

The following text may be printed, copy/pasted, or downloaded and emailed.

## Wrong on Human Rights

Editorial  
New York Times  
January 10, 2006

For months, we have been arguing that the Bush administration has generally the right substantive agenda for badly needed changes at the United Nations, but that Ambassador John Bolton's scorched-earth alternative to diplomacy is undermining the prospects for successfully achieving these reforms. Now it turns out that our criticism has been only half-right in at least one crucial area -- in restoring the United Nations' moral authority on human rights by excluding egregious violators from a new human rights monitoring council. Mr. Bolton's latest proposal on this gets the substance wrong as well.

The problem with the current discredited Human Rights Commission is that its members are chosen by a system of regional rotation that fails to take into account the actual human rights performance of prospective members. The reform was originally intended to change that, by requiring the approval of at least two-thirds of the 191 member countries to win a seat on the new council.

Mr. Bolton wants to defeat the whole purpose of that reform by automatically assuring seats for all five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council -- regardless of their own human rights records.

That would, of course, guarantee a seat every year for the United States, despite what other countries may think of Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib, the death penalty, or Washington's practice of secretly flying suspects to be interrogated in countries that countenance torture. It would also guarantee a seat every year to China, one of the world's most notorious human rights violators, and to Russia, whose own human rights record is less than stellar and which has never hesitated to gloss over the human rights abuses of dictatorships it considers friendly, like Cuba, for example.

There are plenty of areas where special weight is, and should be, given to the Security Council's big five powers, which also happen to be world's five legally recognized nuclear weapons states. Most of these areas, appropriately, are in the Security Council's special domain of war, peace and sanctions.

But the issue of human rights is very different. It is not about recognizing the interests of the powerful. It is about protecting the interests of the powerless. It would be nice if all of the big five could be trusted to do this. But not all of them can, either at home or internationally. Some of the people most in need of a strong U.N. voice on human rights live under tyrannies that have carefully cultivated Chinese or Russian favor: Cuba, Iran, Myanmar, Uzbekistan and Zimbabwe, to name a few.

Although Ambassador Bolton has repeatedly made it clear that he has little use or respect for the United Nations and would be happy to see the United States walk away from it, we have never questioned his commitment to reform its most dysfunctional institutions. But his behavior on this issue leaves us questioning his judgment, and that of his bosses in the State Department and the White House.