

President Obama makes Hu Jintao look good on rights

Washington Post Editorial
January 20, 2011

THE MOST significant statements at the joint news conference of President Obama and Chinese President Hu Jintao on Wednesday came in response to questions about human rights. Asked how China's abuse of its own people affected relations between the two countries, one of the two leaders responded in a perfunctory manner, offered excuses for Beijing and concluded that disagreement on human rights "doesn't prevent us from cooperating in these other critical areas." The other forthrightly stated that "a lot still needs to be done in China in terms of human rights." Disappointingly, that first speaker was Mr. Obama; the relatively honest statement came from Mr. Hu.

The president's remarks were surprising because his administration had indicated before Mr. Hu's state visit that it intended to make human rights a more central part of its China policy. In a speech last week, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton argued forcefully that as long as China represses freedoms, it will be unable to realize its potential. She cited the cases of imprisoned Nobel Peace Prize winner Liu Xiaobo and missing human rights lawyer Gao Zhisheng and said "those who advocate peacefully for reform within the constitution . . . should not be harassed or prosecuted."

But Mr. Obama retreated to the administration's previous approach, which has been to minimize the issue. In his prepared remarks, the president said he had raised human rights with Mr. Hu, but when invited by an Associated Press reporter to expand on the subject, he began with what sounded like an apology for the Chinese regime. "China has a different political system than we do. . . . China is at a different state of development than we are. We come from very different cultures and with very different histories." The president then said that the United States believed in the universality of rights such as freedom of speech, and that he had been "very candid with President Hu about these issues."

Then came more excuses for Beijing's record: "There has been an evolution in China over the last 30 years. My expectation is that 30 years from now we will have seen further evolution." He concluded with the assurance that the United States and China cooperate on many issues, and that the issue of human rights "doesn't prevent" such cooperation. The president made no mention of Mr. Gao, who has not been seen or heard from since last April, or Mr. Liu, who succeeded Mr. Obama as the Nobel Peace Prize winner. Their families could only conclude that China will pay no price for its persecution of the two men in its relations with the United States.

Mr. Hu, by contrast, was more forthcoming. He said "China recognizes and also respects the universality of human rights," before conceding that it had more to do. "We will continue our efforts to promote democracy and the rule of law," he said, adding that China was prepared to

reopen a dialogue with the United States on human rights issues. In fact, human rights have regressed under Mr. Hu's administration, so his promises don't have much credibility. Yet Mr. Hu at least formally recognized the need to move toward democracy. Mr. Obama's failure to do the same made him look more tolerant of dictatorship than the president of China.