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An Analysis of the Influence of Rhetoric in the Deaths of Those in Marginalized Groups

Introduction

On January 6th, 2021, supporters of President Donald J. Trump attacked the Capitol building, in retaliation toward the results of the 2020 Presidential Election. Many Republican figures, as well as President Donald J. Trump (who had lost that election), made comments about how the election was “stolen”, and identified the election as a fraud. In response to that, those who were persuaded by these words became angered (Auerbach). According to NPR’s visual archive, seven people died due to the events on January 6th, four of whom were rioters: Ashli Babbitt, who was shot; Rosanne Boyland, who was trampled by the mob (though her death was attributed to an accidental overdose); and Kevin Greeson and Benjamin Philips, who died later on due to injuries they sustained from the crowd. There were three officers who lost their lives: Officer Brian Sicknick died protecting the Capitol building, while Officers Howard Liebengood and Jeffery Smith took their lives in the following days (NPR). It was Trump’s words and actions, his rhetoric, that led to the attack on the Capitol, and the deaths that followed.

Michael P. Auerbach describes rhetoric as the “art of speaking or writing in a way that communicates a point clearly”, that aims to persuade an audience. In his article “Political Rhetoric: Overview”, Auerbach explains that political rhetoric is rhetoric used in favor of the governmental systems, as well as society itself. And with the advancement of the media, such rhetoric can be known and responded to across the globe.

Political rhetoric has always been in use, starting with the Greek creation of democracy. It was utilized in elections; politicians would try to persuade the people to vote for them (Auerbach). Aristotle, one of the known Greek philosophers, is known for his influence in rhetoric. One of his works, *Rhetoric*, written around 300 BC, was an analysis of persuasive speech. There are three types of rhetoric that

Aristotle talks about: deliberative, epideictic, and forensic. Deliberative rhetoric aims to convince the audience to take action, or make a decision. Epideictic rhetoric is the act of praising or condemning. Forensic rhetoric is rhetoric directed towards one's innocence or lack thereof (Auerbach). But Auerbach mentions a fourth one, partisanship rhetoric, which focuses on the favor of a certain party.

Such rhetoric isn't inherently negative, and it is still used today in the modern United States government and its parties. Currently, there is a large presence of partisanship rhetoric in the media, which is being employed by those in political positions who benefit from it. That's where things can go wrong. Auerbach (2020) uses the 2020 November election as an example of the harmful side of political rhetoric. Likewise, America has a history of employing political rhetoric against certain groups of people. Whether it's political parties, or the African American community, there are those who face the repercussions of the abuse of rhetoric. During colonization, the label "savages" was given to those who were not the picture of a civilized Western, according to the journal article by Alberto Toscano (2019), "By Contraries Execute All Things". The 'title' was assigned to the Indigenous people in America that the colonizers came in contact with, and with comparison to the mythical '*homo sylvaticus*', which hailed from Europe and meant "man of the woods" (Toscano). In the 1995 Disney movie, *Pocahontas*, a currently deemed inaccurate portrayal of the Indigenous woman 'Matoaka', and new world colonization, the colonizers sing a song, called "Savages". Pauline Turner Strong's journal article, "Animated Indians", quotes the lyrics, where there is a line in the song that says "Barely even human. Savages! Savages!" (Strong 417). This is an example of rhetoric against a marginalized group.

What happens when rhetoric goes too far? This paper focuses on those who have died due to the negative influences of political rhetoric, in the marginalized groups present in the United States. It asks the question, "how does rhetoric instigate hate?". Weaponized rhetoric will hurt and can kill those in marginalized groups in the United States. There are those who utilize it out of antagonism, who aim to turn the American people against their siblings. People such as congressmen, those in high societal positions, even the current president.

There will be case studies of seven people: Amber Thurman, Balbir Singh Sodhi, Candi Miller, Nex Benedict, O’Shae Sibley, Vicha Ratanapakdee, and Wadea Al-Fayoume. Each of their deaths were influenced by rhetoric in similar ways, and have been tied to different events: 9/11, COVID-19, the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, and the concept of religion: religion in America, religion versus abortion, and religion versus the LGBTQ+ community. Using the case studies, the paper will examine the damage rhetoric can cause when used against certain people groups.

Artwork

Along with the paper, a multimedia sculpture was done in respect to those who died. The piece is made up of a gravestone with an upside-down American flag, on a mat of moss. The gravestone is made up of cardboard, clay, paint, and vinyl spray. It is unmarked, and that is to represent the deaths of those we aren’t aware of.



The American flag is upside-down to represent a time of distress. It is a symbol of the American system failing its people. The piece as a whole represents the unknown victims of a falling country.

Methodology

Before the case studies, historical context will be provided in regards to 9/11, COVID-19, the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, religion in America, religion against abortion, and religion against the LGBTQ+ community. The three events will be explored with regards to what happened, how people reacted, what group was affected, and what the media, along with politics, said. The exploration of religion will be split up into three sections, and grounded in similar questions to the events: a broad overview of the group's history in America, what was said by the media and politics, and how this affected the group. Each case study follows three main parts: who is the person; what happened; and what politicized event or concept influenced their death.

The research is based on the analysis of media, and history itself. Academic and non-academic sources were utilized, including news articles, academic journals, and broadcast transcripts. Multiple articles were used to fact-check and to provide consistency among the information.

