

Making HR a universal ideology

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By Stephen S. Rosenfeld

YESTERDAY was the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the sweetest document of the century. It has brought an incalculable sum of comfort, relief and dignity to people under abuse or threat. It has changed the world.

But for an ultimate appreciation of the contribution the declaration has made to the human condition, you must turn to the likes of Ginetta Sagan. The Italian-born California resident speaks authoritatively, from personal experience as well as general knowledge, for the victims of the terror that the declaration would put right.

The declaration was written in 1948 under the auspices of UNESCO, the UN cultural body then at the peak of its prestige. Its guiding spirit was the French jurist Rene Cassin. It was he who wrote the majestic and what was in those days the revolutionary assertion, "All people are born free and equal in dignity and rights."

At a certain point, Ginetta Sagan,

a former Italian resistance member who had suffered unimaginably at police hands, found herself at lunch in Paris with Rene Cassin. *Ma petite* (my dear), he said, taking her hand, the high values proclaimed in the Universal Declaration mean nothing without a constituency to bring them into effect.

Ginetta — it is hard to address this laughing, lilting person more formally — was then still in her 20s. She went on to do a major share of the work of providing that constituency, helping to establish the prisoner support organization Amnesty International and then the Aurora Foundation, which funnels aid to Amnesty-supported prisoners.

Sworn against violence, Ginetta turned to persuasion with a vengeance. Journalists don't much like to do setpiece anniversary articles, but she started working on me several years ago to write about the declaration's coming 50th. You try telling Ginetta you'd like to think about it a bit.

The declaration became the legal and moral basis of a continuing global campaign to protect the millions of people threatened by irre-

sponsible state power and its wicked partner, the absence of responsible state power.

Further, the declaration established the principle, as others have put it, that nations are accountable not only to their citizens but also to others outside their borders for the way they treat their people. Accountable because everyone signed, except America's Soviet-bloc adversaries and its Saudi oil friends. Accountable because the declaration expressed the felt truths of the age. And accountable because human rights became a political force, although not always a constant one.

The Allies' winning of World War II had generated the fragile wave of internationalism that brought the declaration to life.

The wave broke on the cold war, which led the United States sometimes to invoke the declaration, against the Soviets, and sometimes to play it down to avoid being embarrassed by the flawed human rights record of some of the countries America chose as cold war allies.

Now we are in a post-Soviet period. Some familiar objections to the

reach of the Universal Declaration are still to be heard. Some say that a concern for rights is interventionist and that different cultures and circumstances justify a selective rather than universal approach.

Communist government claim that economic and social programmes morally match the civil, political and human rights at the core of the declaration. In fact, it is the supposedly softheaded Eleanor Roosevelt who is credited with drafting the language that defanged this claim.

The common approach of the United States and many other democratic governments is that rights must be blended with commerce and strategy in a comprehensive policy. Just how is the continuing question.

On this 50th anniversary, lawyers and diplomats from all over are sifting through ways to improve the text of the Universal Declaration — by extending coverage to women and refugees, for instance — and to strengthen enforcement. They aim to reinforce what Louis Henkin calls "the universal ideology at the eve of the new century."

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