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U.S. Race Relations and Foreign Policy

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MICHIGAN LAW ON RACE & LAW

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SPECIAL ISSUE

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U.S. Race Relations and Foreign Policy

Ambassador (ret.) Susan D. Page

It is easy for Americans to think that the world's most egregious human rights abuses happen in other countries. In reality, our history is plagued by injustices, and our present reality is still stained by racism and inequality. While the Michigan Journal of International Law usually publishes only pieces with a global focus, we felt it prudent in these critically important times not to shy away from the problems facing our own country. We must understand our own history before we can strive to form a better union, whether the union be the United States or the United Nations. Ambassador Susan Page is an American diplomat who has faced human rights crises both at home and abroad. We found her following call to action inspiring. We hope you do too.



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U.S. RACE RELATIONS AND FOREIGN POLICY★

Ambassador (ret.) Susan D. Page★★

Welcome to all of you for your online or phone presence today. I am honored to present this year's Donia Human Rights Center's Martin Luther King, Jr. Lecture on U.S. race relations and foreign policy.

In 1998, then-Secretary of State Madeleine Albright stated that one of her "most important jobs is to call attention to the dangers that still confront us, and to the direct connection that exists between the success or failure of our foreign policy, and the day-to-day lives of the American people."¹ If Madam Secretary's foreign policy prescription is disarmingly straightforward, the day-to-day lives of the American people and their interaction with foreign policy have been anything but straightforward.

The riot and insurrection at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, perpetrated largely by a group of far-right white extremists, came as a shock to many people. Afterwards, we heard over and over again by both Democrats and Republicans alike, phrases such as, "This [electoral violence, this storming of the Capitol] is not who we are as a Nation." Or: "This does not represent who we are;" Or "These are scenes reserved for a banana republic" and, "We are better than this."² But for many Black peo-

* This piece is a replication of the speech given by Ambassador Page for the 2021 Donia Human Rights Center Annual Martin Luther King, Jr. Lecture on January 27, 2021. Ambassador Page would like to offer her gratitude to the organizers of the Donia HRC Lecture, in particular, the Donia Human Rights Center's Director and Michigan Law colleague, Steven Ratner, as well as all of the co-sponsors: namely, the African Studies Center, the Department of Afroamerican and African Studies, the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy's International Policy Center and Weiser Diplomacy Center, and the University of Michigan Law School. Finally, Ambassador Page gives special thanks to the many people working behind the scenes, from those who put together the program booklets, the media professionals, the IT experts, and of, course, everyone who cleans up the messes we leave behind. Your collective work is greatly appreciated.

★★ Ambassador (ret.) Susan D. Page is a Professor of Practice in International Diplomacy at University of Michigan Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy and Professor from Practice, University of Michigan Law School. She was the first U.S. ambassador to the Republic of South Sudan and served as Assistant Secretary-General of the United Nations in Haiti, among other senior diplomatic roles.

1. Madeleine K. Albright, *Still Much Work To Be Done*, U.S. DEP'T OF STATE ARCHIVE (Nov. 1998), https://1997-2001.state.gov/publications/statemag/statemag_nov98/sec.html.

2. See George W. Bush Presidential Center, *Statement by President George W. Bush on Insurrection at the Capitol*, (Jan. 6 2021) <https://www.bushcenter.org/about-the-center>

ple, the violence and destruction caused by the rioters on January 6, and their attempt to overturn a free and fair election by force at the seat of government while the vote certification was occurring, while absolutely terrible to see unfold before our eyes on live television, did not come as a complete surprise.

