

Patricia M. Derian (1929-2016): A Towering Advocate for Human Rights

By Nicholas Birns, Senior Research Fellow, Council on Hemispheric Affairs

Patricia Derian's time in office coincided with the era that the idea of human rights emerged as a prominent factor in U.S. relations with Latin America as well as the rest of the world. Indeed, her elevation to the position of Assistant Secretary for Human Rights and the very creation of that position during the Carter administration were part of the same wave of optimism that occasioned the founding of the Council on Hemispheric Affairs (COHA). Necessarily, Derian worked from the inside, since she was a government appointee and was constrained by the necessity of soft-pedaling certain agendas that were at variance with the unarticulated policy of the U.S. government and the pressures to which even a Democratic President and Democratic Congress was not to overly or excessively criticize American allies. Because of its NGO status, COHA had the freedom to much more publicly and ardently advocate for the cessation of human rights abuses, the freeing of political prisoners, the fostering of transparency, and the implementation of unimpeded democratic processes. Unavoidably, there were tensions between COHA's position and that of the State Department as epitomized by Ms. Derian. Nancy Mitchell has recently argued that the Carter administration, for all it spoke of human rights, was constrained not only by traditional American foreign policy goals but also by the intrusion of domestic political interests.¹ Nonetheless, in the Carter era there was also a fundamental convergence in aims that the U.S. could no longer simply let affairs in Latin America rest undisturbed, as long as the governments were complaisant or actively encouraged, as in the case of Chile, a brutal right-wing overthrow of a democratically elected and maverick leftist government. The late 1970s in Washington made it clear that the fundamental independence of Latin America had to be recognized on a daily basis and that Latin American nations had to be subject to the same rigor and scrutiny as with nations in Europe and Asia where Cold War policy mandated a pro-human rights agenda. These values remained even after the debacle in which, as the Reagan administration assumed power after Carter's defeat in 1980, Derian was replaced by Ernest Lefever, a man of appallingly opposed convictions who abhorred everything Derian rightly held dear. Yet Derian's values have triumphed over the long run. This is not to say things are entirely different today. Recent State Department reactions under the Obama Administration to events in Honduras and Venezuela have shown that there is still a residual unwillingness to acknowledge popular mandates and democratic procedures when they run counter to U.S. political interests. But today, nowhere on the American political spectrum is there any support for foreign dictators even if they carry out a pro-American agenda, and that revolution is very much occasioned by the efforts both of government actors such as Ms. Derian, and non-state actors like NGOs such as COHA, and peer organizations such as NACLA and WOLA. All these forces worked to change attitudes and make the awareness of human rights concerns a constant in diplomatic policy. A recent wave of scholarship, led by the work of Samuel Moyn, has been skeptical of the very idea

¹ . Nancy Mitchell, *Jimmy Carter in Africa: Race and the Cold War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).

of “human rights,” seeing an inherent apolitical quality in it that impedes broader agendas of concrete social change by focusing on the circumstances of particular mistreated individuals that illustrate universal and somewhat abstract values.² That may be true, but, importantly, the idea of human rights reformulated diplomatic policy as a kind of Kantian ideal, by saying that in diplomacy, as in any other interpersonal relation or ethical engagement, we can be our best selves. Diplomatic engagement with other countries is a place to call for values beyond immediate national self-interest. This is particularly necessary for the United States for all its overwhelming power and irreplaceable leading role in the world, to demand of itself that it be its best self in foreign policy and not support individuals or movements that are fundamentally undemocratic merely because they buttress immediate U.S. interests.

It is notable to mention that Patt Derian was largely an outsider. She did not come up through the ranks in Foggy Bottom, and was not a lifelong bureaucrat. Much like Larry Birns, the founding Director of COHA, she started out as a freelance activist. She was called to her mission by life experience and ethical awareness, in her particular case in Mississippi during the civil rights era, and was not necessarily ideological or bureaucratic inculcation. This background may well have been necessary to make possible, to effect a fundamental reorientation in the way Washington looks at things in its world. Derian’s gender may also have been important. It is indeed possible to overrate formal diversity. The establishment can simply find people of color, women, and other minorities that can, in a “path-dependent” way, fit into preexisting molds. Nancy Fraser, indeed, has spoken of the danger of feminism simply being co-opted by corporate neoliberalism.³ Nor were all women in the 1970s monolithically progressive activists: indeed, the other prominent female voice in the Carter-era State Department involved with Latin America, Sally Shelton, who was Ambassador to several Eastern Caribbean countries, was both a robust and a supremely effective anti-Communist. But it could be argued that the way the Carter administration signaled a tentative going-beyond the white, male, Ivy League cadre that had filled the ranks of the State Department bureaucracy did, however indirectly and sporadically, help prompt a broader diversity of outlook, and an awareness that American foreign policy is at its best when it is representative of the values and perspectives of all Americans. In this effort, Patricia Derian was a leader of renown.

The life and work of Patt Derian continues to be an inspiration for young people trying to make a difference in the world today. And for this reason, COHA mourns her passing, and honors her example as an apostle of a worthy creed.

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² . Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012)

³ . Nancy Fraser *Fortunes of feminism: from state-managed capitalism to neoliberal crisis*. (Brooklyn: Verso Books, 2013).