Lunch Address: The United States' Role in International Human Rights under the Trump Administration

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Good afternoon. It is a special treat to be reunited with my former Human Rights First colleague, Professor Avi Cover. I was sorry to have to miss dinner last night at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, but I am happy I could be here today with some real international law rock stars. Dean Scharf has built an amazing institution here, and it is a privilege to be part of this important discussion.

Now is an incredibly important time to be a lawyer, and the kind of lawyer you will be is especially important. We are here today to talk about the impact of the Trump administration on international law. But as I learned during the fight against torture in the Bush

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◊ Former President and Chief Executive Officer of Human Rights First, one of the nation’s leading human rights advocacy organizations. Massimino joined Human Rights First as a staff attorney in 1991 to help establish the Washington office. From 1997 to 2008, she served as the organization’s Washington Director. Previously, Massimino was a litigator in private practice at the Washington law firm of Hogan & Hartson, where she was pro bono counsel in many human rights cases. Before joining the legal profession, she taught philosophy at several colleges and universities in Michigan. Massimino has a distinguished record of human rights advocacy in Washington. As a national authority on human rights law and policy, she has testified before Congress dozens of times and writes frequently for mainstream publications and specialized journals. Since 2008, the influential Washington newspaper The Hill has consistently named her one of the most effective public advocates in the country. She has written for and been quoted in numerous print and online news sources, as well as been featured on many news outlets. Massimino holds a law degree from the University of Michigan where she was an editor of the Journal of Law Reform. She holds a Master of Arts in philosophy from Johns Hopkins University, and is a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas. Massimino serves as an adjunct professor at Georgetown University Law Center, where she teaches human rights advocacy, and has taught international human rights law at the University of Virginia and refugee law at the George Washington University School of Law. She is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations and the bar of the United States Supreme Court.
administration, sometimes lawyers—who they are, their guiding principles, their personal qualities and commitment to the rule of law—can matter even more than the law.

This morning, John Bellinger set out the low expectations that he and others had of this administration based on what candidate Trump said during the campaign, and we are witnessing every day the fulfillment of that prophecy. President Trump has, as John pointed out, praised dictators, withdrawn from the Human Rights Council, and failed to appoint an assistant Secretary of State for human rights.¹ So, I have to admit that it feels a bit surreal talking about international law and the Trump administration. We have a president who has a hostile relationship with facts and seems mostly disinterested in law, international or otherwise. I have worked on human rights in Washington for more than thirty years, and one thing I have learned is that arguing for policies based on international legal obligations is always a tough road, even in the most sympathetic political environment. Today, with an administration that sees little benefit in the rules-based international order that the United States did so much to create, it seems downright quaint.

There is a good reason that Orwell is back on bestseller lists.² And that David Simon is adapting Phillip Roth’s The Plot Against America for television.³ And that Yeats’ poem The Second Coming—which foresaw the rise of fascism—is a favorite on Facebook.⁴ “Things fall apart,” Yeats wrote. “The centre cannot hold.”⁵

Yet so far, the center seems to be holding. Our democratic institutions appear, for the most part, to be up to the challenge. The

media, the courts, and Congress have, to varying degrees, served as checks on the Trump administration’s efforts to impose its vision on the country.\textsuperscript{6}

This is not to minimize the damage Trump has done and will still do. Still, we are not on the brink of a dictatorship. President Trump has not significantly expanded the scope of his power nor neutralized opposition. It appears that our country will emerge from the Trump years—I know it feels like forever, but it has only been twenty months, so let us not call it an “age” just yet—capable of a course correction. That correction may well begin before Trump leaves office. The mid-term elections are in fifty-three days.

But the Trump presidency should be a wakeup call. We cannot take the institutions of our democracy, including the rule of law, for granted. We have to fight to preserve and restore them. So whether President Trump is hostile or just indifferent to international law, there is ample evidence that he is violating it.