To be clear, the events at the Capitol on January 6, just three weeks ago, were **Outrageous**.³ Watching the ease with which many of the rioters shattered windows and scaled the walls of Federal property without confrontation or shots fired; how, in some cases, rioters were chatting casually and taking selfies with police and were actually ushered inside the Chambers; and yes, how some even attacked the police, whose “Blue lives” suddenly didn’t seem to matter as much to some of them anymore, was indeed appalling and horrifying. Even three weeks later, much of the media fails to show the gravity of what could have been: the images—limited though they might be—of those rioters wearing full combat gear who silently, stealthily “got on with business;” who were seen conducting themselves with military precision; wearing earpieces and communicating with each other; who held in their hands zip ties, possibly with the intent to kidnap or do other harm to our lawmakers, in order to allow Donald Trump to remain in office despite his electoral loss.⁴ Rather, we are shown repeatedly the scenes with the man in the silly-looking costume, the people casually strolling through the Capitol as if they owned the place. In fact, many of them, supremely confident that the Capitol in fact does belong to them, said those exact words on video. Believing there would be no repercussions from what they deemed their “patriotic acts,” they gleefully filmed themselves live and posted videos of their illegal acts.⁵ And when the violent rioters finally left, in some cases, provided a helping hand and escorted politely down the stairs by the police, many in the violent mob peacefully walked to nearby hotel bars and celebrat-

/newsroom/press-releases/2021/statement-by-president-george-w-bush-on-insurrection-at-the-capitol.html (“This is how election results are disputed in a banana republic.”): see also Joe Biden (@JoeBiden), Twitter (Jan. 6, 2021, 3:15 PM), <https://twitter.com/JoeBiden/status/1346928275470299142> (“The scene of chaos at the Capitol do not represent who we are.”): see also Marco Rubio (@marcorubio), TWITTER (Jan. 6, 2021, 2:01 PM), <https://twitter.com/marcorubio/status/1346909901478522880> (“This is 3rd world style anti-American anarchy.”).

3. For a full explanation of the day’s event, see Shelly Tan, Youjin Shin & Danielle Rindler.

4. Carol D. Leonnig et al., *Capitol Breach Prompts Urgent Questions About Security Failures*, WASH. POST (Jan. 6, 2021), https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/capitol-breach-security-failures/2021/01/06/e1e09b80-5061-11eb-b96e-0e54447b23a1_story.html (for further explanation of the Capitol response).

5. *In Pictures: Pro-Trump Rioters Breach the U.S. Capitol on Historic Day in Congress*, CNN POL. (Jan. 7, 2021).

ed.⁶ There were very few arrests. Despite weeks, even months of warnings about the rise of white Nationalist extremism and the potential for violence on January 6 in particular, the FBI was forced to ask for the public's help in identifying many of the rioters from the photos taken that day.⁷

Meanwhile, U.S. foreign policy and national security professionals have been worried about the reputation and standing of the U.S. and its authority in promoting democracy and freedom abroad after the entire world witnessed what only we Americans seem unwilling to see: This is, in fact, who we are.

Two hundred forty-four years ago, when delegates from the thirteen colonies formed the United States and declared America an independent nation from Great Britain, the colonists outlined in their "Declaration of Independence," a tenet that has become one of the most poignant and most recognizable statements in the American lexicon: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."⁸ Most of us fail to look beyond these noble and aspirational words. But for those who do, they understand that the colonists omitted a good portion of the truth and history from their great Declaration. And we have been reeling from it ever since, both at home and abroad, in both our domestic policy and our foreign policy.

The truth is that America is a nation built on stolen land by stolen people. Violence, including electoral and racial violence, seems to be hardwired in our DNA. Consistently, in both our domestic and foreign policy and actions, these American "ideals" have straddled a divide between a certain aspirational, perhaps moral clarity, set by the founding fathers, and a strategic incoherence in implementing these "so-called truths." The U.S. has long promoted democracy abroad; many would argue that this public promotion of democracy helped legitimate the U.S.'s global leadership during the Cold War. But while we began by championing democracy and human rights abroad, we have hidden our military and CIA interventions to suit our own desires; propped up dictators and overthrown democratic regimes, and even denied human rights to segments of our own population. This dichotomy might not have

6. Embedded, *January 6: Inside the Capitol Siege*, NAT'L PUB. RADIO (Jan. 15, 2021), <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/957362053>.