9/11

On September 11th, 2001, around three thousand people lost their lives in one of America's worst terror attacks. A Middle Eastern-based terrorist group known as Al-Qaeda was behind the tragedy, having hijacked four planes with three destinations: the Twin Towers in New York, the Pentagon in northern Virginia, and the White House in Washington D.C. The Imperial War Museum website gives a summary of the events that day, along with the article by Gaetano Joe Ilardi, "The 9/11 Attacks—". The passengers on the fourth plane fought back, though. And in their attempts they managed to veer the plane away from the White House, instead crashing in Somerset, Pennsylvania, according to the National Park Service's "Flight 93" memorial page. On September 20th, President George W. Bush made an announcement, declaring a "war on terror" (Ilardi), and later during the fall American and British forces, as well as the Afghan United Front were deployed with Al-Qaeda and the Taliban as their targets. A month later, in November of 2001, the Taliban fell.

Although the devastation passed, the effects of the attacks are still present, affecting a certain community in the United States. According to a survey in a 2016 article written by Katayoun Kishi with Pew Research Center, "Anti-Muslim Assaults...", in 2001 there were ninety-three reported islamophobic-themed assaults in the aftermath of 9/11 (Kishi), which is only two more than the reports in 2015 (Kishi 2016, chart), as well as 257 incidents of hate crimes (Kishi). The attacks birthed a new level of islamophobia in the US, and forced a negative narrative onto the Muslim-Arab community there. A 2017 law review written by Caroline Mala Corbin with the University of Miami School of Law, "Terrorists Are Always Muslim but Never White" explains the perspective created by white Americans that "All terrorists are Muslim", and "no Whites are terrorists" (Corbin 456). It talks about how Arabs are often viewed as "exotic and uncivilized" (Corbin 458), and Corbin also mentions portrayal of Muslim/Arab men as terrorists or overall villains in Hollywood films, exceeding over nine hundred projects (Corbin 458). That's the stereotype interpreted into the media, viewing Middle Eastern men as

evil people. The same survey with Pew Research mentioned earlier also states that 49% of Americans believe that *some* Muslims are ‘anti-American’, while 11% believe that *all* are (Kishi).

There have been many comments and statements made about the Muslim-Arab community in the US, including the negative narrative politicians have adhered to. A current example of this is the New York City mayoral race, where New York City’s first South Asian and Muslim mayor was chosen. The article, “US influencers falsely associate Mamdani with extremist group”, went into great detail about the anti-Muslim rhetoric directed towards the mayor (France 24). Zohran Mamdani, a charismatic candidate, had faced much backlash due to his religion and ethnic background. His opponent, Andrew Cuomo, who was New York’s fifty-sixth governor, made comments such as “God forbid, another 9/11, can you imagine Mamdani in the seat?” according to the Guardian article by Richard Luscombe about Islamophobia and 9/11, along with others calling him a ‘Jihadist’(Luscombe), which is someone who participates in “Jihad”. Jihad is the term for “struggle” or “striving” in the religion of Islam, but now carries a negative connotation due to the events of 9/11 being considered “Jihad” (Kretsch).

In Mamdani’s 2025 campaign, he posted a video of himself eating rice with his hands, which is how some Middle Eastern countries eat their food, according to the article by Peter Burke about the backlash that followed the video. Instantly, statements regarding manners and the ‘proper American’ way to eat were made, including one made by Rep. Brandon Gill, R-Texas, “Civilized people in America don’t eat like this.” (Burke). Gill went on to express that adaptation to “Western customs” is required to live in America, and that anyone who doesn’t should go “back to the Third World”. This kind of rhetoric teaches people to throw away their culture, and to assimilate. It’s simple: change or leave. Throw away your identity and assimilate, or you cannot be called an “American”. People choose to ignore the fact that America was only great due to diversity and variety, and pin the ribbon on faulty nationalism.

This is only scratching the surface of islamophobia in America, especially following political rhetoric. The ‘terrorist’ stereotype has resulted in the deaths of many Muslims/Arabs in the United States, and will continue to kill, as those in higher positions dote on their American pride and distaste for anyone of a Middle Eastern background.

Case Study I: Balbir Singh Sodhi

[bah-lbir sihng sahd-ee]

In Mesa, Arizona, the Sikh American Sodhi family owns two gas stations and an Indian restaurant (NPR). One member of the family, forty-nine year-old Balbir, was in charge of one of the gas stations. He was the oldest of five brothers (SALDEF), and he had a son named Sukhwinder. The Sodhi family spoke to NPR News on their *Weekend All Things Considered* broadcast, after Balbir's death, about how they noticed a change in those who came to their stores. During the aftermath of the horrors on Tuesday September 11th, 2001, the Sodhi family began to acknowledge that some of their customers were not educated regarding the differences between Sikh and Muslim traditions and garments.

Balbir, along with his brother Rohna, and their cousin, decided to converse with the director of Sikh affairs, Guru Roop Kaur Khalsa (NPR). Guru Khalsa recalled in the broadcast that they had told him, "Our customers look at us is totally different (sic). They either look at us with such fear or such hatred, and we need to reach back out to them and say what we believe in is we would never hurt them" (qtd. in NPR). They then decided to try to hold a press conference the coming Sunday. They even tried to reach out to Senator John McCain, according to "The First 9/11 'Backlash' Fatality", by the Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund (SALDEF). But that Saturday, while Balbir was at work at his gas station, he was shot by a man who had mistaken him for a Muslim. Balbir's shooter, American Frank Roque, had said that he wanted to "kill a Muslim" (1), after the events of 9/11.

