increase in the power or influence of the United States in the world affairs generally results—not inevitably, but far more often than not—in the promotion of liberty and human rights in the world. The expansion of American power is not synonymous with the expansion of liberty, but a significant correlation exists between the rise and fall of American power in the world and the rise and fall of liberty and democracy in the world.”

—Professor Samuel P. Huntington

INTRODUCTION

In February 2017, Garry Kasparov and Thor Halvorssen authored a provocative article declaring that global authoritarianism is on the rise. The consequences of which, they believe, will be catastrophic—especially for those who fight and support human rights throughout the world. Kasparov, the chairman of the New York-based Human Rights Foundation, and Halvorssen, the foundation’s president and chief executive, have provided a clear and embarrassing example of not only Western hypocrisy, but the West’s shameful willingness to kowtow to Chinese authoritarian power and money. The 2017 keynote speaker at the World Economic Forum (WEF) was Chinese President Xi Jinping.

The globally renowned annual WEF meeting is held in breathtakingly beautiful Davos, Switzerland. Once a year, Davos becomes the gathering place for the world’s most powerful players in the realms of economics, the media, journalism and politics. Just think of it as a one week, by invitation-only, orgy to celebrate global capitalism and power.

Kasparov and Halvorssen believe that by selecting China’s President Xi to give the keynote address, and his exuberant and exaltation of capitalism and globalization is way beyond the pale in terms of human rights and freedoms. Both men view the steady rise of China and President Xi as evidence of a dangerous and threatening global trend that must be reversed, or Western democracies and the future of human rights will suffer accordingly.

At present, the authoritarianism business is booming. According to the Human Rights Foundation’s research, the citizens of 94 countries suffer under

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1 Samuel P. Huntington, Human Rights and American Power, COMMENTARY MAGAZINE (1 September 1981). Professor Huntington died in 2008. He had spent more than half a century teaching and writing at Harvard University. Samuel Huntington was the director of Harvard’s Center for International Affairs, and he was also the Albert J. Weatherhead III University Professor.

non-democratic regimes, meaning that 3.97 billion people are currently controlled by tyrants, absolute monarchs, military juntas or competitive authoritarians. That’s 53 percent of the world’s population. Statistically, then, authoritarianism is one of the largest—if not the largest—challenges facing humanity.³

Stephen Hopgood, a professor of international relations and co-director of the Center for the International Politics of Conflict, Rights and Justice at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London, published a critical book, The Endtimes of Human Rights, about the lack of overall success by a fragmented global human rights movement, particularly in the West.⁴

Professor Hopgood’s basic argument augments the one made by Kasparov and Halvorssen. He believes the Western concept of human rights (or the interpretation of it), and the movement itself, has been badly compromised, and is, essentially, mostly ineffective due to several critical factors: First, the politics of expediency which are constantly practiced by the U.S., and by other western governments, has continually undermined the importance and legitimacy of human rights; Second, the influential and powerful financial benefactors of the various global-oriented human rights organizations are simply too dominate. It is only their “message” that is reported on television and in the print media; Finally, the commitment and dedication shown at the grassroots level is often ignored or overlooked by the “big money” human rights players in their cozy and well-financed confines in western capitals.⁵

Hopgood’s criticisms are dead-on. I met many of them in Washington, DC, during my tenure as a Franklin Fellow in the U.S. Department of State. They were constantly asking for meetings with our department. We never really learned anything new from them. And, you immediately realized that it was their job to be relentless in getting their organization’s message out amongst the myriad of government agencies.

Finally, these “agents” of human rights were endlessly chasing money for their organizations. Like many members in the U.S. Congress, most hated it. Fund-raising can sap the love one has for any endeavor in Washington. It is always mentioned as one of the primary reasons why a member of Congress retires, and why those employed by special interest groups eventually quit. In the end, chasing down every dollar in Washington

becomes a soul-destroyer.⁶

And, to tell you the truth, I found many of these “manufactured” zealots to be rather boorish. They were self-righteous blowhards who were only concerned about the financial well-being of their respective organizations, and their next job in the human rights industry. And, that is what it was, just another industry that was part of the Washington political merry-go-round. You never felt the “blood and passion” of human rights with these individuals or organizations, just money and power.

