

PRESS & MEDIA

## *Over There*

“Foreign News: What’s Next?” by Michael Parks, in *Columbia Journalism Review* (Jan.–Feb. 2002), 2950 Broadway, Columbia Univ., New York, N.Y. 10027.

While much of the U.S. news media’s coverage of foreign affairs since September 11 shows “American journalism at its best,” they largely missed the boat in covering a telltale string of earlier attacks on the United States by Islamic extremists, observes Parks, the interim director of the School of Journalism at the University of Southern California.

There were attacks on the World Trade Center in 1993; on apartments housing U.S. Air Force personnel in Saudi Arabia in 1996; on U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998; and on the USS *Cole* in the Yemeni port of Aden in 2000. These incidents were reported episodically, sparking only limited investigative reporting and few follow-up stories on U.S. antiterrorism, immigration, and intelligence efforts or on the sources of anti-Americanism abroad.

Even when the U.S. Commission on National Security, chaired by two former senators, concluded in January 2001 that “Americans will likely die on American soil, possibly in large numbers,” at the hands of foreign terrorists, few news organizations passed this assessment on.

Study after study has shown that in the decade after the Cold War and the Persian

Gulf War ended, network newscasts, newspapers, and newsweeklies sharply trimmed international coverage. But in doing this they were going against the preferences of a substantial part of their audience, Parks maintains. He cites a pre-September 11 survey showing that most Americans ranked protecting the United States from terrorist attacks as the country’s top foreign-policy priority.

Yet that same 2001 survey and others indicate that only about 30 percent of Americans are interested in foreign news, about half as many as are interested in local news. Even CNN and other news organizations strongly committed to foreign coverage, Parks notes, were cutting staff before September 11.

News executives such as Paul Friedman, executive vice president of ABC News, don’t think September 11 changed much. “I don’t share the cockeyed optimism that we have all learned our lesson and will now rededicate ourselves to foreign news,” he says. “The [public] interest simply isn’t there.”

Other news executives disagree, reports Parks. They see the situation “as a test of the journalistic craft, of persuading readers and viewers to read and watch what they need to know and understand.”

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

## *What’s Wrong with Human Rights?*

“The Attack on Human Rights” by Michael Ignatieff, in *Foreign Affairs* (Nov.–Dec. 2001), 58 E. 68th St., New York, N.Y. 10021.

Even human-rights activists have been plagued by doubts in recent decades: Isn’t the claim that all humans are endowed with certain inalienable rights just a mask the West uses as it seeks to impose its values on other cultures? The critics—from Muslim fundamentalists to postmodernist academics in the West—have a point, argues Ignatieff, director of the Carr Center for Human Rights at Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government. But it’s not the one they think they have.

“Rights discourse is individualistic,” he says. “But that is precisely why it has proven an effective remedy against tyranny, and why it has proven attractive to people from very different cultures.” Setting basic standards of “human decency” empowers the powerless.

The push for human rights has not come exclusively from the West, Ignatieff points out. Though the West took the lead in drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, representatives of Islamic and other non-

Western traditions also took part. Moreover, the document itself—coming in the aftermath of World War II and at the dawning of the Cold War—was much less a proclamation of Western superiority than a warning to avoid recent European mistakes.

In the half-century since, says Ignatieff, it has become more apparent that the West does not speak with one voice about specific human rights. The British, the French, and the Americans construe such rights as privacy, free speech, and possession of firearms differently. On issues such as capital punishment and abortion, America and Europe are increasingly at odds.

Yet the splintering of the Western consensus does not necessarily presage the demise of the human rights movement, according to Ignatieff. Rather, it signals the movement's belated "recognition that we live in a world of plural cultures" whose diverse views deserve

to be heard. "Western activists have no right to overturn traditional cultural practice, provided that such practice continues to receive the assent of its members."

Human rights advocates, says Ignatieff, the author of *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* (1998), should adopt philosopher Berlin's concepts of "negative" and "positive" liberty. "The doctrine of human rights is morally universal, because it says that all human beings need certain specific freedoms 'from'; it does not go on to define what their freedom 'to' should comprise." Muslim women who demand the right not to be tortured or abused are not therefore obliged to adopt Western dress or lifestyles. And the very fact that many among the non-Western world's "powerless" are demanding such basic human rights gives the global movement legitimacy. Instead of apologizing for their cause, human rights activists need to press it harder.

#### EXCERPT

### *A Source of Human Rights*

*Several features [of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights] set it apart from both Anglo-American and Soviet-bloc documents, and these should be kept in mind as contests over the meanings of the Declaration's provisions continue. Consider the following: its pervasive emphasis on the "inherent dignity" and "worth of the human person"; the affirmation that the human person is "endowed with reason and conscience"; the right to form trade unions; the worker's right to just remuneration for himself and his family; the recognition of the family as the "natural and fundamental group unit of society" entitled as such to "protection by society and the state"; the prior right of parents to choose the education of their children; and a provision that motherhood and childhood are entitled to "special care and assistance."*

*Where did those ideas come from? The immediate source was the 20th-century constitutions of many Latin American and continental European countries. But where did the Latin Americans and continental Europeans get them? The proximate answer to that question is: mainly from the programs of political parties, parties of a type that did not exist in the United States, Britain, or the Soviet bloc, namely, Christian Democratic and Christian Social parties.*

*And where did the politicians get their ideas about the family, work, civil society, and the dignity of the person? The answer is: mainly from the social encyclicals *Rerum novarum* (1891) and *Quadragesimo anno* (1931). And where did the church get them? The short answer is that those encyclicals were part of the process through which the church had begun to reflect on the Enlightenment, the 18th-century revolutions, socialism, and the labor question in the light of Scripture, tradition, and her own experience as an "expert in humanity."*

—Mary Ann Glendon, Harvard Law School professor, in *Commonweal* (Oct. 12, 2001)