Correspondence

A Friendly Disagreement With James Finn

To the Editors: After reading "A Friendly Disagreement About Human Rights" by James Finn in the July/August issue, it appears to me that the words placed in the mouths of Proctor (Pro) and Conrad (Con) do not offer a complete presentation of the relevant arguments. Allow me to respond, on Proctor's behalf, to the illogics of Conrad.

In addition to Con's peripheral pronouncements on the admirable statesmanship of Henry Kissinger, the incredible infancy of Andy Young, and the desirability of retiring the U.N. Human Rights Commission, I also take exception with his basic arguments. Countering them in the order they were presented, I would point out that:

1. The difficulty in obtaining equal degrees of information on rights violations in different countries due to their variable openness is not insurmountable. As Cyrus Vance pointed out, the freedoms of speech, the press, religion, and movement (all vehicles for the flow of information) are themselves human rights. As such, obstacles to these freedoms could be subject to U.S. sanctions, thus encouraging a uniform openness in other societies.

2. The argument that national security (a much abused, ill-defined term) should take precedence over human rights is a nebulous one and does not take account of the fact that these considerations do, or should, often overlap.

3. The application of a consistent rights policy to all countries would add clarity to our foreign policy, not make it the confusing "crazy quilt" that Con contends it would.

4. Present events notwithstanding, a human rights policy does not necessarily portend counterproductivity. Con cites the example of the negative effect of the rights issue on the SALT talks. Perhaps this intransigence by the Soviets is a ploy they would abandon if convinced that our commitment is steadfast and not susceptible to such pressures. Unfortunately, the application of our rights policy so far, as Con would be quick to admit, has been selective enough to signal that our rights policies are negotiable.

5. Con's argument that there is no developing country where Western democracy would really work is actually quite a subversive argument. What is it that our foreign policy establishment has been attempting to make work, anyway? Equitable societies with a reasonable distribution of wealth accomplished by agrarian reform, regulation of foreign-owned enterprises, and other measures? Or societies that guarantee the stability of high profit levels for American-based multinational corporations, regardless of the attendant political liberties accorded the populace? Recent history indicates the latter.

6. Human rights might be, at present, a poorly defined "baggy monster" of a term, as Con points out, but this can be remedied by referring to the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as Pro suggests.

Among Con's other scattered arguments I find debatable are his contentions that "power and self-interest have proven to be more trustworthy guides" than moralistic impulses (have not our shortsighted policies in Cambodia, Chile, and elsewhere backfired tremendously?) and that there are no means of implementing our proclaimed moral principles anyway (is the world's most powerful nation at a loss in choosing from the variety of economic and political sanctions open to it?). What betrays Con's arguments most is the metaphorical context in which he describes concepts of morality. Can it be so undesirable to "break out in moralistic blotches"? Is the prime test of a policy's desirability, as Con implies, the extent to which it is in the interests of the U.S. alone? What has become of the global concern with which, it has been assumed, we have been infected all along?

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Pro

To the Editors: James Finn's debate with himself on Carter's human rights policies summarizes capably the competing claims of idealism and pragmatism in pursuing a human rights commitment at the international level.

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