Professor Hopgood believes the perceived sacred meta-narrative of corporate/government-sponsored human rights had, unfortunately, become to be symbolized through the great architectural temples of power in Geneva (Palais des Nations), New York (UN Headquarters), and by The Hague (International Criminal Court). These citadels of power, according to Hopgood, had divided the human rights movement into two separate camps. The first camp represents localized and self-styled struggles for human rights. The second camp represents international sacred discourse.⁷

Todd Landman indicated in his review of Professor Hopgood’s book, the author’s utter contempt for the latter group, “The elitist and sacred nature of human rights has its own set of codes and conventions, and has become a hermetic community that has little relevance for the everyday struggles for justice taking place at the local level. Despite their sacred and self-evident nature, the mechanisms for the enforcement of human rights have been notoriously weak and over-reliant on the power and purpose of the United States.....”⁸

Camilla Schippa, Director of the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP) which is headquartered in Sydney, Australia, had an article published by the Australian Institute of International Affairs entitled, Building Peace in the 21st century. Schippa, who is also a member of the U.N.’s expert reference group Global Consultation on Conflict, Violence and Disaster in the Post-2015 Development Agenda, wrote the IEP’s Global Peace Index which clearly shows that the global levels of peace since 2008 have

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⁶ I was selected to be a Franklin Fellow from May 2011 to March 2012. I primarily worked on human rights issues. My areas of concern were East Asia and the Pacific. I went to literally dozens and dozens of meetings in the State Department and at other sites in Washington, DC. I also attended numerous lectures and presentations concerning Human Rights. It was truly an education. Some good. Some bad. The shadow of politics loomed over every meeting.

⁷ Book Review, Todd Landman, A Critical Reflection on Stephen Hopgood’s Endtimes of Human Rights (www.todd-lanham.com/tag/endtimes-of-human-rights); 2013; Todd Landman is a professor of political science and Pro Vice Chancellor of the Social Sciences at the University of Nottingham in the United Kingdom. He researches, teaches, and publishes on significant problems and methods associated with development, democracy and human rights.

⁸ Ibid.
decreased; and, in 2014, there were more direct conflict deaths globally than at any time since 1989.9

The IEP also identified that 2 billion people (approximately 28% of global population) live presently in 20 of the least peaceful nations in the world. Since 2001, fatalities associated with global conflict and terrorism have increased (350%); and, in 2014 alone, the global economic impact associated with this heightened violence was estimated at $14.3 trillion.10

Needless to say, the world and its 7 billion-plus inhabitants are currently experiencing or witnessing new levels of what I call the four D’s: dissonance, discombobulation, displacement and danger. These human characteristics are due to primarily four international factors: economic volatility, political repression, enlargement of civil conflicts, and, finally, a fearless determination. Millions of refugees have escaped the bloody and unending ethnic conflicts and political wars that have engulfed North Africa and the Middle East. They are determined to find peace and safety—somewhere, anywhere—in this world.

Yet, it took a horrific and conscious-shattering photo a 3-year old Syrian Kurd boy, Aylan Kurdi, from a small town, Kobani, located near the Turkish border, lying face-down dead on a Turkish beach, to break through the West’s powerful social barriers. The constant barrage of cheap and dehumanizing infotainment and trivia on social media, and the endless promotion of fear of the outside world—manifests itself into a valueless indifference to human suffering. Governments and corporations are both complicit in this “messaging” process that has completely engulfed Western societies.11 Its primary purpose is to inoculate and insulate much of America and the West from the harsh truths and ugly realities that are part of the real world.

The world is currently experiencing a level of economic and political dissonance and fluidity, along with rising civil violence, not witnessed since the end of WWII. More than ever, we need a constructive and informative national dialogue, or at least a serious discussion, about America’s future purpose or role in this increasingly chaotic and unruly world.

Neil Postman’s famous book, Amusing Ourselves to Death, foretold about the power of the electronic media (published before the revolutionary

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10 Ibid.
birth of such offshoots like the iPhone, tablet, etc.). Meaning, what? Well, in truth, the American citizenry has been electronically and technologically anesthetized and distracted from critical global events. Despite these modern marvels of science and technology, if national evaluative tests are to be believed, we remain an incredibly ignorant nation when it comes to understanding geography and history—ours and the world at-large.

Thus, it was nothing short of a miracle that a photograph of a dead 3-year-old Syrian Kurd boy on a Turkish beach, due to his family’s desperate pursuit of a new beginning, had unexpectedly jolted the U.S. (and the world) consciousness out of its daily fog-like stupor. As a result, human rights, and what they represent for millions of desperate refugees, whom we watched with some type of electronic instrument, abruptly, and rightfully, became the story throughout the world. The unavoidable question for the global community was, “what are we going to do with these hundreds of thousands of immigrants from North Africa and the Middle East?”

At first, the American media interpreted this unfolding human drama as strictly a European crisis. Hence, U.S. news networks showed endless streams of desperate people attempting to travel (either by train, or by foot) to various destinations throughout Europe; though, Germany was often the final destination for many. Then, suddenly, European governments, with the strong support of their citizens, began to close their respective borders. The growing tide of humanity from North Africa and the Middle East became frighteningly overwhelming.

