

Tapestries: Interwoven voices of local and global identities

Volume 13
Issue 1 *Bury the Empire: Cultivating Resistance*

Article 3

2024

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Keywords:

Human Rights, United States, Israel, Foreign Policy, Barack Obama, Kamala Harris, Manifest Destiny, Civil Rights

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Recommended Citation

Noor, Ikran J. (2024) "Challenging the American Empire: A History of Hypocrisy and Double Standards in Human Rights," *Tapestries: Interwoven voices of local and global identities*: Vol. 13: Iss. 1, Article 3. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/tapestries/vol13/iss1/3>

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Challenging the American Empire: A History of Hypocrisy and Double Standards in Human Rights

Ikran Jama Noor

Abstract

Despite having played a significant role in the development and continuation of an international standard of human rights, the United States has a history of hypocrisy and double standards when it comes to protecting human rights both at home and abroad. This essay examines the connection between the United States and human rights in three key parts. Part I examines the concepts of manifest destiny and American exceptionalism that is prevalent in American society and how those concepts influence the United States engagement with foreign countries on human rights. Part II then, through the case studies of Israel and Afghanistan, looks at the ways human rights has been used as political football in American politics to further the American agenda. In part III, the intersections of race, politics and human rights is explored through the context of President Barack Obama and Vice President Kamala Harris. The section further explores the hypocrisy and double standards that are prevalent in both Obama and Harris's administrations whether that be in domestic or foreign approaches to human rights policy. The piece concludes by looking at the implications of US foreign human rights policy and what the trend of backsliding human rights means for the future.

Keywords: Human Rights, United States, Israel, Foreign Policy, Barack Obama, Kamala Harris, Manifest Destiny, Civil Rights

Introduction

The United States has one of the worst records in the world, among Western liberal democracies, when it comes to the ratification of international treaties on human rights issues. The United States has only, out of 18 international human rights treaties, ratified five. The US has failed to ratify the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (1966); the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979); the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989); and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2007), including the failure to sign nor ratify the Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (1990); and the Convention on the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (2007), among many others.¹ The United States downright refusal to ratify and be a party to these international treaties demonstrates the hypocrisy of US foreign human rights policy. How can we possibly begin to criticize and hold foreign governments to human rights standards when we ourselves refuse to engage with major multilateral international human rights treaties? The United States engagement with human rights treaties is one of many ways that hypocrisy and double standards are pervasive within American foreign human rights policy. As long as the US continues to abuse its influential power on the international stage and politicize human rights for its own gain, it will be incredibly difficult for there to be an American foreign human rights policy that will be viewed as credible both domestically and abroad. Unless and until the US government recognizes the glaring hypocrisy and double standards that permeate our foreign human rights policy, our foreign human rights policy will continue to be shamelessly misused, threatening the American empire both abroad and at home.

Manifest Destiny and US Human Rights Policy

¹ United Nations Human Rights Office of The High Commissioner, "Status of Ratification Interactive Dashboard," accessed December 1, 2023, <https://indicators.ohchr.org/>

American hegemony and exceptionalism, though at the forefront and pervasive in a post-WWII and Cold War era, have their origins in manifest destiny, the belief that America occupies a special place among the countries of the world. In American culture, this permeates frequently in presidential discourse and in Hollywood films through expressions like “God bless the United States of America,” “City upon a Hill,” and “the greatest country on earth,” among many others. This ideology, which laid the crucial foundation for territorial expansion from the thirteen colonies in 1776 to imperial power,² is highly present, if not central, in both domestic and foreign US human rights policy. Some scholars and historians would disagree with the categorization of the United States as an empire, but the United States is and has always been an empire.³ The way that American imperialism functions has changed over time. The “imperial” can be defined in various ways, but what is central, if not foundational, is the asymmetrical power relationship. Therefore, empire is not a single thing but rather a complex and ever-changing set of unequal relationships. The empire, or hegemony, of the US can be seen in a number of ways. From political to economic, the United States has abused the hegemony it holds on the international stage. With political hegemony, the US has long attempted, and in some cases succeeded, in molding other countries and the world order with its values and political system in the name of promoting democracy and human rights. From practicing a Neo-Monroe doctrine in Latin America to orchestrating the Arab Spring, there are multiple instances in which the US has interfered with other countries' internal affairs.⁴ The US has continually exercised double standards on international rules by placing its self-interest above all else. This can best be seen in the 2018 announcement that the US would withdraw from the UN Human Rights Council, citing the organization's “bias” against Israel.⁵ In the case of military hegemony, the US