That day, September 15th, 2001, four days after the fall of the Twin Towers, Roque found himself at Balbir's gas station, and the eldest Sodhi brother found three bullet holes inside of him. But he was not the only target. Roque brought his violence to another gas station, one that was owned by a Lebanese American family, and the home of a family of Afghan descent (2). Thankfully, no one else was harmed, and Roque was apprehended. Mesa Police expressed that the murder and attempted murders were not race-based hate crimes, but the Sikh American community in Arizona called for the acknowledgement that Roque's only motive was born from racism and xenophobia.

Balbir Singh Sodhi was the first recorded hate crime after 9/11 (p.2), and he was the first victim of the rhetoric influenced by the tragedy. Balbir was not Muslim, he was from India, as are most of those who practice the Sikh faith. Balbir sported dark skin, a long beard, and a turban. Those who aren't aware that multiple religions, faiths, and cultures, share certain garments and traditions, will often, if not always, group those types of people into one big label. Even if Balbir was Muslim, the hate directed towards him was still unacceptable. But it is an example of how the politicization of an event can influence such hate, and cause people to want to "kill a Muslim" (qtd. in SALDEF 1). The "all Muslims are Terrorists" mindset, did not need to be spoken into existence. Balbir was not a terrorist, he was a simple Sikh man, who loved his family, and cared about others. It was by chance that he was the same color as those who hijacked the planes, but it was malice that took his life. It crept into our minds through the hole that centuries worth of xenophobia dug.

COVID-19

In December of 2019, the first symptoms of a mysterious pneumonia-like illness appeared in Wuhan, China, where it was said that it came from a market in the city. It wasn't until the beginning of 2020, that the first case in the United States was confirmed, marking the start of one of history's deadliest pandemics. COVID-19 (coronavirus disease 2019), is caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, a respiratory virus that works similarly like the flu, according to the description on the CDC website (CDC 2024b). On January 28th, 2020, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) advised Americans not to travel to China unless it was necessary (CDC 2024a) as worldwide cases and deaths were rising due to the spread of COVID-19. Around 1,013 deaths were recorded globally on February 10th, and it wasn't until March 15th when states finally began to implement lockdowns (CDC 2024a). By December 11th of that year, the first Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine was released, and the virus began to die down in the US. But even still the virus is still present. By 2024 there were around 1.2 million deaths in the US, and those who survived may still exhibit a variety of symptoms, coining the name 'long COVID'(CDC 2024a).

There were many surveys done to explore how people reacted to the virus mentally and emotionally, including the article by Norman R. Brown et al, "Exploring People's Reaction and Perceived Issues...". The participants of the survey were based off wave one (76.5% female, 22.4% male, 1.1% other and wave two (77.9% female, 21.0% male, 1.1% other), who felt as if their lives were disrupted, who were stressed or concerned economically and medically, though some saw the shutdown as a chance for self-development, and moral re-evaluation (Brown et al.). There were also those who were opposed to the COVID-19 vaccine, according to "Anti-Vaccine Attitudes among Adults..." by Jasmin Choi et al. The article stated overall that those who opted out of receiving the vaccine did it out of fear or mistrust, also due to misinformation or health illiteracy.

Although the virus took a toll on all Americans, medically and/or mentally, the Asian and Pacific Islander community in the US faced another problem worsened by COVID-19. As the virus became well known in the US, anti-Asian xenophobia became evident due to its origins — given that it hailed from a

Chinese market. Phrases like “Chinese virus”, and “Kung flu”, spread like COVID itself. Stop AAPI Hate, an Asian and Pacific Islander advocacy non-profit, published a report on the rhetoric that followed COVID. There were those who were told to kill themselves, that it was their fault that COVID was in America. A victim even recalled the statement said to them: “I will drag you, your chink husband, and your kids off the train and kill you” (5). As proved in the quote, the slur directed towards those from China, “Chink”, was being used more (5).

According to the Pew Research Center article “Asian Americans and discrimination during the COVID-19 pandemic” by Carlyne Im et al., about one-third of API adults expressed personally knowing those who were threatened because of their ethnic background during the wake of the pandemic in 2020 (Im et al.). There was also an increase in violence and discrimination reports, cited in the article from another article by the National Library of Medicine, “Anti-Asian American Hate Crimes Spike During the Early Stages of the COVID-19 Pandemic” by Sungil Han, Jordan R. Riddell, and Alex R. Piquero (Han et al.) that follows the hate-crime increase against the API community as COVID made its way through the United States. In the previous Pew Research Center article, participants were asked to share their experiences with discrimination during the pandemic, including an anonymous Indian American who compared the xenophobia of 2020 to the xenophobia against the Muslim-Arab community after 9/11:

[T]he hate crimes I’m reading about now are towards Chinese [people] because of COVID, but I remember after 9/11, that was – I remember the looks that people would give me on the subway but also reading the violent acts committed towards Indians of all types, just the confusion – I mean, I say confusion but I mean really they wanted to attack Muslims, but they didn’t care, they were just looking for a brown person to attack. So there’s always something that happens that then suddenly falls on one community or another. (qtd. in Im et al. 29-30)

Different events, yet similar social outcomes. After an impactful event that rocks the States, why does discrimination follow? Background knowledge bears no room for opinions and wonders, but maybe, just maybe, stereotyping comes easy for the people of America.