According to the United Nations, it was estimated that more than 705,000 migrants and refugees had reached Europe during 2015. As a consequence, these kinds of numbers caused many European leaders to panic. Human rights quickly became a non-topic. In the final analysis, this “human” crisis represented a real danger to several European governments. The initial humanitarian impulse in Europe was soon replaced by barbed-wire barricades and fences, along with well-armed border guards.

For many Europeans, it reminded them of the infamous novel, The Camp of the Saints, published in 1973, that depicted an oncoming immigration crisis for France, and, indeed, for the West as well. Eerily similar to the present-day dilemma in Europe, the book tells of a massive oceanic migratory movement from India to the French Riviera. As the massive fleet of dilapidated and rusty transport ships, containing tens of

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thousands of Indians, approached an almost completely evacuated French Riviera and the coast of southern France, many French citizens believed that western civilization itself was at stake.\textsuperscript{14}

In September and October of 2015, European governments, without hesitation, asked other countries around the world to help absorbed some of these desperate people. Accordingly, this human tsunami that overwhelmed Europe had now become a global crisis. And, as a consequence, much of the world looked first to America for moral leadership—as it has since the end of WWII. At international venues, for more than 70 years, American businessmen and political leaders had enthusiastically glorified and praised the United States as a nation of immigrants. And, these individuals, without hesitation, told foreign audiences throughout the world that America had created a strong and stable society which had been built upon three fundamental pillars: Human Rights, Democracy and the “Rule of Law”. These three “pillars” became seen as the essential intangibles, a must, for any nation to possess if it hoped to be a humane and mature society.

The intertwining of these critical “pillars” provided the foundation upon which a new doctrine was established during the presidency of Jimmy Carter (1977-1981). President Carter stated that future American foreign policy would now reflect our nation’s most cherished values. Accordingly, the introduction and implementation of human rights had now become a fundamental pillar of U.S. foreign policy.\textsuperscript{15}

Almost forty years later, in October 2015, America’s own celebrated immigrant history, universal human rights doctrine, and a well-earned international reputation for creating a society founded upon the “rule-of-law” principle, was suddenly spotlighted under the discombobulating glare of global opinion by the burgeoning and unending “human” crisis enveloping Europe. As expected, the world asked the United States, “How many of these desperate migrants and homeless refugees from North Africa and the Middle East would they accept?”

Once again, an international crisis had reached America’s shores. The world awaited our response. In truth, we balked a bit at the beginning. Immigration has recently become an extremely volatile and politically dangerous issue in U.S. politics—especially with the 2016 presidential election occurring in just thirteen months. Initially, President Barack Obama was ambiguous about how to answer the question concerning how many migrants and refugees the U.S. would accept.

Stephen Breyer, an associate justice on the U.S. Supreme Court, appointed by President Bill Clinton in 1994, published a new book, *The Court and the World: American Law and the New Global Realities*, that specifically deals with how the American judicial system (particularly the U.S. Supreme Court), in the 21st century, will increasingly encounter cases that will force our judicial system to take into account with respectful consideration an increasingly globalized world of law.\(^{16}\)

The human drama unfolding in Europe was now an American drama. Justice Breyer’s book points to the fact that there has been an emerging global integration of issues concerning economics, human rights, politics, technology and the environment. Now, according to Breyer, you can include judicial practices and the international “interpretation” of the law. Though, several of his colleagues on the court intensely dislike Justice Breyer’s global analysis, nevertheless, the evidence does show an increase in the number of globally-oriented cases appearing on the Supreme Court’s docket.\(^{17}\)

Sadly, millions of Americans remain ignorant, or simply refuse to accept the reality that, in 2018, we live in extraordinary and transformative times. Geo-politically, the center of global power is shifting from West to East. To be more precise, a world hegemony situated primarily in the Trans-Atlantic arena for over 500 years is now steadily moving towards the western Pacific basin.

The brilliant late Australian scholar, Coral Bell, a decade earlier, had correctly identified this historic global transference of power and influence. Her prescient essay, “*The End of the Vasco da Gama Era*”, stated that the era of Western dominance, which lasted for approximately five centuries, was now irreversibly descending into the pages of history.\(^{18}\)

Professor Bell’s game-changing essay, at first, was ignored by geostrategists and by the self-proclaimed smart-set in America and Australia. Nevertheless, in the end, their intellectual arrogance and indifference did not succeed. Because Bell’s basic argument and the inescapable economic and military numbers simply became too formidable to be denied any longer by the West.