² Greenberg, Amy S., 'US Expansionism during the Nineteenth Century: “Manifest Destiny”', in Peter Fibiger Bang, C. A. Bayly, and Walter Scheidel (eds), *The Oxford World History of Empire: Volume Two: The History of Empires* (New York, 2021; online edn, Oxford Academic, 23 Dec. 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197532768.003.0037>, accessed 22 Dec. 2023.

³ Tyrone Groh, “Is America an Empire?,” War on the Rocks, November 18, 2015, <https://warontherocks.com/2015/08/is-america-an-empire/>.

⁴ Scarfi, Juan Pablo. "Denaturalizing the Monroe Doctrine: The Rise of Latin American Legal Anti-imperialism in the Face of the Modern US and Hemispheric Redefinition of the Monroe Doctrine." *Leiden Journal of International Law* 33, no. 3 (2020): 541-55. doi:10.1017/S092215652000031X.

⁵ Gardiner Harris, “Trump Administration Withdraws U.S. from U.N. Human Rights Council,” *The New York Times*, June 19, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/19/us/politics/trump-israel-palestinians-human-rights.html>.

has adopted appalling methods of war. It has led to coups and proxy wars from the Middle East and Asia to Africa. The US continues to increase its military spending as it wages violent, and sometimes downright disproportionate, violence against foreign countries. US military hegemony has caused a number of humanitarian atrocities, with interventions like the war on terror causing millions of lives lost or, in the case of Iraq, where the exposure of torture in Abu Ghraib brought embarrassment for the country.⁶ These are just some of the ways that the United States has utilized its hegemony to push for its interests. In the human rights and humanitarianism sectors, this is even more clear. Despite employing its imperial influence to play a significant role in the creation of the liberal world order as well as international bodies like the United Nations and international treaties, when it comes to human rights, the United States acts as if international law applies to other countries but itself. This is best demonstrated by the invasion of Iraq, which was neither in self-defense against an armed attack nor waged with a clear mandate from the UN Security Council.⁷ The quote, “When the president does it, that means that it is not illegal, by definition,”⁸ said by Richard Nixon in a series of 1977 interviews with British journalist David Frost, when substituting the United States for president, embodies the United States role and positionality in the human rights sector. American exceptionalism, rooted in American society since before the inception of the United States with manifest destiny and more recently in a post-WWII and Cold War era, is central to the United States approach to human rights. As an empire and global power, the United States has not only championed and led the international liberal world order but strategically used its position on the world stage to avoid accountability for gross human rights violations entrenched in hypocrisy. With this influence, it has taken on the position of being the world's police, policing other nations for violations of human rights, but the question then becomes: if the United States is the world's police, then who polices the police?

⁶ Marcy Strauss, "The Lessons on Abu Ghraib," *Ohio State Law Journal* 66, no. 6 (2005): 1269-1310

⁷ Ewen MacAskill and Julian Borger, "Iraq War Was Illegal and Breached UN Charter, Says Annan," *The Guardian*, May 8, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/sep/16/iraq.iraq>.

⁸ Helen Dewar, "President Isn't above the Law, Nixon Insists," *Washington Post*, June 5, 1977, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1977/06/05/president-isnt-above-the-law-nixon-insists/71923838-492f-49d7-921f-0add6743501e/>.