I have spent most of my career as an activist, so I have a bias toward action and against spending a lot of time admiring the problem. My instinct is to focus on what we are going to do about it. That is what I want to focus on this afternoon. John did a great job this morning laying out the challenges we are facing. So I want to try to link the last panel with the next one and focus my remarks on the connection between two issues that have occupied much of my attention over the last fifteen years: refugee protection and national security. It seems self-evident that refugee protection, like the broader issue of immigration, is linked to national security. After all, the United States has a clear interest in ensuring that dangerous people do not enter the country. Yet the intense political connection is relatively new. I do not want to overstate this point: At times in our history, debates over whether to take in immigrants and refugees have included national security questions—especially when the immigrants and refugees come from countries the United States regards as enemies.\textsuperscript{7} More often, however, politicians and others have sought to block immigrants and refugees not on national security grounds but because they pose a supposed threat to the American social fabric, to the jobs of American workers, or to government budgets.


\textsuperscript{7} For an extensive discussion of the immigration debate, see Claire Felter & Danielle Renwick, \textit{The US Immigration Debate}, COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS (July 2, 2018), https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/us-immigration-debate-0 [https://perma.cc/4LPR-X4SR].
That changed after 9/11, which led to a massive increase in funding for immigration enforcement, and stepped up efforts to block, detain, and deport immigrants who pose a security risk.\(^8\) In the months after 9/11, Congress passed the Patriot Act, the Homeland Security Act, and the Enhanced Border Security and Visa Entry Reform Act.\(^9\) There were immediate implications for immigrants from the Middle East and Southeast Asia, and before long, those from Latin America were similarly affected.\(^10\) And they included refugees. As legal scholar Teresa A. Miller notes, “After the attacks... zero-tolerance enforcement of immigration laws was extended to immigrants who had not passed through the criminal justice system, such as asylum seekers and undocumented immigrants.”\(^11\) The issue of refugee protection became entangled in the so-called “war against terror.”\(^12\) 9/11 gave us, for example, material support provisions, under which the government has treated victims of terrorism as if they were terrorists.\(^13\)

Ever since 9/11, politicians of both parties have cited security threats real, exaggerated, and imagined, to slam the door on refugees.\(^14\) It is important to remember that the mounting hostility toward asylum seekers and other refugees predates the Trump presidency, but he has taken it to dangerous new depths. I have been


12. Id. at 117.

13. Id. at 93.

working in this field for three decades, and in that time there have been a lot of changes in law and policy, many of them ill-considered and grounded in a fundamental misunderstanding of who refugees are and why they flee. But I have never seen refugees—people who are running for their lives from persecution and violence—demonized in the way we are seeing today. President Trump is exploiting real problems—the threats from terrorist groups like ISIS and criminal gangs like M-13—to sell shameful policies that undermine America’s historical commitment to refugees and inflict horrific suffering on people—many of them children—who have already suffered unspeakable harm. Indeed, as his official National Security Strategy shows, he sees immigrants and refugees as a core threat to national security.\footnote{\textit{The White House, National Security Strategy of the United States of America} 9-10 (2017).}

That document was hailed for being in the bipartisan mainstream, yet his focus on the alleged security danger posed by immigrants is a departure from prior administrations of both parties.\footnote{\textit{See generally, Priscilla Alvarez, A Brief History of America’s ‘Love-Hate Relationship’ with Immigration, The Atlantic} (Feb. 19, 2017), \url{https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/02/donald-trump-immigration/517119/} [\url{https://perma.cc/G4TT-HVPG}] (comparing the evolution of immigration policies compared to the Trump administration’s changes).}

Declaring that “[o]penness imposes costs, since adversaries exploit our free and democratic system to harm the United States,” President Trump advocates “enhancing the screening and vetting of travelers, closing dangerous loopholes, revising outdated laws, and eliminating easily exploited vulnerabilities” and vows to “reform our current immigration system, which, contrary to our national interest and national security, allows for randomized entry and extended-family chain migration.”\footnote{\textit{The White House, supra} note 15, at 7-9.}

This is a challenging issue for those of us who believe the United States should remain a safe haven for people fleeing persecution. There is a perpetual reservoir of anti-immigrant sentiment that can be tapped into, and the victims have little political clout. Moreover, immigration enforcement authorities have enormous power that they exercise largely in the shadows, and it is difficult to shine a light on their abusive or illegal actions, especially when Congress is not adequately performing its oversight role.\footnote{For a critique of ICE, see \textit{Making Sense of DHS Funding Debate: Why Congressional Oversight of DHS and ICE is Critically Needed}, \textit{America’s Voice} (Feb. 13, 2019), \url{https://americasvoice.org/press_releases/making-sense-of-dhs-funding-debate-why-congressional-oversight-of-dhs-and-ice-is-critically-needed/} [\url{https://perma.cc/JE9A-YQAW}].}
We have to do a better job of pushing back. We need to work harder to debunk the lies used to demonize refugees and depict the asylum system as vulnerable to terrorist groups and other threats. And we need to articulate an affirmative national security case for protecting refugees.

