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PROGRAM From the Editor's Desk STATION WETA-TV  
PBS Network

DATE August 27, 1984 1:00 P.M. CITY Washington, D.C.

SUBJECT Secretary Abrams/Human Rights Policy

RICHARD HEFNER: I'm Richard Hefner. Each week I chair our editorial board. Joining me today is Alvin Schuster, Foreign Editor of the Los Angeles Times. Also with me here at the Editor's Desk is Daniel Henninger, Assistant Editorial Page Editor of the Wall Street Journal. And our guest in Washington is Elliot Abrams, Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs.

Secretary Abrams has long been the Administration's most articulate defender against the charge that Ronald Reagan's human rights policy has been a litany of failure. Most often, Mr. Abrams seems down to the earth, pragmatic in his opposition to liberal attacks. Indeed, he's quoted John Kennedy as saying "Americans' purpose is not to provide an outlook for our own sentiments of hope or imagination, it's to shape real events in the real world."

And this year's annual United States Survey of Human Rights, released by Secretary Abrams, says, "Our aim is to achieve results, not to make self-satisfying but ineffective gestures."

So that I'd like to ask our guest if he embraces Jesse Jackson, whose person-to-person efforts to free prisoners in the Mideast and Cuba, and now perhaps in the Soviet Union, surely have been effective for the human rights prisoners involved.

Mr. Secretary?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF STATE ELLIOT ABRAMS: No, I don't. Because if you take the case of Cuba, as an example, there are broad human rights issues in Cuba. What Jesse Jackson

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did is something that any American of any fame could have done. And that is, go down there and trade a little bit of legitimacy with Castro for a certain number of prisoners.

HEFNER: Of course, no one else did.

SECRETARY ABRAMS: Well, no one else should have. And I personally -- I think I share the prisoners' view that this is a very troubling episode.

We could no doubt get Sakharov and Scharansky out of the Soviet Union if we were willing to trade certain things, like perhaps Afghanistan, in exchange. But the game may not be worth the candle. That is, you have to ask yourself, if the ultimate purpose is human rights, was the Jackson trip one which served the overall goal of democracy and human rights in Cuba, or did it not? And I think most people in the Cuban-American community think it did not.

ALVIN SCHUSTER: In that part of the world -- that is, in Central America and South America -- we're involved now in a campaign to help the Contras in their effort to overthrow the government of Nicaragua. Isn't there some hypocrisy there, in the sense that, on the one hand, we are pushing for human rights, quietly or otherwise, and, on the other hand, supporting those who are determined to overthrow a government now in power?

SECRETARY ABRAMS: No. I would analogize this to the situation in Afghanistan. I see nothing wrong, from the human rights point of view, with supporting the opposition, the rebels, if you will, in Afghanistan. And I would say the same thing about Nicaragua. In both cases they're fighting pretty rotten oppressive regimes. And if you take the case of Nicaragua now, it's quite clear that the rebels have a much greater commitment to democracy and that people like Cruz and Rabello and Pastora have a much better possibility of establishing democracy there. That's what they're fighting for.

So, from the human rights point of view, it seems to me quite justifiable.

HEFNER: Alvin, were you going to follow up?

SCHUSTER: I was going to follow up simply to say I'm not quite sure I follow the analysis which equates a Soviet invasion of Afghanistan with what has happened in Nicaragua.

SECRETARY ABRAMS: The analogy is that in both cases the people who are fighting are fighting a dictatorial and oppressive regime in an effort to remove it and establish what will be a less repressive regime. The guerrillas, the rebels are fighting

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to move the country in question in the direction of better observance of human rights.

DANIEL HENNINGER: Mr. Abrams, Congress this week voted to add to the supplemental appropriations \$71 million for El Salvador. And I believe your office has said that the human rights situation has been improving in El Salvador.

At the same time, a group that is America's Watch, which is frequently quoted by congressmen critical of our policy in El Salvador, issued a report this week in which they said that Salvadoran armed forces have killed thousands of civilians and displaced hundreds of thousands with indiscriminate aerial bombing, shelling, and military sweeps. And they said many of the acts of the Salvadoran army flagrantly violate the laws of war.

How does that square with the sorts of things your office has been saying about human rights and the Salvadoran military?

SECRETARY ABRAMS: Well, if it were true, it would not. I don't think it is true.

There have clearly been incidents in which the Salvadoran armed forces have bombed, either indiscriminately, or at least without sufficient discrimination, and have hit civilian targets. But where is this information coming from? You know, they tend to quote the Tutela Legal (?), the church's own human rights office down there in San Salvador. The Archbishop, himself, is now being very, very careful in how he uses their data because their data is not reliable. It's very difficult to get reliable data.

I can't help noting that America's Watch used to talk about why we shouldn't aid El Salvador because the death squads were so active. Well, now the death squads aren't. They have to admit that. So now we find another excuse for why we shouldn't be aiding El Salvador. There's always some excuse for why we shouldn't be aiding the government of El Salvador.

We know that there have been these incidents. In a couple of cases, for example, they involved the Red Cross. And we've talked to the Salvadorans about them. And I think their record is improving on the use of airpower. But I do not believe that we have these thousands and thousands of civilians killed.

Some of the human rights sources in El Salvador have long been loath to distinguish between civilians killed and guerrillas killed.

HEFNER: Mr. Secretary, how much faith and trust can we put in the reports that do come, basically, from the church in Central America?

SECRETARY ABRAMS: One has to be very careful. First of all, in the whole area of human rights we are dealing with very soft data.

Secondly, in the Third World in general, as you know, statistics tend not to be awfully good.

So that with that as a beginning, we know that we have to be very careful.