Human Rights as Political Means

The deployment of the language of human rights as a political means has changed in American history throughout the twenty-first century. The politicalization of human rights globally has allowed governments like the United States to twist or bend their foreign policy to further political stances, solidify economic progress, and establish control through geopolitics. This is best exemplified through the case study of Afghanistan and the question of Israel-Palestine. In Afghanistan, during the George W. Bush administration, the goal of promoting and protecting the human rights of Afghan women was used as an element of overall US foreign policy to invade Afghanistan in the war on terror. This symbolic use of Afghan women and girls to justify and gather public support for the US's invasion of Afghanistan could not be any more clear than in Laura Bush's November 16th, 2001, radio address to the nation condemning "the severe repression against women in Afghanistan."⁹ She declared, "The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women."¹⁰ However, war does not bring about the protection of women's human rights; if anything, it brings about unique and severe cases of targeted violence, like wartime sexual violence. Wartime sexual violence has a long history in Afghan culture, where the sexual integrity of women is paramount to family honor.¹¹ As a result, rape and other forms of sexual violence are considered attacks on both the individual and the family as a whole. This ideological stance, as similarly seen in Bosnia and Kosovo, was what led to rape being considered a crime against humanity under international law.¹² The United States, in its war on terror against Afghanistan, directly worked with militant groups and warlords that actively used rape and other forms of sexual violence as a strategy of war. For example, General Rashid Dostum, an Uzbeki warlord and ally to the US in the War on Terror in

⁹ Ahmad, Aisha. "Afghan Women: The State of Legal Rights and Security." *Policy Perspectives* 3, no. 1 (2006): 25–41. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42909150>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ahmad, Lida. "Sexual Violence in War and Post War: Afghanistan." (2013).

¹² Unlu, Muge Demirkir. "Rape as a Political Tool and as a Weapon of War." *International Journal on Rule of Law, Transitional Justice and Human Rights* 9, no. 9 (2018): 23-34.

Afghanistan, boasted about conducting systematic rape campaigns and slaughtering villagers.¹³ The United States war against Afghanistan did not bring about the protection of women's rights, and two decades later, with the withdrawal of US troops in 2021, women's and girls rights in Afghanistan remain largely unchanged.¹⁴

While the US co-opted the language of women's human rights to justify the Afghanistan war, the language of human rights is nearly completely ignored with Israel. With the Biden administration, the status quo, as it relates to the case of Israel-Palestine, is denying the human rights violations being committed by its ally and standing behind them regardless. The hypocrisy and double standards of United States human rights foreign policy have never been so clear in the 21st century as they are in the current Israel-Palestine conflict. The Biden administration has made its stance clear by backing Israel's "right to self-defense," despite the rising death toll of Palestinians.¹⁵ Looking at the case of Israel from the US government's perspective, the fuss is not about the American support of Jewish people but rather the government's economic and geopolitical interests in the region. In a resurfaced video, President Joe Biden, then Senator of Delaware, states, "If we look at the Middle East, I think it's about time we stop, those of us who support, as most of us do Israel in this body, apologizing for our support for Israel. There's no apology to be made. None. It is the best three-billion-dollar investment we make. Whether or not an Israel, the United States of America would have to invent an Israel to protect her interests in the region. The United States would have to go out and invent an Israel."¹⁶ Joe Biden's speech on the floor of Congress in 1986 explicitly reveals US policy on Israel-Palestine and the unwavering support for

¹³ Ahmad, "Afghan Women," 34.

¹⁴ "In Focus: Women in Afghanistan One Year after the Taliban Takeover | UN Women – Headquarters," UN Women – Headquarters, August 15, 2022, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/in-focus/2022/08/in-focus-women-in-afghanistan-one-year-after-the-taliban-takeover>.

¹⁵ White House, "Remarks by President Biden on the United States' Response to Hamas's Terrorist Attacks Against Israel and Russia's Ongoing Brutal War Against Ukraine," The White House, October 20, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/10/20/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-united-states-response-to-hamass-terrorist-attacks-against-israel-and-russias-ongoing-brutal-war-against-ukraine/>.

¹⁶ "User Clip: Joe Biden: Were There Not an Israel the USA Would Have to Invent an Israel to Protect Her Interest in the Region.," C-SPAN.org, May 11, 2021, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4962369/user-clip-joe-biden-israel-usa-invent-israel-protect-interest-region>.

Israel in the US nearly three decades later, despite the glaring human rights violations committed.

The usage of human rights as a political means in the United States exposes the blatant and glaring hypocrisy and double standards that permeate US foreign human rights policy. The case study of Afghanistan and Israel, within the context of the twenty-first century, provides an insight into the ways human rights issues are manipulated for political means. In the US, regardless of the political affiliation of the White House administration, human rights issues are consistently, nearly bipartisan in nature, manipulated for political means.