The post-WWII status of the United States—that being the most powerful nation in the world—remains credible but America’s overall

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\(^{17}\) *Ibid*, 253—270.

\(^{18}\) Coral Bell, *The End of the Vasco da Gama Era: The Next Landscape of World Politics*, LOWY INSTITUTE PAPER (Sydney, Australia, 15 November 2007).
influence (financially and militarily) has irrefutably declined. Currently, American debt is now more than $21 trillion, and the U.S. military has only succeeded once in the last fifty years in any major military engagement (Gulf War I). However, a growing number of historians and analysts are beginning to acknowledge and write about the diminishing and receding of America’s capability to project its hegemonic power in all corners of the world.

Historian Alfred McCoy, who teaches at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, warns that America is possibly facing the same fate as those European empires that unraveled after World War II. Professor McCoy writes

Complicating matters even more, the economic, military, and technological trends outlined above (i.e., less technological innovations, the costs of maintaining over 800 military bases throughout the world, and overextending our national resources) will not operate in tidy isolation. As happened to European empires after WWII, these negative forces will undoubtedly prove synergistic—cascading in thoroughly unexpected ways to create crises for which Washington is likely to prove remarkably unprepared. If the worst happens and the country spins into a sudden downward spiral, Americans might well experience a generation or more of economic privation.19

Thus, ominously, the world, particularly the Indo-Pacific region, is evolving and growing as never before. Presently, hundreds of millions in the Indo-Pacific are being educated to meet the economic demands of the 21st century. And, the nations within the Indo-Pacific are using their newfound wealth to purchase and implement state-of-the-art technology with alacrity and purpose. As a result, both an indomitable spirit and sheer willpower have jointly emerged in the Indo-Pacific, and centuries of debilitating, grinding and humiliating poverty has been eliminated for tens of millions.

It is becoming quite clear, at least to this writer, that the foundational doctrine which is becoming increasingly relevant and recognized throughout the world as humanity experiences an unprecedented transformation is the substance and reality of human rights. As the global community evolves on every continent, the questions concerning how humanity conducts itself, and how an individual exists in any structured society have become of paramount importance. The specter of Human Rights is no longer viewed as just some intellectual exercise conveying a moral dilemma, or perhaps a trivial stream of consciousness based upon an abstract philosophy.

In truth, the concept and understanding of Human Rights is quite real. It is indeed becoming the global philosophy with concern to acceptable human conduct, and treatment of, on this planet. And, due to staggering breakthroughs in the field of communication technologies, humans all over the world can not only communicate with each other, but they can collectively witness a state’s egregious actions against its own citizens, or watch murderous acts committed by non-state actors anywhere in the world.

As a result, there is a growing acknowledgment that the concept, or doctrine, or understanding, of Human Rights has come of age. Though, the historic origins and modern-day definition of Human Rights remains an intensely contentious subject among activists, scholars and politicians, if not somewhat elusive. Nevertheless, the idea of Human Rights and its global reach is indisputable.

However, its full implementation throughout the world will probably not occur in my lifetime, but some form of it will prevail down the road. And, I have absolutely no illusions about the future obstacles and resistance that Human Rights will encounter inside America and the world.

Yet, I am of the belief that a good idea is a good idea, and it cannot be eliminated or expunged from human consciousness or thinking by government fiat or due to threats to one’s security. Though it is often presented to the world in abstract form; in truth, in my opinion, it basically means treating an individual with decency and respect—legalistically and spiritually—because an individual—when it is all said and done—is simply a human being who is simply trying to exist and survive on this planet.

I. U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE: THE HOUSE OF MIRRORS

My own experiences involving Human Rights in the U.S. Department of State began with me being accepted as a Franklin Fellow. I was the 82nd Franklin Fellow chosen for this prestigious program which was originally created by U.S. President Barack Obama. It was designed to bring individuals who were experienced and successful within their own respective professions to the State Department to broaden the pool of participants in dealing with international matters. Essentially, Franklin Fellows were to provide greater in-depth thinking about the multitude of global challenges confronting the United States in all corners of the world.

In retrospect, I have come to realize that for almost a year I had been a bit player in one of Clint Eastwood’s famous spaghetti westerns, The Good, The Bad and The Ugly. Like American politics, representing Human Rights in the U.S., and abroad, is not a game for amateurs or idealists. In truth, it
was often a very difficult and dispiriting journey to endure. Serious activists and advocates who represented human rights within the U.S. government, or at high-profile self-glorifying global conferences, such as The Aspen Institute or The World Economic Forum at Davos, often find themselves viewed like children of the 19th century—they were to be seen, but not heard.