7. Atlantic Council's DFRLab, JUST SECURITY, *#StopTheSteal: Timeline of Social Media and Extremist Activities Leading to 1/6 Insurrection* (Feb. 10, 2021), <https://www.justsecurity.org/74622/stopthesteal-timeline-of-social-media-and-extremist-activities-leading-to-1-6-insurrection/>.

8. THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE, para. 2 (U.S. 1776).

been clear at home, but it was not lost on many newly independent nations looking to chart their own path towards independence and freedom from colonialism.

According to Professor Benjamin R. Young of Dakota State University, during the Cold War era, the concept of the Third World originated as a term of empowerment and inspiration for millions of people living in Africa, Asia and Latin America who sought an alternative system to Soviet-style socialism or U.S. liberal capitalism.⁹ French demographer Alfred Sauvy coined the term in 1952, but it was the Martinique-born political philosopher Frantz Fanon who developed the concept into a full-fledged theory of decolonization. In his 1961 book, “The Wretched of the Earth,” Fanon argued, “Europe is literally the creation of the Third World. The wealth which smothers her is that which was stolen from the underdeveloped peoples.”¹⁰

Young claims that the idea of Third Worldism was meant to unify people all over the world fighting colonialism and imperialism. He says that, “From the Black Panther Party fighting racism in U.S. cities to African liberation movements overthrowing European colonial regimes, the Third World was a global project of emancipation and solidarity.”¹¹ As he iterates, “The Wretched of the Earth” inspired revolutionaries and radicals all over the decolonizing world. Influenced by the horrors of the Vietnam War and U.S. militarism abroad, governments as diverse as those in Algeria, China, Cuba and North Korea claimed to be the sole torch-bearer of a unified Third World anti-imperialist front in the 1960s and 1970s.”

Influenced by Fanon’s work, Third World leaders and figures promoted the ideas of national sovereignty and self-reliance, hoping to cultivate a “third way” of development. And while the U.S. may have championed initially these newly independent states’ sovereignty and self-reliance, when these nations chose their own path, the U.S. stopped listening to their voices and desires. It was easier to believe there should only be a binary choice between communism and western-style free markets and democracy.

But we as a nation are more than only one thing. When our actions at home and our interventions abroad failed to live up to the aspirations of the founding fathers, people began asking why in ever louder voices.

On June 6, 1946, the President of the National Negro Congress transmitted a Petition to the United Nations on Behalf of 13 Million

9. Benjamin R. Young, WASHINGTON POST, *The Capitol Siege Wasn’t Like the ‘Third World.’ It Was Uniquely American* (Jan. 25, 2021), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2021/01/25/capitol-siege-wasnt-like-third-world-it-was-uniquely-american/>.

10. FRANTZ FANON ET AL., *THE WRETCHED OF THE EARTH* (1961).

11. Young, *supra* note 9.

Oppressed Negro Citizens of the United States of America which, “call(s) upon the United Nations to mobilize the influence of all organized mankind toward fulfillment, here in the United States, of the stated purpose of the United Nations to promote and encourage ‘respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion.’”¹² Simultaneously, the National Negro Congress wrote a letter to President Truman explaining its rationale for turning to the UN, stating,

This is an historic moment in the life of the nation. Vast internal economic and social upheavals confront us. Added to those, the traditional pre-war policy of racial oppression carried out by powerful forces in this country is now being inhumanly reflected more than ever before. The Negro people had hoped that out of the war there would come an extension of democratic rights and liberties so heroically fought for by all oppressed peoples. Your administration, however, has reversed the democratic program of the Roosevelt government, both internally and in relation to foreign policy. Great burdens have been forced upon the shoulders of the Negro people. Negro citizens find the present conditions intolerable, and are therefore, presenting their appeal to the highest court of mankind – the United Nations. The National Negro Congress in Convention assembled feels impelled to send you the information which motivates this historic petition.¹³