Due to the rhetoric around COVID, surveys showed a rise in mental health conditions in API students. “Stop Asian Hate” by Rachel Banawa et al, is based off of a series of surveys given to Asian and Pacific Islander students in US colleges and universities, done in the fall of 2020, and compared to previous surveys the year before. The surveys concluded that 23% of API students experienced an increase in severe anxiety, 16% increased in depression (Banawa et al.). In the spring of 2020, 22% of students said they experienced some sort of race-based hostility, while the surveys in the fall increased \approx 13% (Banawa et al.).

COVID-19 was a buzz in the media during 2020, and an article digs deeper into the statistics, and analyzes its media appearance. “Pandemics and Politics” by Hans Schmidt, explores the history of journalism and news coverage in the US, but Schmidt also looks at the polarized and politicized content regarding COVID (Schmidt). Schmidt came to the conclusion that politics drastically mentioned more during COVID-19 reports than any other pandemic/influenza (Schmidt).

Political figures in America made their statements, expressing their sympathy and desire for the American people to push on through, mourning the deaths of those who were lost to the virus. But the president at the time, Donald J. Trump, made some comments that influenced the discrimination towards the API community. Trump used the term, the “Chinese Virus” in a post on X (formerly known as Twitter). The study “Trump’s ‘Chinese Virus’”, by Laura Kurtzman found that there were increases in the hashtag use of the term. Trump also had called COVID, “kung flu” at a rally in Phoenix, Arizona, sparking backlash with the derogatory use of the martial art’s name (qtd. in BBC).

The political remarks may not have been the direct influence at the beginning of COVID’s reign in the US, but they certainly have negatively affected the lives of Asian and Pacific Islanders in the US by fueling such undeserved hate towards the community.

Case Study II: Vicha Ratanapakdee

[vee-cha ra-tan-uh-pak-dee]

Eighty-four year-old Vicha Ratanapakdee arrived in San Francisco during the 2000s, from his home in Thailand (Lee). He was married to Jinata Ratanapakdee, and they lived with their daughter, Monthanus. According to the New York Times article by Jaeah Lee regarding the Thai American, Vicha was a known Buddhist, and was “the kind of person who embraced the world with open arms” (Lee). He was also known as “Grandpa Vicha”, mostly by Monthanus’s children, said the NBC Bay Area article by Alyssa Goard et al.

Monthanus had begun to worry for her parents, due to the rising xenophobia targeted towards those in the Asian and Pacific Islander communities in the US. Even she had faced harassment in early January of 2020 — she was spit at, and faced derogatory comments. And not just her, but her kids as well were the target of hate speech from adults (Lee). In January 2021, Vicha was out on his daily walk, something he did when he first immigrated to the US, according to the statement by the National Council of Asian Pacific Islanders. It was during his walk, when nineteen year-old Antoine Watson charged towards the elderly man (NCAPI). Vicha fell to the ground, and lost consciousness. The Thai American unfortunately never woke up, and died two days later. The encounter was caught on a neighbor’s security camera, but Watson’s trial was never classified as a hate crime, regardless of the Ratanapakdee family’s claims (NCAPI).

Vicha Ratanapakdee was one of the first cases of anti-Asian hate due to the rhetoric around COVID-19. Monthanus and her children faced verbal assaults, which are of the probability of being influenced by rhetoric like Trump’s “kung flu” (Kurilla) and “Chinese Virus” (Kurtzman). The danger of such rhetoric is that it makes room for stereotypes to be born, and used against people like those in the Asian and Pacific Islander communities. The sweet, elderly Thai American was the victim of rhetoric fueled by hate and ignorance. Grandpa Vicha should have made it back home that day.

Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

One of the longest ongoing land conflicts in history, between Israel and Palestine, started in 1947, when the United Nations General Assembly passed Resolution 181, which was a proposition to turn Palestinian territories into a Jewish state and an Arab state (CFR). Following the conflict timeline set up by the Council on Foreign Relations, a year later, on May 14th, Israel declared independence from British rule, and Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria invaded Israel, sparking the Arab-Israeli War. On December 11th, 1948, around seven-hundred Palestinian refugees fled their homes due to the fighting, while Israel won the war, and captured the land that was designated for the future state of Palestine.

In 1973, on October 3rd, Egypt and Syria attempted to take Israeli land with Soviet aid, as the United States aided Israel. The war is known by a few names: the ‘October War’, the ‘Yom Kippur War’, and the ‘Ramadan War’. In hopes to end the fighting, the United Nations sponsors a ceasefire between the countries. On September 1st, 1978, Egypt and Israel signed the Camp David Accords, to establish a peace treaty between them. Per the Camp David Accords, Israel was required to withdraw from the Sinai Peninsula, which they did on March 26th, 1979.

