

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights



With the horrors of World War II fresh in their minds, the members of the newly formed United Nations came together to agree on the rights that belong to all members of the human family. These are rights we have without regard to nationality, race, gender, or religion. They are not the gift of any government; they cannot rightly be taken away by any ruler. It took two years for the first United Nations Commission on Human Rights, chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt, to produce the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It was adopted in 1948, and stands as the first comprehensive, internationally approved statement of rights. Here is an abbreviated form of the document Mrs. Roosevelt hoped would become “the international Magna Carta.”

[Plus a few facts—for better or worse—to help show how the United States is doing.]

1. All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.

[The U.S. was founded with a declaration “that all men are created equal.”]

2. We are entitled to all the rights and freedoms in this Declaration.

[Congress has ratified half of the items set forth in this document.]

3. We have the right to life, liberty and security of person.

[The Declaration of Independence says certain rights are unalienable, “that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.”]

4. No one shall be held in slavery or servitude.

[The 13th Amendment makes slavery and involuntary servitude illegal in the U.S., except as punishment for crime.]

5. No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading punishment.

[The Military Commissions Act of 2006 permits any interrogation method that does not cause “extreme” pain or other extreme injuries.]

6. We have the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law.

[In 2003, about 680 suspected terrorists from 42 countries were held at Guantanamo, without access to courts.]

7. We are equal before the law.

[Blacks and Hispanics constitute about 60 percent of all state and federal prisoners.]

8. We have the right to a remedy for acts violating our rights.

[The Alien Tort Claims Act allows foreign victims of rights abuses to sue perpetrators who are present in the U.S.]

9. No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile.

[Since Sept. 11, 2001, at least 70 men living in the U.S.—all Muslim but one—have been placed in indefinite detention without charges.]

10. We are entitled to a fair and public hearing by an impartial tribunal.

[People detained under the Military Commissions Act have no right to challenge their detention in court.]

11. Everyone charged with a crime is presumed innocent until proved guilty.

[The prosecution bears the burden of proving guilt in U.S. criminal trials.]

12. No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attacks upon his honor and reputation.

[The National Security Agency has been collecting the phone records of millions of Americans, using data provided by telephone companies.]