Obama & Harris: Race, Politics, and Human Rights

How much does race matter in politics? By winning his 2008 presidential election, Barack Hussein Obama sealed his legacy—a black man would occupy the White House for the first time in American history. His 2008 election triumph came at a time when race was at the forefront of American life and was also misinterpreted as an act of national atonement for the country's sins of slavery and segregation. During his time as president, Obama would tackle race-related issues impacting the African American community. He would go on to pass the Affordable Healthcare Act, or Obamacare, which would cut the black uninsured rate by a third, visit a federal prison, and reverse the rate of black incarceration by commuting sentences, among many others. Despite some of these progressive achievements for the black community, Obama was also very public about distancing himself from black America. As he has put it, "I'm not the president of Black America. I'm the president of the United States of America."¹⁷ For many, the hope of having a black president meant having someone who would support and represent marginalized communities—a hope that was undoubtedly shattered. With Obama, it could possibly be the case that, in attempting to avoid the perception of racial favoritism, he ended up representing minorities no better, if not

¹⁷ Haines, Pavielle E., Tali Mendelberg, and Bennett Butler. "'I'm Not the President of Black America': Rhetorical versus Policy Representation." *Perspectives on Politics* 17, no. 4 (2019): 1038-058. doi:10.1017/S1537592719000963.

worse, than his white counterparts. While his domestic policies, especially in relation to race, were somewhat notable, his foreign policy on human rights was downright deplorable. As he was painting himself as a neutral arbiter with domestic politics, his approach to foreign policy was anything but. Similarly to other American presidents, US relations with Israel trumped human rights debate at the United Nations during Obama's administration. When the UN human rights council appointed the independent Goldstone commission to investigate charges of war crimes against both Israel and Hamas during fighting in Gaza, Obama teamed with Israel in deemphasizing the issue.¹⁸ In his presidency, Obama continued to back Israel when UN human rights issues intersected with the Middle East, at times prioritizing Israel over a balanced and concentrated focus on human rights.

Aside from the question of Israel, the Obama administration's approach to foreign policy was painted as entirely different from that of his predecessor. Taking the White House after the experience of two devastating and costly wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, Obama's approach to foreign policy centered on non-intervention and moved away from the Bush administration's belief that the US had to be able to project force overseas. The catch was that Obama's approach to foreign policy was not non-interventionist; in fact, it was eerily similar to his predecessors because it was not the objective of US foreign policy that had changed but rather the means chosen to achieve it. Rather than projecting force overseas in the interest of the US with the use of American forces, the Obama administration almost exclusively practiced surrogate warfare.¹⁹ Through the Obama administration, the burden of warfare was delegated in various forms to state and non-state surrogates. The US provided military assistance to a number of Arab countries in the Middle East, from Egypt to Jordan. The United States also played a more direct role in certain conflicts by deploying employed non-state actors as surrogates on the ground. In Syria, the US trained, funded, and equipped units of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and other moderate rebel groups.²⁰ In Yemen, Obama

¹⁸ Forsythe, David P. "US Foreign Policy and Human Rights: Situating Obama." *Human Rights Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (2011): 767–89. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23016000>.

¹⁹ ANDREAS KRIEG, Externalizing the burden of war: the Obama Doctrine and US foreign policy in the Middle East, *International Affairs*, Volume 92, Issue 1, January 2016, Pages 97–113, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12506>

²⁰ Nancy A. Youssef, 'Syrian rebels describe US-backed training in Qatar', PBS Frontline, 26 May 2014.