On December 1st, 1987, an Israeli driver killed four Palestinians in a car accident, causing the first uprising, or ‘intifada’, against Israeli occupation of West Bank/Gaza. The next six years were met with Israeli-Palestinian violence, resulting in about 200 Israeli citizens dead, and around 1,300 dead Palestinians. That same year, Palestinian cleric Sheikh Ahmed Yassin established a Jihad-endorsing group known as Hamas, which was later named a terrorist group in the United States in 1997. On September 28th, 1995, the Interim Agreement, or Oslo II Accords, was signed, giving Palestine total control over the West Bank. On September 28th, 2000, Israeli politicians visited the Temple Mount (al-Haram al-Sharif). Their visit was viewed as a status-quo change from the Palestinian’s perspective, sparking a second intifada marked by demonstrations turned violent, lasting until 2005. Around 1,000 Israeli and 4,000 Palestinians died. Two years later, on March 27th, a Passover celebration in Netanya, Israel, was met with a terrorist attack, resulting in thirty people dead.

In 2008, on December 27th, around eight hundred rockets and attacks from Israel were launched towards the Gaza Strip. The violence lasts less than a month, with hundreds of civilians/fighters dead. In 2014, Israel and Palestine faced attacks from either side. Israel invades the Gaza Strip, and their occupation lasts for fifty days. Around 2,000 Gazans, sixty-six Israeli soldiers, and five Israeli citizens died. A ceasefire brokered by the United States with Egypt, Israel, and other powers.

On January 28th, 2020, the administration under the United States president at the time, Donald J. Trump, proposed a peace plan between Israel and Palestine. The peace plan was claimed to be one-sided in aid towards Israel, with a path leading to Israel controlling the, leading to the rejection of the plans by Palestinians authorities. A year later, Palestinians faced evictions from East Jerusalem. The evictions, and hostilities exchanged at a mosque sparked conflict, resulting in two hundred dead in Gaza, and ten in Israel dead. The administration of the president at the time, Joe Biden attempted to mediate truce, and they managed to restore some US aid with Palestine. In 2022, Israel launched attacks in retaliation to Palestinian attacks towards Jewish Israelis. That same year, on October 7th, Hamas, with the aid of other Palestinian groups, led a surprise attack on Israel. Around 1,200 people died, and over 200 hostages taken, naming it the deadliest attack in Israeli history.

In 2024, starting September 17, Israel led attacks at Hezbollah, a Lebanese military group, for expressing support for Hamas, with an invasion of Southern Lebanon following. Iran arrived at the aid of Hezbollah with a launch of over 150 ballistic missiles. A ceasefire took place out of fear of a larger war breaking out. The ceasefire agreed upon by the Israeli government and Hamas went into effect starting January 2025. Per the ceasefire's terms, Israel releases Palestinian prisoners in exchange for Hamas to release Israeli prisoners. Israel agreed to allow humanitarian aid to address humanitarian issues in Gaza. Amidst the momental peace, both sides began to accuse the other of violations of the agreement, and in March, Israel launched airstrikes and began blocking aid to Palestine.

Since then, there have been many attempts at a ceasefire, but all have proven to be ineffective, and conflict still remains. Since the article was last updated on June 24th, 2025, there have been about 60,000 Palestinian deaths, and over fifty hostages held by Hamas.

According to another Pew Research article, written by Andy Cerda et al.; “How Americans View the Israel-Hamas Conflict 2 Years Into the War”, American’s skepticism of the Israeli government’s actions has increased compared to how they felt earlier in the conflict (Cerda). 39% stated that Israel’s actions are too extreme, that the government had gone too far (Cerda). Support for either side is divided amongst Americans, according to Maya Sweedler’s article, “How American views on Israel and antisemitism have changed since Oct. 7”. It is also stated that over the course of the conflicts between Israel and Palestine, some lost support for Israel due to their government’s actions (Sweedler). The article then goes on to explain that the conversations and debates regarding the conflict are not limited to the US’s foreign actions, but that there is a concern about racism and discrimination in Jewish and Muslim communities. Sweedler talks about the fear for the safety of said communities:

The war has amplified debates in the U.S. not just about foreign policy, but also about the safety and visibility of Jewish communities in America, where fears of discrimination are rising alongside growing divides over Israel. The same polls show that U.S. adults are also concerned about anti-Muslim sentiment, but there hasn't been a similarly dramatic shift. (Sweedler)

The statement from the article contributes to the previous point, that Americans fear for the wellbeing of those who find themselves in the middle of the conflict, and those in the US whose roots hail from the Middle East. In the same article, Sweedler talks about a survey conducted by the nonpartisan Jewish advocacy group, the American Jewish Community, found that 7 out of 10 of those who participated in the survey said that they found the Jewish community less secure than the previous year. (Sweedler)

According to the AJC Director of Antisemitism Policy, Holly Huffnagle, "the number one reason given for why they feel less secure as Jews in America was the Israel-Hamas war". (Sweedle)

With favor directed towards the Jewish community in the US, the Palestinian American community is also bearing the brunt of the conflict. An Al Jazeera article, “Anti-Muslim hate hits new high in US” talks about the complaints of anti-Muslim/anti-Arabic incidents (Al Jazeera). According to a report by the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), recorded in the Al Jazeera article, 15.4% faced employment discrimination, 14.8% had complaints regarding immigration and asylum, 9.8%

regarding education, and 7.5% regarding hate crimes. It was stated that there was an increase in hate crimes and Islamophobia since 2023, per the October 7th attacks. Incidents influenced by hate and discrimination include a six-year-old Palestinian American boy being stabbed, a three-year-old PA girl being the victim of an attempted drowning, a Muslim man in New York being beaten, and the deaths of two Israeli guests in Florida, who were shot due to being mistaken for being Palestinian.

