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## From Inspiring Hope to Taking Action: Obama and Human Rights

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## From Inspiring Hope to Taking Action: Obama and Human Rights

### Abstract

While President George H. Bush spoke of a new world order, and his “misunderestimated” son mangled the English language at countless press conferences, with Barack Obama the USA now has a talented orator as a president. There is a new word order. But does the new and skillful rhetoric match the reality when it comes to human rights?

### Keywords

Human rights, Barack Obama, Policy, United Nations (UN)

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## From Inspiring Hope to Taking Action: Obama and Human Rights

by Stephen James

While President George H. Bush spoke of a new world order, and his “misunderestimated” son mangled the English language at countless press conferences, with Barack Obama the USA now has a talented orator as a president. There is a new *word* order. But does the new and skilful rhetoric match the reality when it comes to human rights?

The human rights record of the Bush administration has rightly been described by Human Rights Watch (Kenneth Roth, “Taking Back the Initiative from the Human Rights Spoilers” in [Human Rights Watch World Report 2009](#)) as “disastrous.” In contrast, Obama’s inaugural speech to the UN General Assembly contained some encouraging signs for human rights and human security: the acceptance of interdependence and multilateralism (at least for some matters); the emphasis on health, food and water security; and the attention to the rights of women and children. It is a refreshing change from the Republican obsession with freedom of speech, democratization and religious freedoms in China (important though these are). But there were some blind spots as well. To say that divisions between North and South “make no sense in an interconnected world” gives scant comfort to the billions suffering extreme deprivation. Moreover, “balanced and sustained” economic growth does not ensure equitable growth, distribution and human development, as evidenced by a number of UNDP reports and the work of Caroline Thomas. While the efforts to combat diseases such as HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria and polio are crucial, many people die from readily preventable diarrheal conditions. Likewise, regarding food security, how do we explain that there is an abundance of food in the world but people starve because they cannot afford access to it? If the USA and other developed nations were to open their markets to products from the South, and to reduce subsidies, this would at least make the “free” trade system a little fairer, but it would not deal with the significant ways that international financial institutions and neo-liberalism can retard the wheels of progress concerning human dignity and security.

As Roth (above) has noted, if the USA wants to lead on human rights it can best do so *by example*. The better it behaves at home and abroad, the more vigorous and less shamefaced it can be in criticizing the human rights records of other nation-states and in building constructive coalitions in favor of the people harmed by violations. Here is how, according to Human Rights Watch, the USA can improve its human rights record:

- sign and ratify relevant treaties, such as those on economic and social rights, landmines, cluster bombs, women, children and the International Criminal Court;
- hold human rights violators accountable;
- avoid complicity with, or indifference to, the human rights violations of other countries, even strategic allies (including Pakistan, Ethiopia, Russia, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Libya and China);
- observe the rule of law, constitutionalism and civil and political rights in its counterterrorism activities;
- improve social and economic rights and reduce racial inequalities at home; and
- avoid double standards and exceptionalism with regard to human rights

Were the USA to embark on this course, it might confidently join with others “to serve the common interests of human beings.” But without such action, Obama’s words will just leave us feeling empty since faith without works is dead.

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