

A QUEST FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

By Edward Mezvinsky
with Mark Bruzonsky

INTRODUCTION:

This will be a looking back -- an overview -- of the year-long period since I found out I would be appointed United States Representative to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. In short, what has been accomplished, what have I learned, what have been my greatest frustrations and challenges, and what are my expectations and hopes for the coming years.

CHAPTER 1:

My transition from Congressman to U.N. diplomat provides the beginnings for the personal dimensions of the book.

Andy Young and I entered Congress together in 1973 little realizing that we would both be part of a Jimmy Carter government just four years later. For me personally, in these few short years, I was being catapulted from state politics to national politics to international diplomacy.

After learning of my appointment I sometimes thought back much further, to my family origins in Czarist Russia and Poland and to the human rights situation in countries I personally was removed from by only two generations.

How I came to be selected for the U.N. Human Rights Commission and how I began contemplating my new responsibilities -- the various apprehensions as well as the challenges and opportunities -- provide a backdrop to all that was to occur. I had sponsored in the House a number of human

rights resolutions, but that was at a time when it was difficult to get human rights even thought of as a proper component of foreign policy. As late as 1974 a Congressional committee felt it necessary to suggest that "The Department of State should treat human rights factors as a regular part of U.S. foreign policy."

But by 1977 much had been turned upside down regarding human rights and my own role as Human Rights Commission Representative was being quickly expanded from that of my predecessors.

And so, I began to realize that I was going to have to help decide just how human rights do fit into the foreign policy equation. Many of my ideas from those early months will be contrasted, later in the book, with those I developed as I actually began dealing with the various issues which comprise the maze of human rights concerns.

CHAPTER 2:

My new family life, in which I recently added two daughters born in Korea and Vietnam, had helped sensitize me to human rights issues at a very personal level. In 1975 I began what I think of as a new life when I married a very special person, Marjorie Margolis, a television news reporter for WRC, NBC News in Washington. Rather ironically, it was the Vietnam War which brought us together when, during the baby-lift in the final tragic days, Marj came to interview me about the airborne evacuation of infants from Saigon.

Together, Marj and I have six daughters -- four are mine from a previous marriage and Marj, when a single parent, had adopted our foreign-born girls. Both Holly and were essentially stripped of their human rights in their own countries. Holly, the Vietnamese, is a child

born of American and Vietnamese parents, a street kid mothered by a prostitute and found in a garbage can. Shortly after I became the Human Rights Commission Representative Marj and I had a child together.

I had also become more sensitized to refugee problems through personal experience. For about six months right about the time Marj and I were married a Vietnamese refugee family lived with us. Their two children plus our own made for quite a lively household -- all the more so as they didn't understand English and sign-language became our means of communication.

Of course, my new family situation was an important conflict, time-wise, as I began considering my new role, one which was sure to involve considerable time in New York and probably much travel abroad. But Marj and I both recognized my opportunity and we even agreed to appear together on Sundays hosting a local TV-talk show.

CHAPTER 3:

Shortly after deciding to accept the position, I quickly began to figure out how to properly prepare myself. President Carter and other top officials in the new administration lost little time in elevating human rights concerns to a position as cornerstone of American foreign policy. I needed to better understand what this meant, or might come to mean, in practical terms of actual policies and what my new, expanded role might mean in terms of a more important and more visible role for me.

I knew, right from the beginning, that I would be the first Human Rights Commission Representative with such an expanded role -- actually coordinating U.S. human rights concerns at the U.N. In the

past, the job really was part-time and mostly involved a five-week period in Geneva where the Commission meets in February. Yet, even though the most recent U.S. Representatives had only this limited role and were not really actors when it came to the actual conduct of U.S. foreign policy, I knew that my very first predecessor was none other than Eleanor Roosevelt who had inspired the most important human rights document of our era, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Beyond these concerns, I needed to start getting a feel for the U.N. itself and for the multitude of non-governmental organizations involved in promoting human rights.

Part of the period between learning of my appointment and my actual swearing in in August was spent in New York informally meeting representatives of other governments, persons connected with the more important NGOs, and learning the ropes, much as I had done in Congress four years before.

I met, for instance, with a Palestinian intellectual attached to the Kuwaiti Mission, Fayez Sayegh, who is generally credited with pushing through the 1974 Zionism equals racism resolution. And he related to me rather interesting political anecdotes regarding his dealings with Andy's predecessor Daniel Patrick Moynihan. I also discussed Middle East matters with the Israeli Ambassador, Chaim Herzog, and with the World Jewish Congress representative, Israel Singer -- both of whom stressed the domestic political importance of how human rights issues at the U.N. are handled.