There have been several comments and actions regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from those in political positions. But the most known have been made by President Donald J. Trump, who has made statements about deporting Palestinian Americans, and revoking student visas for ‘ Hamas Sympathizers’, according to a White House statement (Trump);

To all the resident aliens who joined in the pro-jihadist protests, we put you on notice: come 2025, we will find you, and we will deport you. I will also quickly cancel the student visas of all Hamas sympathizers on college campuses, which have been infested with radicalism like never before.

(qtd. in “Fact Sheet”)

A travel ban went into effect on June 9th, 2025, preventing people from twelve different countries from entering the US, but Trump added an extension to the ban that went into effect on January 1st, 2026, that blocked those with Palestinian Authority-issued travel documents from traveling to the US (IRC). The ban prevents Palestinian refugees from leaving their war-ridden cities, and puts Palestinians in the US at a risk of deportation.

Trump’s actions and comments, as well as those of other politicians, have influenced discrimination towards the Palestinian community in the US. The Jewish/Israeli community also faces backlash. Sympathy for either community is prevalent currently, expressed daily and everywhere. The conflict goes back years, and yet there is no idea of when it will end. Both sides have faced suffering, and both sides have contributed to suffering, a cycle of fighting, pain, and death.

Case Study III: Wadea Al-Fayoume

[wuh-dee-uh ahl-fai-oom-eh]

Wadea Al-Fayoume was a six year-old boy who lived in Plainfield, Ohio, according to the article by Mike Wendling, “Wadea al-Fayoume:”. His father, Oday Al-Fayoume (Nawaz), and mother, Hanaan Shahin, emigrated from Palestine, but Wadea was born in the US (Wendling). In the PBS news transcript about Wadea by Amna Nawaz and Courtney Norris, Nawaz speaks to Edward Ahmed Mitchell, the national deputy executive director of the Council on American-Islamic Relations. Ahmed talks about how Wadea was like any young boy, “He loved sports. He loved drawing. He loved his family” (qtd. in Nawaz). Wadea and his mother lived separately from Wadea’s father, but their landlord, Joseph Czuba (Wendling), was a present figure in their lives. He brought gifts for Wadea, and he even built him a play area outside.

Czuba was friendly with the family, but as the Hamas War started and escalated, he became hostile towards them. On October 14th, 2023 (Al Jazeera), Czuba went to their apartment and started to argue with Shahin. The fighting became violent as Czuba expressed that “muslims needed to die” (qtd. in Nawaz), and he attacked Shahin with a knife. She was stabbed at least twelve times but escaped, and survived. Czuba was not done, though, and he found Wadea in the apartment. The landlord stabbed the six year-old around twenty-six times, and Wadea did not survive (Wendling).

Since 2023, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) has recorded over sixty thousand children injured or maimed — know that this statistic was from 2025, and that the number may be even higher due to current events — in the Middle East (Russel). But Palestinian hate is present here in the United States, and it killed a child. The statement “muslims needed to die” (qtd. in Nawaz), carries the same effects as the statement made by Frank Roque, Balbir Singh Sodhi’s killer; “needed to kill a muslim” (qtd. in SALDEF 1). The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is nothing but political, with aid from the United States fueling the violence. Why did Wadea need to die? What harm did this six

year-old exhibit to Czuba? Was it the color of his skin? Was it his name? The only difference between the barbarity in the Middle East and the violence in the United States, is the distance.

Religion

Religion in America

Christianity made its first appearance in America in the late 1400s, when the Spanish first arrived. The Harvard University's Pluralism Project follows the timeline of Christianity in America. When the Spanish began to settle, they encountered native people groups that took part in many other faiths, in "which the Spanish tried to evangelize (Harvard). Along came others, looking for new land, including the English. The Church of England was established as a church in Jamestown in 1607, thirteen years later, Pilgrims settled in Plymouth Rock. In 1630, Puritans led by John Winthrop settled up north and founded the Massachusetts Bay Colony. During the 1730s-1740s, a series of many revivals occurred in response to the presence of 'sinners' in America — this is known as the Great Awakening (Harvard).

In 1787, the known signing of the Constitution occurred. According to the article by John R. Vile, "The Bible and the US Constitution", the signers of the Constitution were of different faiths, all within the Abrahamic religions. Many believe that because of their faiths, that the Constitution is a Christian-based document. But the Constitution disproves this theory, stating in the First Amendment, in the Bill of Rights, that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof..." (qtd. in U.S. Const. Amend. 1). Hugh Hecló (2013) also brings up another factor, in his journal article "Is America a Christian Nation?" — claiming America to be a Christian nation devalues the faith, and rids patriotism of its true meaning: "The Christian right's effort to identify their country with their faith both distorts patriotism and cheapens Christianity" (Hecló). Hecló also condemns the left for their theocracy scare tactics, and that their aim for 'separation of church and state' is fueled by emotions rather than rational citizenship. Based on the two articles, it would be safe to say that America is not a Christian nation, and should not be.