Point of fact, human rights are often perceived as being complicated, problematic, and certainly a troublesome factor by those possessing power. Accordingly, Human Rights were often viewed as the ugly step-child within the global family of money and power. To put it mildly, this step-child did not fit in well with the other members of this particular human family. The human rights child made the money and power children feel uncomfortable. Despite their best efforts to ignore or be indifferent towards the Human Rights child, this person of consciousness and morality proved to be relentless in its surveillance of every human transaction around the world. In short, in 2018, human rights are an inescapable pain-in-the-ass.

Amongst Asian nations, particularly China, Vietnam, Malaysia, Myanmar and Indonesia, Human Rights are basically interpreted as just another western “colonial” doctrine that was constructed to belittle or embarrass them. Consequently, these nations became even more determined to live by their own set of beliefs, laws and rules, within their respective cultures. Their collective response to accusations of permitting Human Rights violations to occur—get lost! These nations aggressively embraced the Westphalian Principle of 1648. Domestic problems would be handled by the respective government(s) involved. No outside intervention would be tolerated.

Even at the U.S. State Department, the Bureau of Education, Human Rights and Labor (DRL) was often kept “outside the loop” concerning certain meetings—especially those involving China and U.S. business interests. To be quite honest, we were perceived as a major nuisance to many agencies and bureaus within the U.S. government. And, of course, by many foreign governments as well, we were not liked. Why? Business is business.

Human Rights was seen by its critics as another fuzzy-minded, ill-defined, liberal theory that was created to obstruct business and politics as usual. The DRL often faced resistance on multiple fronts—domestic and foreign. The American government often spoke with two voices. One voice was a strong advocate for human rights. The other voice complained that human rights hurt the economic and political interests of America—particularly in its dealings with Asian nations.

Henceforth, let me begin the telling of my own education on matters
concerning human rights, the United States government, and my encounters with foreign officials. I had absolutely no idea what I was getting myself into. As a consequence, I have never viewed the conduct of human rights and international affairs the same way—ever again. Whether as a scholar, teacher, or simply as an American citizen, being involved in Human Rights is like being the Keanu Reeves character in the movie, *The Matrix*. In truth, Human Rights are incredibly multidimensional. When you look at it, your interpretation and perspective will be based upon from what angle you are viewing it.

Put another way, Human Rights represent the Rubik’s Cube of American foreign policy.

In March 2011, I traveled to Washington, DC, during spring break at Central Michigan University, to receive my security badge. During my first day, a Wednesday, I was photographed in the “Hall of Flags” in the morning and I was introduced to Susan O Sullivan, who was the director of the Office East Asian and Pacific Affairs (EAP). This (EAP) office was situated within the hierarchy of the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (DRL). I was designated as a Foreign Affairs Expert.

In the afternoon, I was introduced to the Assistant Secretary of State Michael Posner for DRL. To my great pleasure, I was invited to sit in on a meeting with Secretary Posner, Susan and two other State Department members, and we listened to three individuals who provided Secretary Posner with information pertaining to the severe internet restrictions existing in China.

I remember thinking at that moment that this was what I had worked so hard to achieve—literally, a seat in the room discussing important issues like this concerning East Asia. Little did I know, this brief moment of career-ecstasy and self-realization would come to represent one of the few bright spots during my tenure at the U.S. Department of State!

II. LEARNING THE TERRAIN: THE GAME OF INSTITUTIONAL POLITICS

At first, I was assigned to work on issues concerning Vietnam. I was told to read State Department cables concerning Asia; and, of course, I paid especially close attention to those pertaining to Vietnam. I wanted to work on issues concerning China, but Susan O’ Sullivan would not let me anywhere near this area. Initially, I was baffled at first by her rather distant behavior (at times subtly hostile). Henceforth, and quickly, I learned and understood that China was *her* territory. She was certainly not going to allow some hotshot college professor to operate in her backyard. She was
obsessed about getting the credit for anything associated with the Middle Kingdom. So, Vietnam became my area.

And, I also learned with alacrity and clarity that within the Human Rights hierarchy, a rigid pecking order existed within the EAP office. It should be noted, my relationship with Ms. O’ Sullivan never improved. In fact, it progressively got worse. I found her ineffectual as a leader in the office. I was puzzled how someone with so little focus and work ethic was able to became a director of any department. But, I am sure she found me to be pushy and too ambitious. In short, I became a periodic pain-in-the-ass.

Interestingly, I found the work environment quite similar to academia. There were those who were driven to succeed; then there were those who were destined to become underachieving tenured employees. During my time at the U.S. State Department, I met both types on a regular basis.

