

**CENFAD interview with Sarah Snyder  
Conducted by Brandon Kinney  
February 13, 2020**



**Q: What inspired you to study human rights?**

A: So, what inspired me to study human rights. I'll come at it from a different way and say that I did not intend to study human rights or write a dissertation or write any books on human rights. I was really interested in American-Soviet détente. I'd written my Master's thesis on that topic, I'd done an undergraduate seminar on the topic, and as I was, sort of, looking around, trying to find a dissertation topic, I had all of these ideas that just did not pan out. Cultural exchanges, all of these things. And I went to a talk at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington, D.C. by someone who was talking about the Brezhnev Doctrine, and he said there's this agreement in the 1975 Helsinki Accords that no one's really paid enough attention to but is actually quite important, which is exactly what we're all looking for as PhD students, right? Something that is overlooked but also significant. So I thought "alright, this could be a topic for me." And as I started to get into it, I was really confused, because the Nixon Administration, from what I could tell from... my initial research, had been completely opposed to the agreement. By the time we get to the Carter Administration, Carter seems to be one of the greatest champions of the agreement. And I didn't understand how there could have been such a significant reversal of the U.S. policy in the intervening years... And what I learned was that the reason that there had been this shift was the result of lobbying and activism by human rights activists, by and large in the Soviet Union but also some of their allies in the United States and elsewhere. And so I became very interested in how these human rights activists who, from everything I learned about Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, shouldn't have been able to be very influential in U.S. policy, how they were then able to shift the U.S. approach to the agreement in such a significant way.

**Q: What was the most exciting aspect of the research project for your book?**

A: This is completely random, and it's not the most significant, but it was very exciting. I'm very fortunate to work with some students as research assistants. And I said to one of them "Could you just find out everything

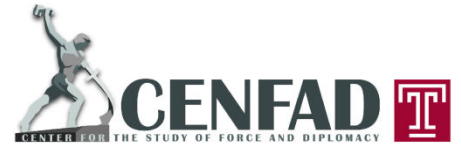
about this guy James Beckett... I kept seeing, as I was going around these Congressional Records, these references to Elize Becket, or Mrs. Something Beckett, who lives in Lakeville, Connecticut. And I thought "why does this woman who lives in Lakeville, Connecticut care so much about human rights, and I kept writing this note to myself. As so when I got to [American University], and I had the opportunity to work with a research assistant, I felt like maybe she had some time to be undertaking what seemed to be a wild goose chase, so I said "figure this out, why does this woman care about it?" And she came back and said "well, it turns out that her son, James Becket, wrote the Amnesty International Report on torture in Greece." So, maybe that makes sense on why she would have gotten involved in this issue. And so, that was pretty exciting, because I had answered this question about... how do Americans who seem to have no personal connection become involved, and then about a year later I said to one of my research assistants, "let's figure out everything we can about James Becket. I want to know where he went to school, did he write a memoir, does he have personal papers?" And she came back to me and said "well, you should just talk to him, he lives in Arizona. This is someone who wrote a report in 1967. I did a lot of interviews for my first book, but I did not expect to be able to interview very many people about a project that ends in 1976, much less someone who was writing a report in 1967. And so it was incredibly exciting to be able to talk to him, and to do a number of the other interviews that I did for the project just because I really had very little hope of being able to have that be part of the research process.

**Q: Going off of that idea of Americans who may otherwise not have a connection to human rights helping to build these networks, could you expand upon the importance of travel in building these networks of human rights activism that you talk about in your book?**

A: Absolutely, in each of the chapters in the book, the American activists have been drawn to human rights activism because of connections they've made overseas. So whether they were traveling as foreign service officers or missionaries or tourists, they met people whose human rights were being abused and when they returned to the United States, they lobbied the U.S. government to have a different approach to these repressive governments. So, in my view, travel was absolutely essential for spurring their attention to human rights in these specific contexts, and I would also say, for the kind of degree of enthusiasm that they had for championing these issues.

**Q: How would you measure the successes of these activists in institutionalizing human rights as a priority for U.S. foreign policy?**

A: I think that they have exceeded many of their expectations in the institutionalization of human rights in U.S. foreign policy. The impact of that institutionalization, my guess, is that some of them, maybe we call them the human rights purists, would be dissatisfied that institutionalization has not lead to a greater prioritization of human rights. But I think that, for many, and we might think of them as the human rights liberals, I think they would be very pleased that institutions like the Human Rights Country Reports still exist and have expanded. That the bureau, which is now not called the Bureau of Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs but DRL [The Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor Affairs], that bureau still exists and is vigorous in many ways... But if the goal was to ensure human rights and attention to human rights would not be subject just to the whims of whoever sat in the White House, I do think that the institutionalization thus far remains firm... I think that the people who were advocating for these issues in the early 1970s would feel that there was a greater chance that attention to human rights would survive due to the institutionalization than if it had not occurred.



**Q: One of your arguments is that this sort of activism is not happening primarily on college campuses or in radical circles but these are older, liberal elite actors moved by prior experience. Could you expand upon that?**

A: Yeah, so part of it goes back to my argument that it's these transnational connections that activate attention to human rights, and it's hard to have those experiences if you're nineteen and at a university. But also, for many young Americans, and particularly young male Americans, the issues of the day were the Civil Rights Movement and Vietnam. So I think, if you were being called up to serve in Vietnam and you disagreed with the war, your activism may have been elsewhere rather than, say, human rights abuses in South Korea. And I think that's understandable. So I think that's part of the reason that we don't see as much activism by young people or... overlap with some of the other political and social movements of the time.