# [Black Lives Matter—for Social Justice, and for America’s Global Role](https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/28839/black-lives-matter-for-social-justice-and-for-america-s-global-role)

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The murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and other black Americans by police, and the sustained protests in their wake, present a test for the United States both at home and abroad. They underscore the structural racism that permeates American society and how far the nation remains from delivering on the Constitution’s promise of equal rights and justice for all. Globally, they threaten America’s longstanding, if uneven, role as the world’s leading champion of universal human rights. The success of the Black Lives Matter movement is critical, not only to achieve a more perfect union at home, but also to advance human liberty and dignity worldwide.

Since World War II, the United States has made the global promotion of human rights an explicit foreign policy objective. [Eleanor Roosevelt shepherded negotiations on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948](https://www.amazon.com/World-Made-New-Roosevelt-Declaration/dp/0375760466), and U.S. diplomats have spearheaded the drafting of the many human rights treaties, from the [International Convention on Civil and Political Rights](https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx) to the [Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html). The State Department issues [annual reports on human rights in countries around the world](https://www.state.gov/reports-bureau-of-democracy-human-rights-and-labor/country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/), as well as assessments on [the state of international religious freedom](https://www.state.gov/international-religious-freedom-reports/) and [progress against human trafficking](https://www.state.gov/report-to-congress-on-2020-trafficking-in-persons-interim-assessment-pursuant-to-the-trafficking-victims-protection-act-as-reauthorized/). Abroad, human rights and democracy activists rely on U.S. support in their struggles against tyranny and oppression.

However, American leadership in human rights has long been undercut by two stubborn realities: persistent racial injustice in the United States itself and the nation’s uneven commitment to being bound by the very norms it propounds globally. During the early years of the Cold War, [the Soviet Union pointed to civil rights protests over Jim Crow laws](https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/10/russia-facebook-race/542796/) as proof of American hypocrisy. More recently, [the Chinese government has deflected criticism](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/mar/14/china-hits-back-at-us-prejudice-in-human-rights-tit-for-tat-row) of its own human rights abuses by [highlighting persistent U.S. racism](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/06/china-criticises-human-rights-record-150626053605693.html).

The United States has compounded foreign skepticism by failing to ratify important multilateral human rights instruments, including some it initially promoted. These include the [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cescr.aspx), the [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women](https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/), the [Convention on the Rights of the Child](https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx) and the aforementioned convention on disabilities.

This pattern of U.S. exceptionalism—or, more accurately, “[exemptionalism](https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/files/publication/american_exceptionalism.pdf%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)”—reflects a longstanding American ambivalence toward international law, according to which the United States seeks to be the [architect but not the subject of international rules](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/30527664_Weak_as_constraint_strong_as_tool_the_place_of_international_law_in_US_foreign_policy). The root of this Janus-like disposition, strongest among American conservatives, lies in [a narrow and misguided conception of national sovereignty](https://www.brookings.edu/book/the-sovereignty-wars/) that regards international human rights treaties and the external scrutiny that comes with them as unwarranted infringements on U.S. independence and self-government under the Constitution.

These concerns were front and center during early 1950s, when the Senate nearly passed the infamous Bricker Amendment. The brainchild of Sen. John Bricker, Republican of Ohio, the proposed constitutional amendment sought to limit the president’s treaty-making power. [Racial politics were at the heart of that effort](https://www.academia.edu/2830281/The_Paradox_of_US_Human_Rights_Policy). The amendment’s most ardent champions worried that U.N. human rights treaties would empower American civil rights activists to challenge the nation’s segregationist policies. To forestall this possibility, Bricker’s amendment would have raised extraordinary hurdles for any U.S. accession to an international treaty, requiring not only a Senate supermajority but also approval by all of the (then) 48 U.S. states. Even then, the amendment would have required separate congressional implementing legislation before any new treaty commitments could take domestic effect.

The Bricker Amendment was narrowly defeated in 1954 by just a single vote in the Senate, but its legacy lives on in conservative resistance to international human rights treaties and, more broadly, to any global scrutiny of America’s performance in advancing those rights at home. Such defensiveness was on full display in April 2012 after Navi Pillay, then the U.N. high commissioner for human rights, had the seeming temerity to insist that the United States conduct a thorough investigation and prosecution of George Zimmerman for killing Trayvon Martin, an unarmed black teenager, in their Florida neighborhood. Jon Kyl, the former Republican senator from Arizona, [condemned Pillay’s interference](https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887324348504578606493979321554) as part of a broader effort by “a global progressive elite to pierce the shield of U.S. sovereignty and influence the outcome of the country’s domestic debates.”

Such global scrutiny has become very intense today, as foreign attention focuses on the deaths at police hands of Floyd, Taylor and so many other black Americans. In late May, Michelle Bachelet, the current U.N. high commissioner for human rights, [demanded “serious action” from the United States](https://thehill.com/blogs/blog-briefing-room/news/499962-un-human-rights-chief-calls-for-serious-action-to-stop-police) to address “the latest in a long line of killings of African Americans by U.S. police officers and members of the public.” A week later, [66 U.N. human rights monitors released a pair of extraordinary statements](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/05/un-human-rights-monitors-us-modern-racial-terror-lynchings) publicly decrying the “fundamental racial inequality and discrimination that characterize life in the United States for black people” and denouncing the “[legacy of racial terror [that] remains evident](https://ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25933&LangID=E) in modern-day [American] policing.”

Crackdowns on peaceful protests in the United States, including the forceful clearing of demonstrators in Lafayette Square outside the White House with tear gas and rubber bullets, all so President Donald Trump could have a photo-op in front of St. John’s Church, [have brought scathing international condemnation](https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/06/06/the-battle-of-lafayette-square-and-the-undermining-of-american-democracy/). Writing in The Washington Post, Agnes Callamard, the U.N.’s special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, has [decried “possible violations of international law”](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/06/01/police-us-are-abusing-tear-gas-rubber-bullets-possible-violations-international-law/) in American police conduct, including uses of violence that contravene established principles of “proportionality and necessity.” From [Berlin to Brisbane](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/06/world/george-floyd-global-protests.html), protesters have [massed in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/01/world/asia/george-floyd-protest-global.html) and expressed outrage over the Trump administration’s indifference to entrenched racial discrimination. Whatever threadbare standing the United States previously claimed to lead on human rights now lies in tatters.

That is a disaster for the cause of human rights, at a time when [freedom is already on its heels globally](https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/28587/with-the-u-s-backsliding-who-will-defend-democracy-in-the-world) and authoritarian powers, notably China and Russia, feel emboldened. To regain moral authority on human rights, the United States can no longer simply preach from the pulpit. Regaining external influence will await internal renewal, in the form of a painful but long-overdue reckoning with—and reparations to correct—enduring racial injustices in American society, more than a century and a half after slavery officially ended. It will also require the United States to shed its sovereign defensiveness and open itself to external scrutiny of its own, imperfect human rights record.

None of this is likely to happen, of course, so long as the divisive, race-baiting Donald Trump remains in the White House. It will be up to his successor to make America decent again.