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**Oct. 20, 2009**

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**Roger Pilon**, Vice President for Legal Affairs, Cato Institute:

This morning, both **Bret Stephens**, in the Wall Street Journal, and **Mona Charen**, at Real Clear Politics, catalogue Obama's silence on human rights -- China, Tibet, Sudan, Iran, Burma, Honduras -- and his backpedaling from his campaign rhetoric. Meanwhile, **Eric Posner**, at the Volokh Conspiracy, rightly credits Obama for, among other things, not backing the Goldstone Report and pressuring Spain to water down its undemocratic "universal jurisdiction" statute, even as he condemns the administration, again rightly, for its decision to join "the comically named U.N. Human Rights Council," bastion of some of the world's worst human rights abusers.

**What's missing, it seems, is any coherent and systematic approach to those matters.** During the Reagan administration I served for a time at State as director of policy for the Bureau of Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs -- now called, interestingly, the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor. Things were simpler during the Cold War. We focused on totalitarian regimes, somewhat less on authoritarian regimes, since people were allowed to leave those. And, yes, realpolitik played at least a part in our thinking, as inevitably it must. But the basic principles were clear: If human rights were to be respected, not simply behavioral but **systematic change** would be required. And Reagan kept the pressure on, publicly. With the fall of the Berlin Wall, millions saw that kind of change, in varying degrees. But the contrast between totalitarianism and democratic capitalism is less clear today than it was then, and the Obama administration, in both its foreign and domestic policies, is doing little to clarify it.

The promotion of human rights starts at home, with allowing people to plan and live their own lives, not with vast public programs that compel people to live under government planning. And in foreign affairs it requires both private and public diplomacy, quiet and not-so-quiet attention to the conditions that give rise to human rights abuses. That doesn't mean military intervention to change those conditions. But neither does it mean remaining silent, as the Obama administration too often has. Countless victims of abuse, from Cuba to China and far beyond, have written about how important it was that they knew that the world knew about them: When America speaks, the world listens. But equally important, history demonstrates that regimes that respect their own people respect other people as well. It's time for Obama to speak out.

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