There are many, many human rights groups that are, in fact, fairly well politicized. That is why Secoro Juridico (?), which used to be the church's human rights office, was moved out by the Archbishop, because he felt they had become politicized. So I think we really do have to be quite careful.

HEFNER: Do you feel that way about the present information that comes from church sources in Central America?

SECRETARY ABRAMS: I wouldn't generalize about Central America. I think that each group is quite different. I think that the Tutela Legal in San Salvador has come up with a great deal of very useful and reliable information, and a fair amount of unreliable information. I think one has to look at it piece by piece.

SCHUSTER: In general terms, Mr. Abrams, how much impact has the United States had? What have been one or two of our successes in this whole field?

SECRETARY ABRAMS: Well, I suppose the whole case of Uruguay moving back towards democracy, Argentina, Honduras, and El Salvador, if we want to just look at the Western Hemisphere for a moment, are examples of where we hope that American influence was useful in the direction of democracy. You never know because you can't prove what things would have been like had we not done what we did. And we also don't like to take credit for a lot of things that we do. And basically, the credit doesn't belong to us. The credit belongs to the people of those countries.

HEFNER: Biggest disappointments?

SECRETARY ABRAMS: Oh, I suppose the single greatest was Nigeria -- it was Africa's largest country, and therefore largest democracy -- leaving the democratic track.

HEFNER: Mr. Secretary, tell us about the fate of Sakharov.

SECRETARY ABRAMS: We don't really know anything that has not been made public -- which is to say, not too much. He appears to be hospitalized. There are repeated rumors about drug treatment. And no apparent willingness on the part of the Soviets to give a single inch on that case.

HENNINGER: Mr. Abrams, I want to talk to you or ask you a little bit about the nature of human rights abuses in Latin America. You, for instance, are required from time to time, or have been required, to give certifications of progress on human rights by the government in El Salvador. And it seems to me that most of the time these human rights abuses are thought of in terms of governments committing them. Yet we have Marxist guerrillas in El Salvador and Colombia and Peru which, according to news reports, are killing civilians. And yet what is it they're guilty of? Their killing is never criticized in any sort of institutional or public way by Congress. Can only governments commit human rights abuses, and what the guerrillas do is, what, just tough luck for the victims?

SECRETARY ABRAMS: Well, there's an answer to that from Amnesty International. Their answer is that the crimes -- that the human rights violations committed by guerrillas are in fact crimes, under the law of the country in question, and should not be viewed as human rights violations. Human rights violations are defined as acts of governments.

I think that's really dumb. An act of murder or torture, or something like that, is going to feel the same whether it's a soldier doing it or a guerrilla. And it has the same -- it really has the same effect on a society and on the individuals who bear the brunt of it. So we disagree with that Amnesty definition.

We have tried, in our own country reports, to take up the question of what non-governmental groups are doing. When we go over an asylum case, we always take into account what will happen to the individual, not who will be doing it. It doesn't really matter whether there's a guerrilla group or a government that may be persecuting you. You still get asylum. And I wish that human rights groups took the same view.

HENNINGER: Given the way you, the Administration, or any Administration, and their critics in Congress fight over these human rights figures, why shouldn't we regard this human rights issue now as having become mainly just a political football?

SECRETARY ABRAMS: Well, it has become very much a

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political football, a lot more than I wish had happened. I think it makes it very difficult to talk about human rights when we know that so many of the people involved on all sides of the issue have political goals.

I have, myself, faulted many of the groups working on Central America because I think that they have a policy difference with the Administration and they dress it up as a human rights problem and attack our human rights policy, when really it's the overall Central American policy that bothers them. I think that that's very bad for human rights policy because it's an area where we should be able to achieve a very great deal of consensus.

HEFNER: Part of the reason for that, I would think, Mr. Abrams, is that there does tend to be some inconsistencies in what we criticize, as a country, and what we do not criticize, as a country. You often hear, for example, that we criticize South Africa -- I have no particular brief for South Africa -- and leave Saudi Arabia alone.

This is a problem, is it not, in terms of American policy on this issue?

SECRETARY ABRAMS: I don't really think it's as large a problem as people generally make out. We issue a country report every year on each country, in which we try to tell the truth. And most human rights groups and Congress have acknowledged that we do it pretty well.

Beyond that country report, the question is, how do you try to achieve a better human rights performance in a given country? It's a tactical question. The goals are the same.

And we do treat different countries differently. Some places we have nothing to use but denunciations, like Vietnam or North Korea. In other places, we have an awful lot of diplomatic and political clout.

The problem is that when I say we are using our political clout, we are using diplomacy in a friendly country, whether it be Chile or Uruguay or Paraguay, or whatever, I'm accused of being a liar. People say that quiet diplomacy, so-called, is really silence, and you're not doing anything. And that's the real problem. The problem is not that people don't like the tactic; it is that they accuse their government of lying to them.

If we could get past the point where everybody thought they were being lied to all the time, then I think we'd have a better consensus on human rights policy.

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HEFNER: Mr. Secretary, I wonder. Comparing yourselves, comparing the Reagan Administration, let's say with the Carter Administration, to what extent do you think you are more or less concerned with making matters of human rights impact upon actual foreign policy?

SECRETARY ABRAMS: I think we're more concerned. I'll give you one rough and odd measure: cable traffic. Every cable on human rights has a tag, human rights. There are many thousands more cables going in and out of the State Department and U.S. embassies today than there were in the Carter Administration.

Around the world today at U.S. embassies, I think we've managed to persuade people in the Foreign Service, who were very dubious, that human rights and U.S. national interests always go together. I think in the Carter Administration, the way in which the policy was conducted led lots of ambassadors, Foreign Service officers to conclude they were frequently incompatible, and that human rights policy had to be held at arm's-length. I don't think that's so widely believed anymore in the U.S. Government.

(End of interview)