FOREWORD

Our nation is founded on bedrock beliefs in individual freedom and individual rights. In the early days of the Republic, of course, many basic rights, including the right to vote, were limited to white male property owners. But over more than two centuries, our concept of and support for human rights has broadened both at home and, increasingly, abroad. The effort to expand and defend these rights continues to this day. The story of the progress we have made, however, is not a straightforward tale of constant improvement but rather one that more often involves two steps forward, one step back.

The historical unevenness of America's commitment to rights may be especially relevant today when the nation is a prime target for terrorists and our willingness to maintain and extend human, civil, and legal rights is being tested in new ways. In fact, when the history of the current "American Era" is written, we can only hope that if anything is remembered as truly exceptional about our nation it will be our abiding commitment to basic human rights in the face of extraordinary dangers.

The Century Foundation has long believed in the importance of examining events beyond America's borders. During World War II, the Twentieth Century Fund, as we were then named, under the leadership of Evans Clark, joined many other nongovernmental organizations in activities aimed at promoting human rights and establishing the United Nations. After the war, we supported

research and writing on economic, social, and political conditions in many countries across the globe.

Our interest in other nations did not begin to focus on human rights issues and policies aimed at dealing with them until later. Starting in the late 1980s, we backed research that resulted in books looking at the role of the United Nations, such as Rosemary Righter's *Utopia Lost: The United Nations and World Order*; reports examining related issues, such as Alan Dowty's *Closed Borders: The Contemporary Assault on Freedom of Movement*; explorations of our nation's attempts to deal with the problems inherent in achieving more humanitarian societies, such as Howard J. Wiarda's *The Democratic Revolution in Latin America* and Tony Smith's *America's Mission: The United States and the Worldwide Struggle for Democracy in the Twentieth Century*; and studies of the problems created by ethnic conflict, such as David Callahan's *Unwinnable Wars: American Power and Ethnic Conflict*, as well as a series of reports on preventive action that could ease conflicts between groups, which culminated in Barnett Rubin's *Blood on the Doorstep: The Politics of Preventive Action*. We also set up a distinguished international task force to examine what steps needed to be taken to ensure adherence to the international rule of law in situations such as that in Bosnia; the result of that effort was the publication of *Making Justice Work: The Report of the Task Force on Apprehending Indicted War Criminals*.

This volume extends the tradition of our support for work on these issues. Kathryn Sikkink, a professor of political science at the University of Minnesota, traces the modern history of human rights, especially as it emerged from the determination among many people to make a better world after World War II. She reports extensively on the place of human rights concerns during the construction of the United Nations. While she provides a knowledgeable global perspective on U.S. policy and human rights, a considerable portion of the book is focused on her specialty, U.S. relations with Latin America. In the second part of the book, for example, she demonstrates how intellectual rigor can be brought to the task—often seen as highly subjective—of evaluating the success or failure of human rights policies. Her case studies of several Central and South American nations also provide specific examples of how this analytical approach can be useful in practice.

Sikkink has spent much of her career examining these issues, and her understanding and insight are apparent in this book. She tells the epic tale of the emergence of human rights issues in Washington policy circles especially well, reciting battles lost and won along the way to the modern status of rights as a critical part of U.S. foreign policy. This history would be known to every schoolchild if we paid as much attention to the struggles for human rights in the hemisphere as we did to the wars and other violent campaigns conducted

over the same time span. There are heroes (and villains) aplenty in this story, some immediately recognizable, such as Eleanor Roosevelt, and others probably known only to specialists, such as Hernan Santa Cruz of Chile and Donald Fraser, a leader in Congress and then in the executive branch.

In the current era, as Sikkink's analysis makes clear, while human rights have a powerful legitimacy in international affairs, U.S. administrations frequently have chosen courses of action with troubling implications. She documents, for example, the recent history of U.S. rejection of international treaties "with teeth." In other words, while her book is generally replete with great successes for human rights advocates, it also makes clear how much more needs to be done.

Kathryn Sikkink's topic is at the heart of one of America's self-proclaimed goals for itself. And, her book should provoke self-appraisal that is especially necessary as we struggle with the threat of terrorism. We need to recognize that it may be among the most dangerous self-delusions to believe that one's own people are somehow above human failings. We are all too human. And, we need to be brave, most of all, in addressing our own shortcomings. In the long run, we shall certainly be a stronger people for having, even under pressure, sustained the courage of our convictions.

On behalf of the Trustees of The Century Foundation, I commend Kathryn Sikkink for bringing her lifetime of knowledge and commitment to this important topic.

RICHARD C. LEONE, PRESIDENT
The Century Foundation
May 2004