I am going to do that. But first I want to review the history of American leadership on refugee protection, so that it is clear what is at stake, and I will also discuss the mounting threats to refugees, so that it is clear what we are up against.

Following the mass displacement and inhumane treatment of refugees after World War II, the world came together to produce the 1951 Refugee Convention. The United States played a key role in crafting the treaty; the late Lou Henkin, a longtime member of Human Rights First’s board, led the U.S. delegation and was one of the chief architects of the convention. Its purpose was to protect the right to seek and enjoy asylum enshrined in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The U.S. commitment to refugees grows out of our history and is a core aspect of our identity. We are a nation founded by refugees fleeing religious persecution. If we stopped providing protection to the persecuted, the United States would, in a very real sense, stop being the United States.

Of course, the American record on refugees is not unblemished: there have been failures of leadership, and decisions about who is deserving of protection have sometimes been tainted by politics and racism. Nonetheless, the United States has long been a leader in this area based on the strength of a bipartisan consensus that, to put it in contemporary terms, protecting refugees is part of the American brand.

Consider the U.S. response to the mass exodus of refugees following the war in Vietnam. Among American political leaders,

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there was not an overwhelming consensus in favor of providing protection. There was, in fact, opposition from prominent politicians, including Democrats such as Governor Jerry Brown of California, who argued that instead of helping refugees, we ought to do more to help Americans. Yet an inter-agency task force set up by President Ford and supported by Senator Ted Kennedy led to the resettlement of more than 100,000 Vietnamese refugees. Some 800,000 ultimately settled in the country.

Our asylum and refugee procedures were systematized and codified by the 1980 Refugee Act—a seminal law which, I am proud to say, Human Rights First played a role in drafting. It codified the definition of a refugee, established a permanent commitment to resettle a certain number of refugees each year, and allowed for flexibility in the case of crises.

I mentioned that the US commitment to refugees has historically been bipartisan. “Since 1975, America has accepted 1.69 million refugees under Republican presidents, and 1.56 million under Democratic ones, according to the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants.” As President Reagan said in his farewell speech, the United States is “still a beacon, still a magnet for all who must have freedom, for all the pilgrims from all the lost places who are hurtling through the darkness, toward home.”

America’s historical commitment to refugees flows from the recognition that refugees are victims in need of protection. They are


25. Id.


28. Id.


30. Ronald Reagan, President of the United States, Farewell Address to American People (Jan 12, 1989).
disproportionately women and children, uprooted by persecution and war.\textsuperscript{31} It is hard to think of a more sympathetic population. Undeterred, politicians and pundits in recent years have sought to depict these vulnerable, innocent victims as invaders and threats to our security.\textsuperscript{32}

How did we get here? What happened? Two things: The war in Syria fueled the worst displacement crisis since World War II at the same time that ISIS rose to prominence and launched spectacular attacks.\textsuperscript{33} Fear of terrorism—and the abject willingness of certain political leaders to exploit it—has prevented the U.S. government from responding to the refugee crisis in a manner worthy of this country. On the contrary, many officials in this country responded by conflating refugees with terrorists.\textsuperscript{34} In 2015, the horrific ISIS attacks in Paris sparked a furor in the United States.\textsuperscript{35} It did not matter that those attacks were not committed by Syrians, or that Syrian refugees were among ISIS’s primary victims, thirty American governors proclaimed that their states would be off-limits to Syrian refugees.\textsuperscript{36} Governor Chris Christie, a presidential contender at the time, said the U.S. should block all Syrian refugees, even five year-old orphans.\textsuperscript{37} And the House passed a bill that would have effectively halted

\begin{footnotes}
\item[32.] For further discussion on this topic, see Symposium, \textit{The Border and Beyond the National Security Implications of Migration, Refugees, And Asylum Under US and International Law}, 9 J. Nat’l Sec. L. & Pol’y 3 (2018).
\item[33.] Claire E. Parker, \textit{A War Apart: Syrians at Harvard}, \textit{Harv. Crimson} (2016).
\item[34.] De Luce, supra note 14.
\end{footnotes}
resettlement of refugees from Syria and Iraq. That bill died in the Senate, but it was a precursor to Trump’s Muslim ban.

