

# Taking a Stand: The Evolution of Human Rights

*Palgrave Macmillan, ISBN-13:978-0230112339, by Juan Méndez and Marjory Wentworth*

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In this book the authors set into the world an authoritative and incisive examination of torture, detention, exile, armed conflict, and genocide, whose urgency is even greater in the wake of recent disastrous policies. The book offers a new strategy for holding governments accountable for their actions, providing an essential conscription for diverse human rights groups to work together to realise their importance and work towards achieving their goals and carry out to effect change

Méndez has experienced human rights abuse first hand as the result of his work with political prisoners. In the late 1970s he was arrested and tortured by the Argentinean military dictatorship. After over a year he was released and moved to the United States, continuing his lifelong fight for the rights of others. The lessons Méndez has gleaned over the decades can help us learn so much with our current struggles against torture.

Méndez's testimony is not only a personal history of someone who has devoted his life to defend human dignity but also a

thoughtful perspective on the evolution of the human rights idea. It is a stimulating account of someone who has spent all his life in the human rights movement, as a militant lawyer, a war crimes investigator, a UN expert and an academic. The book shows the rise of the human rights movement; from the fight against the brutal Latin American dictatorships in the 1970s to the hopes and doubts of the Arab Spring.

Méndez has the authority to talk about human right as he has first-hand experience of human rights violations. He eloquently writes about his arrest, his imprisonment and torture by the military dictatorship in Argentina for his work with political prisoners. It is a well-known fact that between 1976 and 1983, around 30,000 people were abducted, tortured, and many finally killed. He was one of the survivors who during his detention decided he wanted to continue to pursue his objectives, defending the rights of those whose human rights were violated.

In this book the authors write a penetrating perceptive examination of torture, detention, exile and conflict as urgent issues that need greater understanding from governments and politicians.

The dynamic of the writing relies on the fact that despite the horrors Méndez lived at the hands of the Argentinean regime, he has turned his life into an inspiration, dedicat-

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ing it to defend the right of others and make freedom and justice for all his business. The strength of his convictions comes together with a deep sense of humanity. His criticisms, his condemnations and his admonitions of torturers and other forms of human right violations, indeed, his dissatisfactions and criticism of democratic leaders' collusions, collaborations, connivances and or participations with human rights abusers, are without any dispensations.

The book is educational for all involved in the human rights campaign, as the authors provide the arguments against torture and for an international movement for justice for all and for prevention of torture and other forms of human rights violations. They emphasise the importance of solidarity to be effective in our work and to implement the basic principle of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as well as to prevent failure in a whole host of different phenomena that has been coming to justify some types of torture under the ethos of security, which in my view is a direct attack on the principle of the Universal Human Right declaration. Ethics become blurry and violent and segregation of different faith or ethnic groups will increase, for their difference, for their extremism, for their unwillingness to integrate, for their Islamic faith, for undermining national values and just for their presence. Defending human rights then involves fighting a rear-guard action, as it were, to protect what are considerable human right achievements by education and dialogue. It means taking on seriously, not just those who march provocatively through our towns in defence of, but also the sections of the media which day after day find ways of problematizing difference and the politicians, policy makers and governments.

This book contains all the arguments, information and context, historical and

contemporary, needed for the battle against torture and other forms of human rights violations. Méndez's comprehensive accounts on his experiences makes a very accessible educational tool for anyone needing to understand the parameters of torture and the possibilities for resisting it.

Méndez set a challenge for us which lies in creating the psychological climate of opinion and to develop a common mentality that rejects torture, war, genocide, ethnic cleansing and terrorism as solutions for any type of conflicts. His life is testimony to the possibilities. From psychological perspectives it shows how we individually and collectively can challenge the way in which States use and defend torture and how to mobilise our responses to have maximum influence on these States. Those justifications for crimes against humanity such as torture may influence even those who have respect for human rights and influence individuals' subjectivity. Learning to acknowledge and displace the violence in a harmless manner can help to address fears and anxieties of others and of difference by allowing people to relate and identify with each other. This can create a real desire to live together in harmony rather than despair. What seems to be needed is ensuring an intact, integrated object world, a world in which people are able to contain their fears, hatred, and anxieties, without the need for acting out and hurting/torturing others. We must learn to link our internal and external worlds so as to contain our own and others' fears and anxieties, thus encouraging an ethics of mutual containment of our fears and hatred.

Méndez testimony is educational for governments and civilians, providing a potential mechanism for greater accountability and offers a visible sense of justice for individuals who have experienced torture. In so doing the governments can help those who have

been tortured to move on from their experiences and regain their integrity and dignity and once again become a positive member of the society where they live.

The UN Convention against Torture was not meant to be merely a theoretical text setting out theoretical rights. States are obliged to make the rights set out in the Convention practical and effective, and that is a very strong message that Juan Méndez is passing on in his incredible testimony *Taking a Stand, The Evolution of Human Rights*.