In the petition, they spell out the jurisdiction of the United Nations from the UN Charter, and ECOSOC in particular, and document in detail the numerous ways that the Negro peoples were being discriminated against in the aftermath of World War II – in arrests and detention, housing, education, work, pay, health, and more. The NNC concludes its letter to President Truman with the following, and I quote:

The cancer of racism has spread its poison throughout the life of America. Its throttling and killing effect upon the people of the entire nation—North and South, Negro and white—grows more fearful and more anachronistic with the passing of each hour. The Negro people, for themselves, and for the

12. Max Yergan, *Foreword* to A PETITION TO THE UNITED NATIONS ON BEHALF OF 13 MILLION OPPRESSED NEGRO CITIZENS OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA 2, 2 (Nat'l Negro Cong. 1946).

13. Letter from Max Yergan & Revels Cayton to President Harry S. Truman (June 6, 1946), in A PETITION TO THE UNITED NATIONS ON BEHALF OF 13 MILLION OPPRESSED NEGRO CITIZENS OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA 2, 3 (Nat'l Negro Cong. 1946).

benefit of all other inhabitants of America, demand full freedom and absolute equality. Nothing short of this will satisfy them. Where one is enslaved, all are in chains.¹⁴

Fast forward a few years, and on December 17, 1951, Paul Robeson and William Patterson from the Civil Rights Congress submitted a petition to the UN General Assembly of the United Nations, titled, “We Charge Genocide: The Crime of [the United States] Government Against the Negro People.”¹⁵ They made their case with a detailed legal argument and analysis under the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, in a book-length petition that documented hundreds of lynching cases and other forms of brutality and discrimination, evincing a pattern of government inaction and complicity.¹⁶

But with the Cold War raging, the U.S. government maneuvered to prevent the United Nations from formally debating **or even considering** the charges brought in the petition. According to the Black American historian Carol Anderson, “Working behind the scenes, U.S. officials were even able to prevent any discussion of the petition by the UN Commission on Human Rights.”¹⁷ Many of these Black activists were denied the right to travel abroad and to speak about racism at home; they were monitored by the FBI, and had their reputations tarnished. In the 1950s and 1960s, other figures were rising to the challenges as well. As America fought a war in Vietnam, ostensibly to advance freedom there, here at home, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr, whom we honor with today’s Lecture, declared, “All we say to America is, ‘Be true to what you said on paper.’”¹⁸ We hail Martin Luther King, Jr. today, but that is because we do not remember our history. In the 1960s, he was one of the most despised men in America for daring to challenge the system of oppression, the war in Vietnam, and the status quo. We must not forget that.

14. *Id.*

15. [CONTENT WARNING: the following link includes disturbing images.] We Charge Genocide: The Historic Petition to the United Nations for Relief from a Crime of The United States Government Against the Negro People, *Civil Rights Congress* (1951), <https://depts.washington.edu/moves/images/cp/1.%20We%20Charge%20Genocide%201-28.pdf>.

16. Needless to say, some of you may not have known about these petitions. I myself only recently learned of them in preparation for teaching my classes.

17. See CAROL ANDERSON, EYES OFF THE PRIZE: THE UNITED NATIONS AND THE AFRICAN AMERICAN STRUGGLE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS, 1944-1955 (2003).

18. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Address Delivered at Bishop Charles Mason Temple (Apr. 3, 1968), <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/ive-been-mountaintop-address-delivered-bishop-charles-mason-temple>.

As we know from this past Summer and Fall, clearly, Black Americans still have not realized the full equality or humanity we have long sought; but, we have not stood still either. This demand to be coherent in our actions to promote democracy and freedom at home as well as abroad remains a profound American challenge.