From the rhetoric, you would have thought that the United States was accepting hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees. In fact, amid a global refugee crisis that was crying out for American leadership, our government had resettled fewer than two thousand Syrian refugees—a pathetically paltry number given our capacity and the scale of the need. Frontline states Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon—all U.S. allies—had taken in hundreds of thousands of refugees. In other words, at a time when the United States should have been doing much more to help refugees, many in Washington wanted it to abandon even its modest protection goals.

A lot of us spent time and energy pressing the Obama administration to do more to help Syrian refugees. In 2016, the administration resettled 10,000 Syrians—a modest but meaningful accomplishment—but this was the last year of his presidency.

There was another part of the global refugee crisis, one closer to home. Violence and political instability in the Northern Triangle of Central America had triggered a mass-exodus that included thousands of unaccompanied children. In 2014, when they began to cross the

40. Prior to 2014, there had been fewer than 2000 Syrian refugees admitted. See Nicole Ostrand, The Syrian Refugee Crisis: A Comparison of Responses by Germany, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States, 3 J. On Migration & Hum. Sec. 255, 270 (2015) (estimating a total of 1,986 refugees admitted by the United States between fiscal years 2012 and 2014). In 2016, the United States resettled 15,479 Syrian refugees—3,024 were resettled in 2017, and only 11 had been resettled by April 2018. Deborah Amos, The U.S. Has Accepted Only 11 Syrian Refugees This Year, NPR (Apr. 12, 2018), https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2018/04/12/602022877/the-u-s-has-welcomed-only-11-syrian-refugees-this-year [https://perma.cc/A79E-5AFT].
43. Silvia Mathema, They Are (Still) Refugees: People Continue to Flee Violence in Latin American Countries, Ctr. for Am. Peace (June 1, 2018), https://www.americanprogress.org/
southern border in large numbers, intrepid anti-immigration media outlets discovered a “loophole” that, they warned, could allow many unlawful and perhaps dangerous migrants to stay in this country. That pernicious “loophole” was something called asylum. Predictably, politicians in Washington picked up this language and started to exploit it.

I wish I could say that President Obama responded with a grand reaffirmation of America’s commitment to refugees. Many of these migrants had, after all, fled horrific violence, including gang murders of children. But instead the Obama administration pursued a policy of mass “family detention,” locking up thousands of women and young children. In violation of international law, the express purpose of this policy was to prevent other refugees from coming to the United States.

So it is not as if the United States was leading on refugee protection when President Trump took office. He took advantage of, and exacerbated, an existing trend. At first, it was his Muslim ban that received the most attention. Courts blocked or partially blocked

44. Rick Jervis, Immigrant children Continue to Surge into South Texas, USA TODAY (June 17, 2014), https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2014/06/17/children-surge-immigration-texas/10643609/ (“Some lawmakers, however, argue the youths – and the smuggling rings bringing them in – are exploiting U.S. policy, which allows youngsters from Central American countries other than Mexico to be released to an adult living in the USA while awaiting their court hearing.”).


49. See, e.g., Jonah Engel Bromwich, Lawyers Mobilize at Nation’s Airports After Trump’s Order, N.Y. TIMES (Jan. 29, 2017),
different versions of the ban, and the Trump administration revised it to disguise its discriminatory purpose. Even without the ban in place, the Trump administration managed to block most Muslim refugees. The overall number of refugee admissions is plummeting—President Trump capped admissions this fiscal year at 45,000, the lowest number ever—and the percentage decline is by far the greatest among Muslims. Today, as we near the end of the fiscal year, the U.S. has admitted only about a third of its 45,000 target. U.S. resettlement of Muslim refugees has fallen by about sixty-eight percent.

