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Bill of Rights Day Human Rights Day and Week, 1983

By the President of the United States of America

A Proclamation

On December 15, 1791, our Founding Fathers rejoiced in the ratification of the first 10 amendments to the Constitution of the United States—a Bill of Rights which has helped guarantee all Americans the liberty we so cherish.

One hundred and fifty-seven years later, on December 10, 1948, the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, an effort aimed at securing basic human rights for the peoples of all nations.

Americans have long honored the gift of liberty. So it is with glad hearts and thankful minds that on Bill of Rights Day we recognize the special benefits of freedom bequeathed to posterity by the Founding Fathers. They had a high regard for the liberty of all humanity as reflected by Thomas Jefferson when he wrote in 1787, "A bill of rights is what the people are entitled to against every government on earth." In this century alone thousands of Americans have laid down their lives on distant battlefields in Europe, Asia, Africa, and in our Western Hemisphere itself in defense of the basic human rights.

When the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948, Americans hoped that the Jeffersonian vision was about to be realized at last. The Universal Declaration, it was believed, would embody the consensus of the international community in favor of human rights and individual liberty. And the United Nations, it was further thought, would serve as the instrument through which the observance of human rights by governments would be enforced by the international community.

Thirty-five years after the adoption of the Universal Declaration, it is clear that these hopes have been fulfilled only in part. Nevertheless, the Universal Declaration remains an international standard against which the human rights practices of all governments can be measured. Its principles have become the basis of a number of binding international covenants and conventions. At the United Nations, it has served to strengthen the arguments of those governments which are genuinely interested in promoting human rights.

Still, the fact remains that even as we celebrate Bill of Rights Day and Human Rights Day, human rights are frequently violated in many nations. In the Soviet Union, for example, brave men and women seeking to promote respect for human rights are often declared mentally ill by their government and incarcerated in psychiatric institutions. In Poland, the free trade-union movement Solidarity has been brutally suppressed by the regime. Throughout Eastern Europe and the Baltic States, the rights of workers and other basic human rights as the freedom of speech, assembly, and religion and the right of self-determination are denied. This same tragic situation also occurs just 90 miles off our southern coast. In South Africa the apartheid system institutionalizes racial injustice, and in Iran the Bahai people are being persecuted because of their religion. And, in Afghanistan and Southeast Asia, toxic weapons, the use of which is outlawed by international conventions, are being utilized by foreign occupation forces against brave peoples fighting for their freedom and independence.

As Americans recall these and other human rights violations, we should reflect on both the similarities and the differences between the Bill of Rights and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Both great human rights documents were adopted in the aftermath of a bitter war. Both envision a society where rulers and ruled are bound by the laws of the land and where government rests on the consent of the governed, is limited in its powers, and has as its principal purpose the protection of individual liberty.

Yet while the Bill of Rights was adopted by a Nation in which free institutions already flourished, many of the countries which adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights lacked free institutions. Since human rights are the product of such institutions as a free press, free elections, free trade unions, and an independent judiciary, it is not surprising that formal adherence to the Universal Declaration by governments which suppress these institutions has resulted in no real human rights gains.

By posing as champions of human rights, many governments hope to disguise their own human rights abuse. It was with special pleasure that I noted the recognition offered by the Nobel Peace Prize to Lech Walesa for his real efforts on behalf of human rights in a country where the government speaks only of the illusion of human rights.

Human rights can only be secured when government empowers its people, rather than itself, through the operation of free institutions. Because our Founding Fathers understood this, we are blessed with a system of government which protects our human rights. Today, let us rededicate ourselves to respect these rights at home and to strive to make the words of the Universal Declaration a living reality for all mankind.

NOW, THEREFORE, I, RONALD REAGAN, President of the United States of America, do hereby proclaim December 10, 1983 as Human Rights Day and December 15, 1983, as Bill of Rights Day, and call upon all Americans to observe the week beginning December 10, 1983 as Human Rights Week. During this period, let each of us give special thought to the blessings we enjoy as a free people and renew our efforts to make the promise of our Bill of Rights a living reality for all Americans and, whenever possible, for all mankind.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have hereunto set my hand this 9th day of December, in the year of our Lord nineteen hundred and eighty-three, and of the Independence of the United States of America the two hundred and eighth.

Ronald Reagan