intervened in the civil war on the side of Saudi Arabia, which has caused noticeable effects, the worst being the severe humanitarian crisis that is still ongoing in the country. Another major surrogate for the United States in the Middle East was technology. In an effort to avoid putting troops on the ground, an issue that brought forth vast outcry from the American people during the Bush administration, the Obama administration heavily relied on air power. Under his administration, he also extended the armed drone program, which allowed for drone warfare to be instrumental in the United States involvement in the Middle East. These key military, security, and political factors are essentially what led to the Obama administration's human rights violations and poor human rights policy in the Middle East. The drone program, although it began under the Bush administration, was dramatically expanded under President Obama. According to the Obama administration's official numbers, the US killed 2,436 people in 473 counterterrorism strikes in Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, and Libya between January 2009 and the end of 2015.²¹ Of those, between 64 and 116 were civilians, although the independent non-profit Bureau of Investigative Journalism estimated the deaths of civilians to be six times higher than the Obama administration's estimate.²² A number of these drone strikes violate international humanitarian law and international human rights, with the vast majority of them killing civilians. The hypocrisy of human rights policy during the Obama administration was evident during Hu Jintao's visit to the White House, during which Obama referred publicly to Beijing's poor record in human rights,²³ despite the Obama administration actively using drones and surrogate warfare that continued to result in vast civilian deaths. President Obama, a liberal and the first black president of the United States, conducted vast military action in the Middle East and ignored flagrant violations of human rights. His actions in the Middle East were worse

²¹ Jennifer Williams, "From Torture to Drone Strikes: The Disturbing Legal Legacy Obama Is Leaving for Trump," *Vox*, January 11, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2016/11/14/13577464/obama-farewell-speech-torture-drones-nsa-surveillance-trump>.

²² Jack Serle, "Obama Drone Casualty Numbers a Fraction of Those Recorded by the Bureau," *The Bureau of Investigative Journalism (En-GB)*, February 22, 2017, <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/stories/2016-07-01/obama-drone-casualty-numbers-a-fraction-of-those-recorded-by-the-bureau>.

²³ Ewen MacAskill and Tania Branigan, "Barack Obama Risks China's Ire with Human Rights Remarks," *The Guardian*, November 26, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jan/19/barack-obama-china-human-rights>.

than those of his white and conservative counterparts. Why? The perception would be that Obama, as a black man, would approach foreign human rights policy differently—the same perception that black Americans held before he shattered it. Throughout his presidency, in both terms, Obama faced claims, mostly from conservatives, of secretly being muslim or muslim-adjacent due to his religious-sounding name and the ethnicity of his father. Whether this claim or the perception of this claim impacted his administration's approach to foreign human rights policy, particularly in the Middle East or the war on terror, is something we will never know. What we do know is that Obama consistently portrayed himself as neutral and as wanting a non-racial and one-America state—a portrayal that was necessary in order to win the white vote. The positionality of representing minorities, politics, and overall engagement with human rights are a few factors that draw parallels with President Barack Obama and Vice President Kamala Harris.

The hypocrisy and double standards that existed in the Obama administration also exist in the Biden and Harris administrations, both domestically and internationally. Vice President Kamala Harris truly exemplifies that hypocrisy. Harris, similarly to Obama, represents a trilogy of firsts: the first female vice president, the first black woman, and the first woman of South Asian heritage. Despite her extensive trilogy of firsts, Harris is also disappointing in her failure to support or represent marginalized communities, and unlike Obama, her failure in this predates her position in the White House. Throughout her campaign for the presidency and even throughout her appointment to vice president, Harris consistently centered her identity and personal heritage as a black and Asian woman, the former being the most emphasized. Harris centered her college experience at Howard as being transformative to her identity as a black woman, stating, “I became an adult at Howard University. [It] very directly influenced and reinforced—equally important—my sense of being and meaning and reasons for being.”²⁴ Howard University, a sort of crown jewel of historically black colleges and universities, is known for teaching the likes of Toni Morrison, Stokely Carmichael, Amiri Baraka, civil rights activist Vernon Jordan, and Supreme Court

²⁴ Robin Givhan, “Kamala Harris Grew up in a Mostly White World. Then She Went to a Black University in a Black City,” *Washington Post*, January 11, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2021/01/11/kamala-harris-howard-university-black-city/>.