At the same time, the Trump administration has been waging an assault on asylum. For a long time, this was largely under the radar. In what appears to be a coordinated effort, immigration officials have been turning away refugees at the southern border, denying them a chance to seek asylum. A recent investigation by my organization documented more than one hundred of such cases, and we released


an audiotape of a border official illegally turning away an asylum seeker.  

The Trump administration would have us believe that refugees are breaking the law by seeking asylum. In fact, immigration officers are breaking the law by denying people the right to seek asylum.

Earlier this year, a caravan of refugees from Central America headed through Mexico toward the U.S. border. Never mind that many of these people had escaped persecution and brutality, or that the caravan was an annual project organized by refugee advocates to help bring endangered people to safety, the Trump administration saw this as an opportunity. Attorney General Sessions declared, “Today we are here to send a message to the world: We are not going to let this country be overwhelmed. People are not going to caravan or otherwise stampede our border.” Depicting asylum seekers as would-be invaders, President Trump pushed his priorities: expanding immigration detention, prosecuting all immigrants—including asylum seekers—for illegal entry, and taking immigrant children away from their parents. Under President Obama, there were instances when

57. Human Rights First, 24.17 San Ysidro Port of Entry Turn In, YOUTUBE (July 13, 2017), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H0AHt6y6Fjs [https://perma.cc/5XJ6-X3B4].


60. Id.


immigration agents separated families, but this explicit policy of family separation is new, and President Trump is lying when he claims it is mandated by law. While he was forced by bipartisan outcry to back away from this policy, he is now vastly expanding the capacity to detain children with their families. According to a New York Times report this week, the overall number of detained migrant children has exploded to the highest ever recorded. The U.S. has now detained 12,800 children—your tax dollars at work.

More recently, Sessions announced that most victims of domestic abuse and gang violence will no longer qualify for asylum. In so doing, he is rewriting asylum law and precedent, prejudging cases, and encouraging judges to deny asylum claims.

On refugee protection, the news is bleak. The good news, such as it is, is that the Trump administration may be overplaying a strong political hand. Suddenly, we are talking about the U.S. government


67. Id.


putting children in cages, and Senator Feinstein has introduced a bill that would end family separation.\textsuperscript{70} While blatant contradiction has never fazed President Trump, he has made M-13 public enemy number one at the same time he is denying asylum to its victims.\textsuperscript{71} More and more, the assault on refugees is looking like what it is: an assault on vulnerable people.

This provides an opening for those of us who want the U.S. government to live up to its ideals to protect the human rights of refugees. At this challenging time, it is tempting to believe that the truth no longer matters, that all that matters is the size of your microphone. But such fatalism plays into the hands of those who want to deny and suppress the facts. One fact is that unauthorized border crossings have dropped to a forty-five year low.\textsuperscript{72} Another fact is there are effective safeguards to block people who pose a genuine threat.\textsuperscript{73} Another is that immigrants commit fewer crimes than native-born Americans.\textsuperscript{74} Another is that it is very difficult for refugees to receive asylum.\textsuperscript{75} Another is that many of the immigrants arriving at the Southern border have fled violence and persecution.\textsuperscript{76}

We need to counter this insidious effort to demonize refugees. In April, as the caravan of refugees and migrants arrived at the border, people from my organization were there.\textsuperscript{77} They were there to provide\textsuperscript{76, 77}

\textsuperscript{70.} Press Releases, United States Senator for California, Feinstein, Colleagues Introduce Legislation to Halt Separation of Immigrant Families (June 08, 2018), available at https://www.feinstein.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/ [https://perma.cc/XV6E-ESAZ].


\textsuperscript{73.} See id. (stating that border control has increased over the past 45 years).


\textsuperscript{75.} See Press Release, supra note 70 (publishing various statements from individuals seeking asylum).

\textsuperscript{76.} Id.