Fortunately, throughout 2011-2012, my mentor was a five-year EAP/DRL veteran, Micah Watson. Over the next nine and half months we developed an excellent relationship. Micah was an extremely capable individual. In fact, he was the “go-to” guy in the EAP office because Susan was often absent due to her preference for two-hour lunches, and for her occasional shopping foray in the Georgetown district during working hours.

Thus, it became a fact of life that whenever anything important needed to be addressed in our office, you could pretty much count on Susan not being there. Her constant absences became the butt of jokes amongst the foreign service officers and the office staff.

Beginning my first week at EAP, Micah began introducing me to the Human Rights community. And, that is exactly what it was—a community. It was made up of hard-core, totally committed, borderline fanatical, extremely outspoken advocates, who had their sights most often fixed on China.

Though, economic and geopolitical concerns had top billing at the State Department, Pentagon and at the White House, the multitude of human rights organizations in Washington, DC, were very effective at keeping their “organizational” agendas relevant. In short, they were committed to keeping the government’s feet to the fire, especially the U.S. State Department. I found the vast majority of these Human Rights advocates to be smart, aggressive and well informed on a variety of Human Rights issues.

At one particular meeting, I personally witnessed Susan O’ Sullivan getting dressed-down and humiliated by Sophie Richardson, a fierce advocate from the Human Rights Watch (HRW) organization at a meeting in the State Department. Her pointed comments were related to the results of a recent U.S.-China Human Rights Dialogue, in 2011, that occurred shortly
before I came on board.

Sophie, the China Director at HRW, was simply not happy about the State Department’s performance during these important bilateral talks. As a result, Ms. Richardson was quite blunt in her assessment. She stated, without concern for political niceties, that Susan and the State Department were much too weak and conciliatory toward addressing Human rights violations in China. Susan attempted to defend her actions, but Sophie shut her down immediately with a barrage of sarcasm and insults.

The whole scene was a bit unnerving and a bit ugly. Harold Koh, who was nominated, in 2009, by President Obama to be the principle Legal Adviser on international law at the State Department, sat in silence as Susan was savaged. It Washington politics at its best. You are on your own! Upon some reflection, I realized later on that this contentious meeting was my initial baptism and introduction to hardball politics-DC style.

But, then, just as quickly, I was stunned, again, when Sophie asked Susan out for lunch and Susan quickly accepted. What the hell? Needless to say, I learned the golden rules of Washington, DC; first, never accept at face value anything said in this town; second, never take anything too seriously in this town - except your career.

Everything else in DC was Kabuki Theater — all show, little substance.

Sophie Richardson’s organization (HRW) and other human rights operations and organizations annually raise millions of dollars from supporters, and other interested parties in the U.S. Accordingly, Sophie, and her colleagues at HRW, as well as other Human Rights groups in Washington, were expected to produce substantive results inside the halls of power within the U.S. Congress and throughout Washington, DC.

Principally, these dedicated Human Rights representatives are paid to influence the U.S. government’s human rights policies; or, when necessary, participate in the writing of Congressional legislation that relates to Human Rights. In the end, this dedicated community of Human Rights activists and advocates are essentially hired to ensure that the American government upholds its own publicly stated standards concerning Human Rights.

Actually, the Human Rights Watch’s agenda is quite direct and simple. It aggressively attacks any country, governmental department, or non-governmental entity, that does not measure up to their organization’s standards concerning human rights. During my tenure as a Franklin Fellow, I found Sophie and most of the Human Rights representatives to be serious-minded professionals.

In truth, their work never ends. In fact, recent studies have shown that there are increasingly undeniable signs that a growing list of countries are
now beginning to lean away from democracy and the “rule of law”.

In the final analysis, I concluded that Sophie Richardson, whom I actually liked very much as an individual, and her fellow brothers and sisters within the Human Rights community, will be very busy for many years to come.

III. HUMAN RIGHTS & FOREIGN POLICY: AN UNCOMFORTABLE MARRIAGE

In early November 2011, the annual U.S.-Vietnam Human Rights Dialogue took place in the Truman Building at the U.S. Department of State in Washington, DC. This gathering was the second most important human rights “dialogue” other than the one held annually with the Chinese. A great deal of logistical and on-site preparation was done for this important event. I had several responsibilities—some important, some not so important—but all were necessary:

First, I helped to set up the main room where the primary discussions would take place; I believe we used a horseshoe-shaped table.

Second, I assisted in putting together the briefing books for the U.S. delegation; these consisted of the issues that the U.S. delegation had hoped to raise during the day-long conference.

Third, I reserved the proper lunch rooms at the State Department for both delegations; we wanted the delegates to be inter-mixed at all the tables; we did not want both groups isolated from each other. The sitting chart—who sat where—became a very important issue.