Another reason why America shouldn't be a Christian nation, is because of the other religions and faiths present in the United States, some of which lie outside of the Abrahamic religions. According to the Pew Research Center study of Religious Landscape, sixty-two percent of Americans identify as Christian,

while twenty-nine percent are unaffiliated with any religion or faith (RLS). The study's percentage is slightly off due to those who had opted out, so instead of one-hundred percent, it rounds up to ninety-eight percent. Twenty-two percent identify as Evangelical Protestants, nineteen percent are Catholic, eleven percent are Mainline Protestant, and five percent are Historically Black Protestant. Along with two percent of Latter-Day Saints — or Mormons — the one percent Orthodox Christians, and the less than one percent Jehovah's Witnesses, they make up the majority of Americans (RLS). So who is the seven percent? Well, there are those who identify within an Abrahamic religion but do not classify themselves as Christians: those who are Jewish, and those who are Muslim. Then there are those who identify outside of the Abrahamic religions: Buddhists and Hindus, as well as the less than one percent of Unitarians and those of other liberal faiths, and the Native American faiths and belief systems (RLS). There is also Paganism and Wicca, which mainly make up the faiths outside of the Abrahamic religions.

America is made up of many different religions and faiths, only because of those who immigrate here. But there are those who uplift the rhetoric surrounding the ideology of Christianity being the only right religion, and the only religion in America. For example, there are states where bills are trying to be passed regarding the presence of the Ten Commandments in schools, according to the SCOTUS Blog by Kelsey Dallas, "The Ten Commandments return to classrooms". Those states include Louisiana, Arkansas, and Texas, all of which complaints and lawsuits have been filed against (Dallas). There was also some negative direct rhetoric from those in political positions, such as Representative John Gillette's X (formerly known as Twitter) posts. The posts included the comments posted September 2nd, 2025, "I have years of direct experience with these savages. Thier (sic) own religion preached convert or die. F**K EM. If they want here to become the sh*t hole they left... they can go home" (qtd. in MacDonald-Evoy). These comments were directed towards those of the Muslim faith, as many of his posts were. According to the AZ Mirror article "Arizona GOP lawmaker calls Muslims 'f***ing savages'" by Jerod MacDonald-Evoy, many of his X posts are Gillette using the label "savages", and that Islamophobia is a "construct of the Marxist left" (qtd. in MacDonald-Evoy). But Gillette was not the only Representative making such remarks online. Rep. Mary Miller spoke ill about a guest in House who

opened in prayer. In the article by Aaron Pellish, “Mary Miller Says She’s ‘Deeply Troubled’”, Pellish explains that Miller misidentified the man as a Muslim in a post on X, where she claimed that “America was founded as a Christian nation” (qtd. in Pellish), and that Congress must uphold what is true. As explained before, America was not founded as a Christian nation, but founded by those who not only respected other religions, beliefs, and faiths, but respected their own faiths.

Perhaps one has heard the statement, “Indians worship cows”, or like what was explained before, “all Muslims are terrorists”. Those statements are results of xenophobia and racism, but they are also the outcomes of when one religion is held to a higher status. Compared to Christianity or any Abrahamic religion, other faiths and beliefs are seen as inferior, They are not taken as seriously as Christianity is being taken, and they are being disrespected as the push for Christianity in United States’ politics advances.

Religion versus Abortion

In 1973, the Supreme Court decided that under the Fourteenth Amendment, abortion was a fundamental right, in the known landmark case, *Roe v. Wade*. The Brennan Center for Justice has a history of reproductive rights court cases, where it goes through the cases and events leading up to abortion being constitutional. Norma McCorvey, who lived in Texas, became pregnant in 1969. This was her third pregnancy, and due to her addictions at the time, McCorvey decided to abort the pregnancy (BCJ). Unfortunately for McCorvey, Texas's abortion ban only allowed an abortion to the pregnant person's life. Two Texas lawyers filed a suit for McCorvey under the name 'Jane Roe' — those lawyers were Linda Coffee and Sarah Weddington — and the defendant was attorney Henry Wade (BCJ). On January 22nd, 1973, the Supreme Court decided that abortion was a right that the government should have little to no restrictions on. But in 2022, *Roe v. Wade* was overturned by the case *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, where the right to an abortion was put in the hands of the state (BCJ).

The side against abortion, Pro-Life, is mainly influenced by Christian beliefs. In “The Tyranny of the Discontinuous Mind”, an essay by Richard Dawkins (2011), Dawkins explains that those of a discontinuous mind — in this case, he describes those who are Pro-Life — that something can either be a person or not, and that they cannot understand the concept of an ‘incomplete person’, and so by their definition, abortion is murder (Dawkins). The Bible itself doesn't mention abortion, but Christians use certain verses in favor of the argument. One of them being the infamous, “Thou shalt not kill” (KJV, Exodus 20:13). There is also another verse that Christians often use to condemn abortion, and it is in the beginning of Genesis, where God creates Man — “So God created man in his *own* image, in the image of God created he him, male and female created he them” (KJV, Genesis 1:27). The verse is used to explain that since everyone is made in God's image, then surely everyone is special. But this verse only says nothing about babies or fetuses. That's where Jeremiah 1:3 supposedly comes in. The verse says, “Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee, and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee...” (KJV, Jeremiah 1:3), which is roughly translated into God saying that he knew people before they were

born, before they were even a thought, and that their lives are sanctified. Such a verse could be used to condemn abortion, but it only works if God is feared exactly how Christianity deems him to be feared.

Religious rhetoric is what makes up the anti-abortion arguments, and has made its way into politics. Whether science is a factor or not, religion has fueled the Pro-Life movement, and criminalized everyone Pro-Choice.