These initial meetings began to give me glimpses of what I could expect once the General Assembly session began in late September --

the pressures, political considerations, personalities and competing values.

When I met with Leonard Garment, who held my position under Nixon, he not only gave me pointers on the U.N.'s workings but told me of his final meeting with the dethroned President at Camp David. Garment gave Nixon something of a limp fish hand-shake only to have Nixon give him a school-boy lesson on the importance that a politician have a firm, strong way of shaking hands. "Let me show you how it's done," Nixon insisted, betraying his misunderstanding of so much that was happening around him.

CHAPTER 4:

The United Nations "family" is a separate world of meetings, cocktail circuits, fine dining and political intrigue. It's a rather strange world, especially at first.

With my origins in the American Midwest I had come to think of Washington as a second home after years as a Legislative Assistant on Capitol Hill and two terms in Congress. But those years were involved with American politics and I was in touch with and responsible to a grass-roots constituency. Now I was heading into world politics and the cosmopolitan atmosphere of New York's U.N. headquarters and Geneva's Palais de Nations.

There were other institutions and bureaucracies for me to fit into as well. In Washington I began working out of Andy Young's seventh floor State Department office, and in New York my office was, of course, at the U.S. Mission on 44th Street across from U.N. headquarters with the towering Ugandese Mission being build next door.

Developments in Uganda were especially troubling to me and much in the news as I began my work. One day when Morris Abram came to visit and we got to discussing the Uganda problem and the 12-story tall Ugandese mission (our own Mission next door is only - stories), I suggested to Abram that he get a young associate of his law firm to investigate possible pay-offs and bribery in connection with this building. Stories about how Amin would leave the country after demanding of his Finance Minister millions of dollars in cash had stuck in my mind. And I already was looking for any way possible to discredit this barbaric man and expose what he was still doing to the Ugandese people.

For Andy, Amin presented a special problem. For all of Amin's atrocities, he represented a challenge to Africa's colonial past which Amin had dramatically demonstrated by having white men carry him on his tribal throne. In much of Africa Amin was actually a charismatic figure -- a fact which had made difficult any Organization of African Unity sanctions against him. Andy too now had to face this situation, and how he decided to do so would of course greatly affect whether or not I would be able to pursue a tough line against this fanatic.

And then too, there was almost a separate world of NGOs. Some represented universalistic concerns, others came out of a religious or quasi-political orientation. A number proved extremely helpful; others (most, in fact) consumed time but offered little.

Even with these issues beginning to occupy my attention and with the getting acquainted meetings taking much of my time, I was still

just learning the basics of my job.

The situation with classified materials had me a bit anxious, at first. I was instructed about always locking things up at the end of the day in a safe which had, what was for me at least, a rather complicated combination. The constant rounds of security guards always checking for violations made me rather nervous; in the Congress we didn't have much of this and for some reason the "burn bags" reminded me of the Nixon shredding machine stories.

Finally I had mastered my safe after much practice. Then one afternoon a security official headed my way and I was sure he was going to reprimand me for something or other. Instead, he just told me he had come to change the safe's combination! It was just one small example of how bureaucratic procedures control all of us.

CHAPTER 5:

My orientation period passed very quickly. Planning for the three special forums where human rights matters would be debated soon became my preoccupation.

Since the Human Rights Commission meets annually early in the year in Geneva, there were other things I needed to prepare for which took place earlier.

In October at Belgrade, Yugoslavia, an important review meeting of the agreements signed at the 1975 Helsinki, Finland, Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe was scheduled. Arthur Goldberg was named, in August, to head the American delegation -- a step designed to give added political stature to the upcoming meeting. Because of the importance attached to the human rights agreements in what had come to be termed

"basket three" of the Helsinki agreement, I began planning to attend at least a few sessions in Belgrade.

And, of course, during the General Assembly session which began on September 20th the important Third Committee would be taking up many human rights issues. Among others, I was looking forward to working with Mrs. Coretta King, a public member of the U.S. delegation.

CHAPTER 6:

My approach to the panoply of human rights concerns was to divide them into basic issues and into specific problems involving individual countries.

The overall issues fit neatly into three separate categories:

- 1) Fundamental human rights involving the integrity of the person: freedom from slavery, torture and arbitrary imprisonment.
- 2) Social and Economic Rights: food, clothing, shelter, medicine, schooling.
- 3) Civil and Political Rights: freedom of thought, religion, assembly, speech, travel, the press, and to participate in government.