As a diplomat, my colleagues and I fought tirelessly to advance the promotion and protection of human rights, democracy, good governance, accountability, and fair electoral processes. As a lawyer and diplomat working overseas, I advised foreign leaders to follow their own constitution and respect their own laws. But as a Black American woman, I also interjected a reality that many of my other colleagues either did not do or could not speak to as articulately. I admitted that the United States is not a perfect Union; that we are constantly striving to make it ever so. So I will repeat part of what I said in my Fourth of July speech in 2013 when I was the U.S. Ambassador to South Sudan, then, and now, the world's newest country:

Quoting myself from 2013:

I stand before you today as a Black American female ambassador, appointed by America's first African-American president. But this moment was more than 50 years in the making; 150 years following emancipation; and 237 years after our independence. It is true that progress can sometimes be slow, but this moment, right here, right now, with me standing before you, a person whose ancestors were not considered equal to white land-owning men, whose mothers and sisters, as women, also could not vote and were also not considered equal by that great Declaration of Independence, demonstrates that even slow progress is better than standing still.¹⁹

And in President Obama's own message, which I read aloud at the U.S. Embassy in Juba, South Sudan, he wrote,

Two hundred and thirty-seven years later, their words are just as bold and revolutionary as they were when they were first inscribed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness' But while these truths may be self-evident, history tells us they have never been self-executing. For more than two centuries, our Nation has been

19. See U.S. Embassy Juba of South Sudan, FACEBOOK, (July 8, 2013) <https://www.facebook.com/USEmbassySouthSudan/posts/us-ambassador-susan-d-pages-july-4th-speech-2013begin-textit-was-237-years-ago-w/474263045998745/>.

on an enduring journey to bridge the meaning of our Founders' words with the realities of our time.²⁰

In his historic, "I Have a Dream" speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial during the "Great March on Washington," Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said,

Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy. Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksand of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood. Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children. It would be fatal for the nation to overlook the urgency of the moment.²¹

So how do we address the urgency of this moment? Diplomats and foreign-policy leaders must raise their voices at home—and continue to keep them loud abroad in recognition of the inextricable linkages between the two. We have to match our aspirations and actions at home with the intensity and urgency of those calling for justice and accountability for those who have been killed, including George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and countless others.

All of us need to engage local communities at home and overseas. Local communities can speak to the ties between U.S. foreign policy and the persistence of racism in the United States.

In conclusion, if ever there was an urgent moment, it is also **NOW**. Americans must be more humble; we must heed our own advice that we give to other nations about democratic norms and principles. What we believe about who we are as a nation—our values and our common story—matters. The question of the identity that binds a nation together matters more in a democracy of diverse ancestry, religion, ideology and relationships to the land.

While Americans have a shared history, it is not widely known. We lack a common story about that history. As numerous people have written, are we an exceptional country that pioneered a radical experiment in democratic self-government? Are we a refuge for the tired, poor and downtrodden of the world, who in this country can find freedom and opportunity? Are we a country that denied freedom to minorities so that they could help build prosperity for others at their own expense? The

20. See also President Barack Obama, Inaugural Address (Jan. 21, 2013).

21. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "I Have a Dream" Address Delivered at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom (Aug. 28, 1963), <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/i-have-dream-address-delivered-march-washington-jobs-and-freedom>.

story of America is in fact **ALL** of these narratives and more—both the redemptive and the damning.

We should re-define who we are and grapple with a national narrative of our past that never reflected the perspectives of Native American communities or enslaved people and their descendants. But truth-telling, memorialization and lifting up stories of resilience also are critical components of shaping a more inclusive narrative. We must rediscover the story of immigrants in this country, who have come here from every continent seeking the promise of a better life, and whose contributions to this country are another critical part of our nation's identity. We must learn all of our history and teach it to each other and to future generations.

Today is also National Holocaust Remembrance Day. As I reflect upon the aftermath of World War II and the Nuremberg Trials afterward, I can't help but stress the importance of words and actions. Listening to Donald Trump's angry, inciting language and their outcome: words are important; words matter.

Thank you.

