



Reclaiming American Virtue

Barbara J. Keys

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The American commitment to promoting human rights abroad emerged in the 1970s as a surprising response to national trauma. In this provocative history, Barbara Keys situates this novel enthusiasm as a reaction to the profound challenge of the Vietnam War and its aftermath. Instead of looking inward for renewal, Americans on the right and the left looked outward for ways to restore America's moral leadership.

Conservatives took up the language of Soviet dissidents to resuscitate the Cold War, while liberals sought to dissociate from brutally repressive allies like Chile and South Korea. When Jimmy Carter in 1977 made human rights a central tenet of American foreign policy, his administration struggled to reconcile these conflicting visions. Yet liberals and conservatives both saw human rights as a way of moving from guilt to pride. Less a critique of American power than a rehabilitation of it, human rights functioned for Americans as a sleight of hand that occluded from view much of America's recent past and confined the lessons of Vietnam to narrow parameters. From world's judge to world's policeman was a small step, and American intervention in the name of human rights would be a cause both liberals and conservatives could embrace.

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