Fourth, I had to find at least two qualified interpreters to help the American delegation understand their Vietnamese counterparts. This was not an easy task because the annual APEC meeting was being held in Hawaii. Obviously, most of the available interpreters on the East Coast sought this assignment—a free trip to Hawaii is hard to pass up. Hence, qualified interpreters were in short supply. Nevertheless, I was finally able to recruit two excellent interpreters. By all means, a critical success.

Finally, I was designated as one of the primary note-takers of the discussions. This proved to be the most interesting part of my participation. However, what is the old saying? Diplomacy is like watching paint dry. Often it is bone-numbingly boring and mundane. Yet, if done right, through dogged determination and skillful negotiating, positive results can be achieved. But, an inescapable truth remains; the diplomatic arena will absolutely test one’s character and patience two with no guarantee of success at the end.

Well, the day finally arrived for the long-awaited “dialogue” with
Vietnam. The American team was ready to go. Everyone knew their responsibilities and roles for this important “Human Rights” summit. Unfortunately, to our annoyance and dismay, the only people excited about the “talks” was the U.S. delegation. The entire Vietnamese delegation from the very beginning of the event, which began at 8:00 am sharp, was emotionally and intellectually disengaged. In fact, there were early indicators that this entire event was going to be very contentious and tense. As the day unfolded, all hope for a positive exchange of ideas, or a substantive discussion concerning human rights, had slowly evaporated.

In fact, nationalistic storm clouds began to appear on the horizon at the morning encounter between Secretary Posner and the Director General of Vietnam’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Hoang Chi Trung. It should be noted that Mr. Trung was also the head of Vietnam’s Department of International Organizations. Secretary Posner had requested a private meeting with Mr. Trung before the “dialogue” began that morning. Even from a distance, one could surmise that their morning “conversation” had not gone well. Shortly after the “breakfast meeting” had concluded, Secretary Posner confirmed our gloomy assessment.

And, little did we know that the Posner-Trung morning summit had also established the diplomatic mind-set for the rest of the day. Clearly, Secretary Posner looked a bit frazzled and pale after his breakfast meeting with Director-General Trung. The Vietnamese director-general walked confidently into the main conference room completely stone-faced and appeared to be a bit annoyed by even having to attend the “human rights dialogue”. Upon reflection, my initial analysis of Trung’s disposition proved correct.

Later, I discovered that the Vietnamese government only agreed to participate in this event because the U.S. government made it a precondition for future U.S. cooperation on economic and military matters. Hence, Vietnam's desperate need for economic and technological development, and with the meteoric rise of Chinese power, particularly throughout the South China Sea, and upon Vietnam’s northern border, produced a “diplomatic” version of a geopolitical “shotgun wedding”. Hence, both bride and groom are not very happy, but they get married due to extreme circumstances.

These types of geopolitical “weddings” are becoming increasingly common in the Indo-Asia-Pacific region. The re-emergence of a powerful Middle Kingdom is forcing middle powers and smaller nation-states in the region to re-evaluate their relations with America, China and with each other. It also appears, for now, having a strong U.S. military presence within the Indo-Asia-Pacific region is suddenly viewed as necessary and greatly
needed—if not appreciated. This regional “consensus” is due to China’s increasingly abrasive and aggressive behavior; examples being the confiscation and current construction of military infrastructure upon the Paracel and Spratly Islands. As a result, most governments in this vast oceanic region believe that China’s recent military activities and visible developmental intentions represent a dark and foreboding geopolitical future for all of them.

Despite Vietnam’s vulnerable geo-strategic situation, such as having China’s military forces near its northern border, as well as the Chinese navy parked just outside Vietnam’s 12-mile territorial waters in the South China Sea. Nevertheless, Vietnam remains determined and resolute in pursuing new relations with the U.S., but, with limitations.

Without question, Vietnam desperately needs U.S. assistance on a number of economic and military matters. Yet, their integrity and pride as a nation, as a people, will not permit them to publicly kow-tow to all American demands, particularly those concerning human rights. As stated earlier, the subject of human rights is viewed by the leadership of the Vietnamese Communist Party as just another western ploy to humiliate them and their country. Remember, Vietnam militarily defeated the Japanese, French, Americans and Chinese between 1941 and 1980. In pugilistic terms, it is a nation that punches significantly above its weight division; the Vietnamese people take great pride in this historical fact.