Most of these rights are incorporated into various international conventions the most important of which is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Others, many of which have yet to be ratified by the United States, include: The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination; The International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights; The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Optional Protocol to this Covenant; The Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide; and a number of others.

The history of how the international community has begun dealing with human rights considerations since World War II is really quite intriguing. Gradually universal standards have come to be widely acknowledged. Today investigation and sanctions are taking on added importance.

Another important issue was the proposal to establish a U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights -- a proposal which has floated around U.N. circles for more than a decade. Already in existence is a U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees. But with the greater importance now being attached to human rights questions, and with the obvious need to strengthen U.N. machinery for considering human rights violations, I realized right from the beginning that we might want to give this proposal new life. And I also realized that the task of mustering political backing for a Human Rights Commissioner would largely fall to me.

And then, of course, there were the major problems surrounding the functioning of the Commission on Human Rights itself and its Sub-commission on the Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities.

Though the Commission meeting in Geneva in February was some months off, planning had to begin even while my time was being consumed by the General Assembly and the Belgrade Conference.

President Carter had drawn attention to both the importance of the Commission and the need to strengthen its powers in his first address to the U.N. in March, 1977. A large part of my job would be to promote a more important role for the Commission. We would need to reform some of its procedures and convince other countries to allow

the Commission sufficient powers of investigation and publicity so that it could become more than a dead-end for the thousands of complaints concerning human rights violations which have begun to flood the U.N.

CHAPTER 7:

As for the problems involving specific countries, they are on the whole the ones which dominate the news: Chile and other Latin American dictatorships; apartheid in southern Africa; Soviet Jewry; the situation in the Israeli-occupied West Bank; refugees from Vietnam and Cambodia; Idi Amin's rule of terror; etc.

With a few of these problems I have some background from personal experience. In 1975, for instance, I visited the Soviet Union and met with Andre Sochorov and Anatoly Sharansky. But I never thought then that in a few years I would actually be in a position to dramatize their cause. Soon after my appointment I had a chance to discuss the possibilities with Mrs. Sharansky. While I was looking for ways of reducing the sentence her husband might have to face; she, understandably, wanted to get him completely exonerated and free -- after all, he simply wasn't guilty of anything she insisted..

But for most of these problems I needed to learn much more than I knew and to decide upon an impartial strategy for dealing with them all.

Facing candidly the problems of our American past, and some problems of the present as well, was also a responsibility I had to accept, I felt.

CHAPTER 8:

Another part of my responsibilities, as I envision them, has to do with reaching the American people on human rights themes and sometimes about the United Nations itself.

I expect to be doing this through newspaper Op-Eds (the first of which I had published in in late September), magazine articles, and occasional seminars around the country. On the Sunday TV show which my wife and I will host there will be some opportunities I'm sure to deal with human rights issues.

CHAPTER 9:

As Andy and I discussed when I was first offered my new assignment, we would be working closely together. This is a part of the job which I most look forward to. And it will give me a chance to watch Andy's growth as he functions as, what some people are already calling, America's most influential U.N. Ambassador.

CHAPTER 10:

By mid-1978 it will be time to reflect on the accomplishments of my first year working on human rights -- my quest for human rights.

Since 1978 will be the 30th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, I am hopeful I can help arrange an American-sponsored plus a U.N.-sponsored event in commemoration of the momentous importance of this document -- in many ways an international charter on human rights.

If this can be accomplished, the events might provide a culmination to my first year's work.

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MEMORANDUM

To: Edward Mezvinsky
From: Mark Bruzonsky
Date: 21 September 1977

You asked me to give some thought to how we could actually begin working together on the book and other matters. Maybe it would be helpful for me to put down some thoughts in writing. These thoughts take into consideration, of course, that though we would be primarily working on the book, we would also be writing Op-Eds, articles, speeches, etc., and bringing me into the things you are dealing with as much as possible.

My preference would be to use the period January through May 1978 to do the book pretty much on a full-time basis. If we can get a \$15,000 advance to pay me plus, I would think, at least \$2,500 - \$3,000 expenses, this would be possible. I should be with you in New York frequently and with you at least part of the time in Geneva when the Commission is meeting.

Ideally we should continue working together -- on something like a half-time basis -- for the rest of this year if we can determine for sure that we want to go ahead with the book and have sufficient money. I could partially reschedule my Middle East traveling to be gone around a month. For the September-December period we would need an additional \$3000 for me plus some expenses.

Let's talk over this as well as the book outline and the status of the Op-Ed when we meet on Friday.