\textsuperscript{77.} The Refugee Caravan: Human Right’s First’s Observations from the Border, HUMAN RIGHTS FIRST (May 25, 2018),
guidance to people seeking asylum and to monitor their treatment. But they were also there to help put a human face on this issue, to put the lie to the effort to depict these people as security threats. The more these refugees remain nameless and faceless, the more effective the administration’s campaign of misinformation will be. It is one thing if the Trump administration seeks to deny entry to a “caravan” of immigrants, quite another if it seeks to deny entry to Kenia Avila, a 35-year-old woman who fled Honduras with three small boys after a gang threatened to kill her. 78

The administration does not want Americans to know the truth about refugees, or to see how their government is treating them. That is why Senator Merkley should be applauded for trying to enter an immigration detention center for children in Texas. 79 He did so only after DHS refused to allow him access. 80 The video of his attempt went viral and intensified the debate about our government’s treatment of child immigrants. 81

Most Americans would not see this as necessary to protect national security. That is why exposing what is happening is so important. The more people know the truth, the more they will see that the Trump administration’s assaults on the rights of refugees have little to do with national security. They will begin to understand that it is using national security as a pretext for pursuing a misguided and ugly agenda. Detention, intimidation, and fear are being used explicitly to deter desperate people fleeing violence from seeking safety here.

But it is not technically accurate to say that the Trump administration’s assaults on the rights of refugees have little do with U.S. national security, because, in fact, they are weakening U.S. national security. 82 The President’s effort to limit, if not end, refugee


80. Id.

81. Id.

82. Eleonor Acer, Trump’s Squeeze on Immigrants Has Nothing to Do With Security, NEWSWEEK (Feb. 02, 2018),
resettlement by Muslims has faded from the headlines as he focuses on refugees from Latin America, but the Syrian refugee crisis persists, and we should not lose sight of this effort to slam the door on Muslims—which is, among other things, an attack on religious freedom.

The President’s actions recall other shameful instances when the U.S. government discriminated against groups of people in the name of security, from General Grant’s expulsion of Jews from three states during the Civil War\(^\text{83}\) to the attacks on German-Americans during World War I\(^\text{84}\) to the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II\(^\text{85}\) to the Red Scare during the Cold War.\(^\text{86}\) Like those predecessors, President Trump is insisting that security and human rights are competing interests in a zero-sum game: to protect ourselves, we must violate human rights.\(^\text{87}\) Make a choice—your ideals or your safety.

The Trump administration claims that the U.S. government cannot effectively screen refugees.\(^\text{88}\) But the U.S. government has been doing just that for years.\(^\text{89}\) The extreme vetting the President seeks is already happening.\(^\text{90}\) Of the many millions of foreigners who enter our


\(^86\) Red Scare, HISTORY (Sept. 13, 2018), https://www.history.com/topics/cold-war/red-scare [https://perma.cc/NG57-Q2SQ].


\(^88\) Acer, supra note 82.

\(^89\) Id.

country every year, refugees are by far the most stringently vetted. 91 Screening often takes more than eighteen months and includes pre-screening from UNHCR, 92 and then multiple interviews and review by professionals at the Department of Homeland Security, intelligence agencies, biometric screenings by the Department of Defense, and cross-checks with information from other governments and from Interpol, which maintains extensive information on stolen and lost passports. 93

Of course, no screening process is infallible. But the idea that the refugee resettlement system poses particular risks is simply not grounded in facts. Meanwhile, the security risks on the other side—of denying protection—are substantial. In fact, the President is doubly wrong here: not only does resettling refugees not weaken national security, it bolsters it. 94

ISIS is in retreat in some places, but it remains a threat, along with Al Qaeda, the Taliban, and other terrorist groups. 95 National security experts agree that these groups cannot defeat the United States and its allies on the battlefield. 96 To thrive, these groups must win the battle of ideas. 97 For many years, terrorist groups have sought to trigger fear-based responses from the United States that they can use to propagandize against us. 98 There is a very good reason that President Obama and the late Senator John McCain have both said that American ideals are an asset, not a liability, in the fight against terrorist groups. 99

91. Id.
92. Id.
94. Ohlbaum, supra note 90.
97. Id. at 22.
98. Id. at 6.
99. President Barack Hussein Obama, Inaugural Address at the White House (Jan. 21, 2009), available at https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2009/01/21/president-
From a national security perspective, the animus toward Muslim refugees is akin to the U.S. government’s fateful decision to use torture after 9/11. The systematic abuse of prisoners was not only a violation of international and domestic law, it was a PR gift to Al Qaeda, which used it to win recruits and sympathizers by depicting the United States as hostile to Islam.100