Justice Thurgood Marshall. This is an institution that has taught a generation of civil rights activists and individuals who are fighting the good fight. Except Harris does not fit into that image. She didn't work to be a revolutionary or to upend the system; in fact, she did the complete opposite. Prior to her campaign for the White House, Harris held positions as a prosecutor, the state attorney general for California, and a district attorney for San Francisco. In the late 1960s, a rise in crime led to a number of laws strengthening criminal penalties that drove a surge in the mass incarceration rates of California. Under both Republicans and Democrats, including Kamala Harris, a tough on crime rhetoric flourished in California, with the African-American community being hit the hardest.²⁵ The adoption of three-strike laws in the 1990s and stop and frisk practices eroded public trust in law enforcement and normalized incarceration in low-income communities. Despite her race-baiting tactics and her promise to relieve mass incarceration and correct racial inequalities in the justice system, many black voters were wary of her past, and for good reason. In a number of legal documents received by the prospect, Kamala Harris, while serving as attorney general of California, filed a number of legal motions fighting a 2011 Supreme Court ruling requiring the state to reduce its prison population.²⁶ Harris undermined the court's ruling, with the state almost being held in contempt by the overseeing judicial panel for refusing to release fewer than 5,000 nonviolent offenders, which multiple courts had cleared as presenting no danger to the public as well as no risk of recidivism. A federal court's ruling to release prisoners is a rare event and a remedy of last resort. Due to various criminal laws, California prisons continue to face severe issues, from a lack of space to hold inmates to a lack of medical personnel. The California AG's office appealed the district courts mandate for the state to enact a series of decarceration measures to reduce the state's prison population; however, the Supreme Court, a conservative leaning court at the time, in *Brown v. Plata*²⁷ argued that the California prison system was in violation of the prisoners' eighth amendment rights. The court called for the state to begin decarceration

²⁵ Michael Finnegan, "California's Law-and-Order Past Haunts Kamala Harris - Los Angeles Times," *Los Angeles Times*, February 3, 2021, <https://www.latimes.com/politics/story/2019-10-24/kamala-harris-california-crime>.

²⁶ Alexander Sammon, "How Kamala Harris Fought to Keep Nonviolent Prisoners Locked Up," *The American Prospect*, July 29, 2020, <https://prospect.org/justice/how-kamala-harris-fought-to-keep-nonviolent-prisoners-locked-up/>.

²⁷ *Brown v. Plata*, 563 U.S. 493 (2011).

measures, which Harris's team failed to comply with; in fact, a resurfaced report showed that the state, under Harris's direction, was intending on increasing its prison population. Harris's agenda to fight against the ruling to release low-level offenders ultimately failed, with the state complying to reduce its prison population in 2014.

In addition to her shaky record with domestic human rights, Harris has also, under the Biden White House, displayed hypocrisy and double standards in her approach to foreign human rights. In her recent Africa tour visit to Ghana, Vice President Kamala Harris discussed with Ghana's President Nana Akufo-Addo an anti-LGBTQ bill, "Promotion of Proper Human Sexual Rights and Ghanaian Family Value", that was in front of Ghana's parliament. When asked about her and Biden's administration's commitment to calling out any foreign government that advanced anti-gay legislation or violated human rights, Harris said, "I feel very strongly about the importance of supporting the freedom and supporting the fighting for equality among all people, and that all people be treated equally. I will also say that this is an issue that we consider, and I consider to be a human rights issue, and that will not change."²⁸ Harris' visit not only to Ghana but also to Tanzania and Zambia is a summation of American foreign human rights policy in the global south. The fundamental issue here is not that Ghana or nations in the global south shouldn't be held responsible for passing legislation that does not align with human rights standards, but rather the hypocrisy that exists within our foreign policy. As Kamala Harris is berating African nations for anti-gay legislation, her own house is not in order. In just 2023, 75 anti-LGBTQ laws will have become law in the United States.²⁹ These bills range from denying gender-affirming care to restricting school instructions on sports participation. Rather than vowing to diplomatically work with these countries on addressing anti-LGBTQ sentiment or legislation together, Harris shames them for it. Unfortunately, this hypocrisy and double standard permeate American foreign policy. It is evident in the Russia-Ukraine war, in which American politicians, including President Biden, condemned Russia for violating

²⁸ Justin Gomez and Ella McCarthy, "VP Harris, in Ghana, Addresses Human Rights amid Anti-LGBTQ Efforts in Africa," *ABC News*, March 28, 2023,

<https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/vp-harris-ghana-addresses-human-rights-amid-anti/story?id=98152996>.

