

# From Helsinki to Baghdad

By Michael D.J. Morgan

Thirty years ago this month, a brief ceremony in Helsinki opened the door to the end of the Cold War and sowed the intellectual seeds for the Bush Doctrine, the core of American foreign policy today. The leaders of 35 European and North American countries assembled in the Finnish capital to sign the Helsinki Final Act, the product of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. Unlike Paris in 1919 or Yalta in 1945, few of those in Finlandia Hall on Aug. 1, 1975, recognized that they were witnessing one of the turning points of the 20th century. Yet over the next 16 years, the Final Act steadily eroded the legitimacy of the communist governments of Eastern Europe and helped to catalyze their ultimate collapse. It proved that words can indeed be weapons.

Ironically, the proposal for the Conference came from Moscow, which hoped to legitimize its satellites' communist regimes, entrench the territorial status quo, and kick U.S. troops off the Continent. The North Americans and Western Europeans accepted the invitation and, by sticking together and being patient, slowly wore the communists down. In so doing, they turned what might have been an easy Soviet victory into a triumph for Western ideals, especially human rights.

It took thousands of hours of tough-slogging negotiations and almost three years to hammer out the Final Act, which covered nearly every dimension of international affairs. The Warsaw Pact pushed hard on security and military questions, seeking a clear statement that the frontiers of Europe were fixed for all time—thus entrenching the division of Germany and the Soviet annexation of the Baltic republics—and an affirmation of the Brezhnev Doctrine, which held that the Soviet Union had the right to use force to prevent the overthrow of communism anywhere in Eastern Europe, as in Czechoslovakia in 1968.

Presenting a united front, the West resisted these proposals and insisted that there would be no deal unless the communists pledged to uphold the human rights of their citizens. Determined to see their conference succeed, the Soviets had no choice but to agree. They failed to see just how momentous a decision this was. In two important ways, the Final Act was nothing short of revolutionary.

This was the first time that human rights were accepted as a legitimate subject for international negotiation. Here was concrete proof of what Michael Ignatieff has called “the rights revolution” of the 20th century, in which human rights were transformed from an abstract idea into a political force at the very heart of Western identity and government. The Final Act challenged the doctrine of absolute sovereignty, which had been the foundation of the international system for more than three centuries, and offered the new idea of qualified sovereignty in its stead. Prior to the Helsinki negotiations, the Soviets had insisted that the nature of its regime and the way it treated its citizens were purely domestic concerns, and that any West-



*Selling the West the rope they hanged communism with.*

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ern attempt to broach the subject was illegitimate interference and a violation of sovereignty. Regardless of whether they were democracies or dictatorships, states had to treat each other as equals.

But now, for the first time, the nature of a state's regime—and how it treated its citizens—mattered. The West won the right to monitor human rights abuses and to pressure communist governments to live up to the promises made in Helsinki. There is a straight line between the Final Act and the humanitarian interventions of the '90s in Kosovo and elsewhere, which were grounded in the belief that states that violate their citizens' human rights forfeit their own rights to sovereignty.

Second, the communists had hoped that the Final Act would entrench the European status quo and give them some respite from the constant competition of the Cold War. The agreement did the exact opposite. Its *Leitmotiv* was change, not stability. Instead of declaring that European frontiers were permanent, it outlined the ways in which they could be altered. Instead of sealing the East off from the West, it committed both sides to the freer exchange of people, ideas and information. Instead of confirming the legitimacy of the communist governments, it paved the way towards their erosion by guaranteeing the human rights of all Europeans, Eastern and Western alike. These guarantees inspired Eastern dissidents—most notably Václav Havel and his Charter 77 colleagues in Czechoslovakia, and Lech Walesa in Poland—to hold their governments to account for breaking their human-rights promises. Contrary to the vision of détente that President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger advocated, the Final Act did not accept communism as a normal feature of the international landscape that the West would just have to suffer. It dared to raise the possibility of regime change in Moscow, Berlin and the other communist capitals of Europe.

In his essay “Two Concepts of Liberty,” Isaiah Berlin warned against discounting the power of ideas: “Philosophical concepts nurtured in the stillness of a professor's study,” he wrote, “could destroy a civilization.” There is no stronger proof of Berlin's dictum than the ideas born in Helsinki, which have a direct descendant in the Bush Doctrine: The West should support democracy and human rights in every country, with the ultimate aim of ending tyranny. The West lived up to precisely this ideal 30 years ago. Its success in changing the face of Europe—and in overturning realities that many said could never be overturned—stands as a powerful lesson for the world today. No matter how strong it might look, no tyranny is immortal. Good things happen when states stick up for their principles and the rights of the oppressed. And, perhaps most important of all, ideas do have the power to change the world.

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