Thus, throughout the one-day U.S.-Vietnam “dialogue”, periodically, when annoyed, Director-General Trung took great pleasure in reminding the American delegation that Vietnam had defeated the U.S. during its lengthy war (1945-1975). This historical rejoinder would always stop the “dialogue” dead in its tracks. Though, crude and mildly offensive to the State Department’s delegation (most of whom possessed very little real knowledge or understanding of the Vietnam war); nevertheless, it was an effective debating tactic that enabled Vietnam to avoid answering any real questions concerning serious human rights violations in their country.

In retrospect, Director-General Trung’s strategy was quite simple. Just endure this one-day “dialogue”, and get the hell out of the U.S. State Department as soon as possible. Trung’s blunt declarative statements about the verdict of the Vietnam War, and his visible disdain and unmistakable disrespect for the entire proceedings, represented Vietnam’s way of telling the Americans to “get-off” their ethical and moral high-horse on issues concerning democracy, human rights and labor in modern Vietnam.

The Indo-China Theater (Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos) suffered, approximately, 3 million dead, with millions more injured and maimed from
the Vietnam War. Maybe, just perhaps, the Vietnamese were justified in their contempt for America’s critical inquiries concerning Human Rights violations within their country. The Vietnamese delegation was clearly agitated and annoyed by being lectured to by Americans who had admittedly committed innumerable acts that also violated Human Rights standards during the war.

Needless to say, Secretary Posner and the rest of the U.S. delegation went home that night a bit chastened by the exhausting experience of debating the Vietnamese about human rights. Everyone in the conference room witnessed the Vietnamese director-general reading magazines or other documents throughout the proceedings.

Unsurprisingly, the rest of the Vietnamese delegation, taking its cue from Trung, had also displayed the same degree of disinterest and disregard toward achieving the primary purpose of the conference. Hence, what the American delegation had experienced was a well-choreographed performance by the Vietnamese delegation that displayed an uncompromising and unrelenting nationalism in the form of resistance.

On my way home that evening on the Metro, I realized that the Vietnamese delegation had displayed the same intense determination and tenacious tactics that enabled them to eventually win the long and violent Vietnam War. At the end of the day, like the last helicopter taking off from the roof of the U.S. embassy in April 1975, the shadow of frustration and failure hung over the entire U.S. State Department’s delegation.

And, to add insult to injury, at the conclusion of the first day, Director General Trung informed the U.S. State Department that the Vietnamese delegation would not participate in any further activities.

So ended the U.S.-Vietnam Human Rights Dialogue. Like the legacy of the Christian crusades that occurred a millennium ago in North Africa and the Middle East, the U.S.-Vietnam Human Rights Dialogue would also leave barely a trace. In truth, no one was surprised.

IV. HUMAN RIGHTS: THE AMERICAN DILEMMA

Finally, I just want to say a few things about how the American government presents Human Rights to the world, and how Human Rights are actually assimilated and practiced as a part of U.S. foreign policy.

Put simply, the gulf between what is said about human rights, and what is actually done in support of human rights, can often appear to be contradictory, if not hypocritical. After having proudly worked on issues concerning Human Rights for almost a year, I still had serious questions
about its actual meaning and purpose for America and the world at-large:
1) How important are Human Rights to America?
2) How important are Human Rights to the implementation of U.S.
foreign policy?
3) Is the U.S. government willing to go to war over Human Rights?
4) Are the American people willing to sacrifice their children for
Human Rights?
5) Due to torture being utilized by the U.S. in Iraq, and in other
countries, do we still have credibility on matters concerning Human Rights?
These were questions that I wrestled with as I edited several Human
Rights reports in 2011-2012. Nevertheless, intellectually, if not spiritually, I
remain absolutely convinced that the struggle for human rights is indeed a
righteous cause. And, I remain convinced—without any specific evidence or
absolute justification—that Human Rights represents the future for mankind.
Therefore, committing one’s self toward achieving and defining the
honor, integrity and purpose—as an individual in this often ambiguous,
complex, dangerous, and volatile world which often appears to critics and
supporters of Human Rights to be opaque and distant from such universal
goals—remains a worthy mission for an individual, a community, and a
nation.

CONCLUSION

In my mind, as the 21st century unfolds, defining and assimilating
Human Rights into our daily lives everywhere in the world will remain
humanity’s ultimate challenge. Thus, how Human Rights is finally defined,
deciding its ultimate purpose and its actual universal value in the world, I
believe, will, in the end, determine humanity’s own survivability on this
planet.
The world’s population is nearing 7.5 billion. The communications
revolution has enabled human beings to connect with each other as never
before. And, additionally, the crimes against humanity are increasingly
difficult to hide from the global community.
In the end, I believe the battle to define and implement a universal
understanding of what Human Rights are, and what they constitute for
everyone on this planet, has just begun.