²⁹ "From Drag Bans to Sports Restrictions, 75 Anti-LGBTQ Bills Have Become Law in 2023," *NBC News*, December 17, 2023,

<https://www.nbcnews.com/nbc-out/out-politics-and-policy/75-anti-lgbtq-bills-become-law-2023-rcna124250>.

international law while simultaneously aiding and abetting Israel in its war crimes against the Palestinian people. Vice President Kamala Harris's position on Israel is also unique in that she is married to Doug Emhoff, a lawyer and law professor, as well as the first Jewish spouse of a president or vice president. Harris, in the face of Israeli aggression against the Palestinian people, continues to support Israel's military objectives in Gaza. Her positioning on Israel does not align with the congressional black caucus, which recognizes the humanitarian crisis unfolding in Gaza.³⁰ Members of the black caucus have also been facing a multi-million-dollar campaign launched by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) to unseat them for their views in the current conflict.³¹

When it comes down to it, Kamala Harris has not done much, either domestically or abroad, to represent marginalized groups. Since entering the White House, she has been nearly nonexistent to the American public. Both her experience and that of President Barack Obama do not align with those of marginalized groups. They both came from backgrounds where their blackness, whether intentional or not, was suppressed, and it was only in the face of a political career that they began to center that part of themselves. Obama and Harris's politics, familial dynamics, and educational backgrounds, among many other things, do not fit the traditional experience of everyday black people. This begs the decades-old dilemma of race and class. It's true that a hundred years ago, race mattered more than class, but is that still true today? With Obama and Harris, despite both coming from marginalized communities, their politics do not align with these groups. Their activities in office were one disappointment after the other; the perception or the hope that Obama and Harris would represent marginalized communities was shattered. The reality is that regardless of the race of the individual sitting in the White House, at the end of the day, their duty is to uphold and continue the American empire. They are an extension and vessel for the empire, an empire that is built on and maintained through the oppression and suppression of marginalized groups.

³⁰ "Congressional Black Caucus."

³¹ Akela Lacy, "AIPAC Targets Black Democrats — While the Congressional Black Caucus Stays Silent," *The Intercept*, September 21, 2023, <https://theintercept.com/2023/09/21/aipac-cbc-progressive-black-democrats/>.

Conclusion

In the past few decades, human rights, particularly the promotion of human rights, have been declining in the United States. From withdrawing from the UN Human Rights Council in 2018 for its report on extreme poverty, which was critical of the US, to forcing the re-wording of a United Nations resolution on the use of rape as a weapon of war to eliminate language on reproductive and sexual health, the United States has been backsliding and decreasing its role in promoting and upholding international standards of human rights.³² This trend of human rights backsliding is increasingly dangerous for the lives of vulnerable and marginalized communities. It impacts the fundamental tenets of democracy, and the United States approach to human rights, both foreign and domestic, puts the American empire in a dangerous position. Many scholars will argue that Russia and China are the existential threats to the American empire, but truly, it's America and the American people that are the existential threats to American power. As W.E.B. Du Bois put it so eloquently in the NAACP's 1947 petition to the UN, "it is not Russia that threatens the United States so much as Mississippi..."³³ There is no doubt that the American empire will sooner or later fall. They all do. Some of the factors that contributed to the fall of the Roman Empire—economic inequality, overspending on the military, and corruption that undermines our political system, to name a few—are evident in modern-day America. The influence of the American empire abroad is also greatly diminishing, in part due to hypocrisy and double standards in human rights; ultimately, the United States cannot berate foreign governments for human rights violations while committing those very violations. The hypocrisy and double standards displayed by the US must end for the US to promote human rights in other countries with authority and for it to maintain any influence on the international stage.

³² Mapp, S., Gabel, S.G. The Decreasing Role of the USA in Promoting Human Rights. *J. Hum. Rights Soc. Work* 4, 101–102 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41134-019-00100-5>

³³ Berg, Manfred. "Black Civil Rights and Liberal Anticommunism: The NAACP in the Early Cold War." *The Journal of American History* 94, no. 1 (2007): 75–96. <https://doi.org/10.2307/25094777>.