



BOOK REVIEW

David Grealy. *David Owen, Human Rights and the Remaking of British Foreign Policy*

London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022. Pp. 232. \$120.00 (cloth).

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How can human rights be promoted in a world of great power competition and different values? This is a timely question for this volume to consider, given the re-emergence of a multipolar world in the twenty-first century. In this superb contemporary history of British foreign policy, David Grealy embraces the biographical turn to ponder how one individual, David Owen, shaped and responded to this ethical dilemma in the course of their career.

David Owen became foreign secretary at 38 in February 1977, after the death of Anthony Crosland. He immediately stamped his mark on the office by giving a speech in the House of Commons on 1 March declaring that Britain would take a stand on human rights violations “in any corner of the globe” (12).

Britain’s commitment to human rights had vacillated in previous decades. Having been a leading voice building human rights regimes in the immediate postwar period, the United Kingdom had become more conservative and regressive in the 1950s (30). The Wilson governments of the 1960s reversed this somewhat by providing ministerial representation at a United Nations human rights seminar in 1965 in Belgrade and then hosting one in turn in 1968. Nevertheless, allegations of torture in Aden in 1966 and Northern Ireland from 1968, and Britain’s warm relations with Greece and Chile despite military dictatorships, questioned this commitment.

Coming into office, there was a sense that Owen wanted to introduce a fresh approach, in contrast to the perceived “hollow managerialism” of his predecessors (7). He would be assisted by a similar rhetorical turn in the United States with the election of President Jimmy Carter in 1976 but would face bureaucratic opposition from his own department, whose officials were inclined to downplay values in favor of economic interests.

Yet, Owen was not a naïve idealist. He was aware that public office would involve compromise. The most obvious example, which Grealy expertly explores, was in Britain’s support for the Pahlavi regime in Iran. As Foreign Secretary, Owen approved arms shipments, crowd control equipment, and CS gas despite the evidence of their use against protestors (80–81). British policy was characterized as “to support the Shah warts and all, while occasionally offering treatment for the warts” (75).

How could this be reconciled? In part, it was defended on the consequentialist basis that the opposition’s rule would be worse (a view that was arguably borne out). But Owen also sought to defend his foreign policy against charges of inconsistency or hypocrisy by appealing to philosophical justifications (75). In particular, he constructed a defense of compromise as a moral position, based on Isaiah Berlin’s ideas about “value pluralism”—essentially, that we should respect different ways of living and allow others to come to their own moral positions, rather than coerce them into aligning with ours. The cultures and histories of peoples and states differ and that will be reflected in their moral choices.

The problem, as a contemporary critic noted, was the question of “when compromise should stop” (79). Owen did cancel a contract to supply armored vehicles to El Salvador in October 1977, resulting in a major intra-departmental dispute with the Ministry of Defence, which was only resolved by the prime minister in Owen’s favor in early 1978 after pressure from the Catholic Church (59). But when it came to more powerful actors, the tendency was for Britain to acquiesce in human rights violations. That seems indistinguishable from the old realist adage in Thucydides that in international politics “the strong do what they can, and the weak suffer what they must.”¹

Although Owen was turfed out of office in 1979 with the election of Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative government, he continued to engage in global discussion on issues of human rights. He participated in the Independent Commission on International Humanitarian Issues (ICHI), set up by the UN General Assembly in 1981, which emphasized development and famine relief. Subsequently he would chair the NGO Humanitas, which continued this work. He then became a leading figure, with the former US Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, in efforts to achieve peace during the Bosnia war (1992–1995). Owen became a supporter of more muscular military intervention to support humanitarian aims. After the failures of intervention in Bosnia and Rwanda, he would urge the creation of a UN Rapid Reaction force and wrote to the then prime minister, Tony Blair, to push for a sizeable British contribution to this endeavor.

What did any of this matter? For Grealy, Owen introduced a “step-change” in the prominence of human rights in British foreign policy discourse (184), one that would influence later initiatives, from Robin Cook’s assertion that human rights were at the center of New Labour’s foreign policy, to the emergence of the Responsibility to Protect, as well as the regular use of force in the service of humanitarian goals in Kosovo, Sierra Leone, and Libya.

None of this was solely, or perhaps mainly, attributable to Owen alone; but Grealy’s impressive biographical approach brings to light how individuals can shape debates and have an impact on outcomes.

Overall, this is a masterfully written text. Richly researched, expertly articulated, and containing numerous fascinating nuggets of information about the ethical dilemmas of statecraft. It is sure to be a key text in understanding human rights and British foreign policy in the latter part of the twentieth century.

¹ <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780191866692.001.0001/q-oro-ed6-00010932>