

Amnesty Infomercial

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WHEN Amnesty International was formed in 1961, its charter sought a nobler future for mankind. It called on nations to adopt three desiderata: the end to torture and the death penalty; prompt and fair trials for political prisoners; and the release of all prisoners of conscience who had not condoned violence. In the midst of the Cold War, Amnesty was a beacon to prisoners of conscience languishing in the Gulags of the Soviet empire and the work camps of Communist China. It was an institution whose time had come.

Today, its time has passed. Rather than attack real abuses of human rights, it has lost sight of its original objectives. It has become, like Greenpeace, the Wilderness Society and ACOSS, yet another self-perpetuating bureaucracy. More effort is directed into recruiting new members, whose subscription fees pay for this entrenched class of *apparatchiks*, than in exposing real violations of human rights.

The decline in standards has become especially apparent over the last five years. The collapse of the Soviet empire has deprived Amnesty of most of its *raison d'être*. In its place is an active campaign against free, democratic nations.

At the heart of the problem is Amnesty's faulty methodology. Amnesty does not rank countries according to their human rights record. It contends that even one abuse is worthy of their censure. But this is grossly misleading. A nation that uses systematic imprisonment, torture and murder of dissidents is far more reprehensible than one that simply has uncomfortable prison conditions.

For example, in Amnesty's 1999 *Annual Report on the Internet*, 165 lines of text were devoted to criticism of Australia's human rights. In contrast, the Communist dictatorship of North Korea had only 83 lines of critical text. Yet there is simply no comparison between the human rights records of Australia and North Korea.

Amnesty counters this by saying that it 'relies on access to verifiable information about human rights violations'. If there is more criticism directed against free, democratic nations, then it is because there is more independent information available. Amnesty refuses to condemn North Korea,

because most of the human rights violations that we know about have been documented by South Korean intelligence debriefs of defectors. Amnesty contends that this is not an impartial source and, hence, uses none of the information obtained.

Herein lies the second and most serious methodological error. Under Amnesty's guidelines, a nation that is grossly brutal and repressive, which never released dissidents, which never acknowledged their existence and which prohibited any independent domestic assessment of its human rights, would receive almost no criticism from Amnesty. A nation that is free and open, but had minor infractions, would receive much more criticism. Such is the ludicrous position that has seen South Korea receive eight times the amount of negative publicity from Amnesty in the last 5 years, than has North Korea.

This leads to the third error in Amnesty's methodology—trial by press release. The accompanying box demonstrates the consequences of these problems. The material is a summary of all critical press releases put out by Amnesty over the period 1995–1998 inclusive. Given the flaws in Amnesty's procedures, it is not surprising to find that in direct regional comparisons, the free, democratic nations fare much worse than the dictatorships.

Nation	Criticisms
Free, democratic USA	49
Closed, despotic Cuba	12
Free, democratic Israel	43
Hamas terrorists	5
Free, democratic South Korea	49
Closed, despotic North Korea	3
Free, democratic Malaysia	15
Closed, despotic Vietnam	3
Free, democratic Turkey	47
Closed, despotic Iraq	2
Free, democratic Egypt	12
Closed, despotic Libya	3
Free, democratic Pakistan	12
Closed, despotic Syria	6
Free, democratic Australia	20
Most countries in Africa	<3

Source: www.amnesty.org.au/news/index.html

Amnesty counters that the actual numbers do not matter, and that the abuse of human rights is not a matter of quantity. But the trouble with that is that magnitude does matter. If a person hears that Amnesty has put out 20 criticisms of Australia and only three criticisms of North Korea, then what are we to make of this fact?

Of course, such a policy helps to play into the hands of the entrenched Amnesty bureaucracy. Most people simply do not care about human rights abuses in distant countries. Members of the media with a Left and/or sensationalist tilt are, however, likely to enthusiastically report any 'independent' criticism of its own (or friendly) government's human rights record.

The Aboriginal deaths-in-custody issue is a good example of Amnesty's trend towards fatuous irrelevance. Let us leave aside the fact that Amnesty has no charter to investigate what are essentially suicides by people who have been charged with (non-political) criminal acts. Amnesty knows that this is a 'trendy' domestic political issue. Therefore, an Amnesty report on this subject is certain to receive widespread media coverage—and much more publicity for Amnesty than if it were to put out a hundred press releases on the abuses taking place in North Korea or Cuba or Vietnam.

Moreover, when impressionable young Westerners hear about human rights 'violations' in their own country, then the incentive to 'do something'—for example, pay a membership subscription to Amnesty—is much greater.

Thus Amnesty's secretariat skews its reportage to serving the end of building up its own membership base. This is, of course, something that it is incapable of doing in countries where real human rights violations occur. They then dress up the biased result in the *faux* morality of only commenting upon 'independent, verifiable information'.

In fact, what Amnesty does today is an utter travesty of its charter. It deliberately sets out to demonize the very societies that have been the strongest proponents of human rights, while downplaying the real culprits.

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