A rejectionist approach to the refugee crisis poses a similar threat. In fact, the mean-spirited anti-refugee rhetoric alone does damage.101 While doing research on the refugee crisis in Turkey and Jordan, our team at Human Rights First discovered that the presidential campaign rhetoric demonizing refugees and immigrants was reverberating on the frontlines of the crisis. The message was causing refugees to give up hope of finding protection in the United States.102

I am not suggesting that anti-refugee rhetoric and actions cause refugees or Muslims generally to run into the waiting arms of ISIS and other terrorist groups. All but a small fraction of Muslims loathe these groups.103 But among that small fraction, messaging matters, and we know that ISIS has exploited hostility to refugees and other Muslims, using it to validate its clash-of-civilization narrative.104 A letter to Congress from an esteemed group of former secretaries of state, military leaders, and national security officials who served in administrations of both parties made this point well:

Refugees are victims, not perpetrators, of terrorism. Categorically refusing to take them only feeds the narrative of

barack-obamas-inaugural-address [https://perma.cc/W93N-4EU9], (“As for our common defense, we reject as false the choice between our safety and our ideals.”);


101. Id.


ISIS that there is a war between Islam and the West, that Muslims are not welcome in the United States and Europe, and that the ISIS caliphate is their true home. We must make clear that the United States rejects this worldview by continuing to offer refuge to the world’s most vulnerable people, regardless of their religion or nationality.\textsuperscript{105}

More broadly, the U.S. abdication of its role as a leader on refugee-resettlement diminishes America’s global standing, which, in turn, weakens our national security. The ability of the United States to influence events and pursue its interests—including its security interests—depends not only on its military and economic power but also on its moral power. When it demonstrates fidelity to its ideals and leads on human rights, the U.S. government is better able to persuade other countries to follow, to build strategic coalitions, to inspire democratic movements, to negotiate peace deals, to ease tensions, and to pressure repressive governments to reform.

When it does the opposite, when it defies its ideals and perpetrates abuses, it undermines faith in the global order and empowers tyrants and dictators. It is no coincidence that repressive governments across the world have defended their crackdowns on activists by saying they’re fighting a “War on Terror.”\textsuperscript{106} The human rights abuses committed by repressive governments not only inflict suffering on people, they help produce violent extremism.\textsuperscript{107} The United States cannot lead effectively if it does not lead by example. And it cannot presume to turn its back on the world one minute, then turn around the next and try to shape events to its liking.

Perhaps more than any other issue, hostility to refugees is the thread connecting authoritarian governments and ascendant far right movements, from Russia to Hungary to Italy. The United States should be bucking this trend; instead, it is fueling it.

I mentioned earlier the importance of facts. But facts are not everything. President Trump plays to fear and repeatedly presents his

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vision as putting America first. 108 We have to respond in kind, not with fear but with hope; not with prejudice, but with an inclusive vision of our country. We need to speak to hearts as well as heads, and remind people in a visceral way what America stands for. “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” 109 No less than the Declaration of Independence’s “self-evident” truths or the first line of the Gettysburg Address, these words convey core American ideals. They express who we want to be, who we are supposed to be, and—at our best—who we are.

To fight for the rights of refugees in the context of the American story, we launched a new initiative called Veterans for American Ideals. 110 We started this group two years ago, and the response has been overwhelming. Thousands of veterans have now joined us to stand up for refugees and against the anti-Muslim bigotry that undermines American security. 111

While people join the military for a variety of reasons, many are motivated by idealism—by a desire to uphold the ideals of our country. And as we have learned, a great number want to keep serving their country after they take off the uniform. They feel that, in advocating for the rights of refugees, they are fighting for the same ideals they fought for overseas.

They are speaking out against the Trump administration’s clampdown on refugees. 112 And who better to make the case? Not only do they embody national security and neutralize the “soft on terrorism” charge, they also speak passionately about the ideals that they fought to protect and that they want their government to reflect.

They believe, as I do, that most Americans want our country to remain a beacon of hope and a safe haven. And that in the end, if we are united and resist appeals to prejudice and fear, our vision of hope, rooted in history and international law, will prevail.


111. Id.

112. Id. (“Veterans for America ideas is a nonpartisan group of veterans who share the belief that American is strongest when its policies and actions match its ideals.”).