Case Study IV: Amber Thurman

[am-bur thur-mun]

Amber Nicole Thurman was born on September 16th, 1993 (“Find a Grave”), to Shanette Williams and Andre Thurman, according to Rebekah Sager’s article, “Her Daughter Died After a Fatal Delay...” with Capital B News. She had two sisters, Andrika and Cjauna “CJ”, and her six year-old son Messiah (Sager). Thurman was said to enjoy being a cheerleader and majorette earlier on in life, and she loved to sing and dance (Sager). At age twenty-eight, Thurman worked as a medical assistant, and had dreams of being a nurse (Sager). But that dream was shattered when she died due to the lack of medical care in regards to the abortion ban Georgia had passed (Rahman 3).

According to the article “Amber Thurman First Named ‘Preventable’ Abortion Death Since Bans” by Khaleda Rahman (2024), Georgia’s abortion ban went into effect on July 20th, 2022 (Rahman). Thurman found out she was having twins, and decided to have an abortion, mainly to maintain a stable environment within her family, as a current mother, and aspiring nursing student (Rahman). Due to Georgia’s ban, Thurman set up an appointment with a clinic in North Carolina to implement the surgical abortion (Rahman). But due to traffic, Thurman arrived late to the clinic. The best they could do was to offer her a pill-induced abortion, with mifepristone and misoprostol (which were both approved by the FDA). During the days after taking the pills, Thurman started to become ill, including vomiting and heavy bleeding (Rahman). She was admitted to Piedmont Henry Hospital, where she was diagnosed with ‘acute severe sepsis’. After much waiting, the doctors finally allowed for a D&C — dilation and curettage — to be performed (under the ban, a D&C was considered illegal unless the situation met a specific set of standards), and the doctors decided that Thurman would need a full hysterectomy (Rahman). But during surgery, Thurman’s heart stopped.

A maternal mortality committee came to the conclusion that if the D&C had been performed earlier, then Amber Thurman would have had a better chance to survive (Rahman) The Gender Equity Policy Institute did a study on maternal mortality after abortions in the United States, where they found

unfair statistical differences between Black and African American women, and White women (GEPI). They recorded just around sixty Black maternal deaths per one hundred thousand live births. This follows a long-lasting history of racial inequality in the medical field. It also follows the concept of religion versus abortion, where religious rhetoric like “abortion is murder”, has made its way into the political realm (Dawkins). Political figures, such as Winsome Earle-Sears, who was a Virginia Republican Governor candidate in 2025, had indirectly called abortion murder three years prior to the 2025 election, which was recorded in a clip from “Richmond’s Morning News with John Reid”, with WRVA, where she turned the conversation from the war with Ukraine to abortion: “I don’t care ... I don’t care who you are. Murder is murder. And one day it’s going to be your turn” (qtd. in Israel). Rhetoric like this is what influences the laws implemented, which then affects those who not only require abortions to live, but require the procedures banned along it, like D&C.

Amber Thurman lost her life, not because of medicinal malfunctions, but because the care she needed could not have been offered to her until she was close to breathing her last breath. These laws would not be in place if religious rhetoric had not become another politician to follow.

Case Study V: Candi Miller

[kan-dee mil-err]

Candi Miller was a forty-one year-old Black woman who grew up in Alabama, but spent most of her life in Atlanta, Georgia Adams. According to Kavitha Surana’s article, “Afraid to Seek Care Amid Georgia’s Abortion Ban...”, Miller was married to Alex Cardenas, and she was a mother of three kids. Miller spent her time braiding hair and doing nails to earn a living. She loved gardening, and she was known to have a soft spot towards stray cats (Surana). Her family said that you could always find her listening to The Commodores, and that she was the ‘firecracker’ of the family — she was quick to stand up for those she loved.

Miller had been diagnosed with lupus, diabetes, and hypertension. And in the fall of 2022, she discovered that she was pregnant (Surana). She found herself in the same situation as Amber Thurman; Georgia’s ban prevented her from trusting the medical systems, and so she avoided doctors, according to. In fear for her health, given her medical ailments, ordered the pills online, and administered the abortion herself (Surana). The pills did not help dispel all of the fetal tissue, but regardless of the pain, Miller refused to go to the hospital. On November 12th, Cardenas found his wife unresponsive in her bed, with their three year-old daughter by her side. The autopsy results showed the dispelled fetal tissue, in which the maternal health experts committee expressed that if it wasn’t for the ban in place, then the D&C could have possibly saved her life, as well as a doctor-administered abortion (Surana).

Thurman and Miller were both victims of the religious rhetoric that influences politics — Miller’s own fear of the laws in place could not outweigh the fear of her health. Miller was not a murderer, she did not hate what could thrive in her womb, but she feared what would bring her to her tomb. Miller was not a criminal, she was a gardener, a sanctuary for stray cats, a wife, and a mother.

Religion versus the LGBTQ+ Community

In contrast to abortion, there are many verses in the Bible that condemn homosexuality. First, critics claim that God created Eve for Adam as an example of heterosexuality to follow. Leviticus 18:22 says that men should not have sexual relations with men in the same way that men have such relations with women (KJV, Leviticus 18:22). Romans 1:26-27 says something similar; "... for even their women did change the natural use into which is against nature, and likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the women, burned in their lust one toward another..." (KJV, Romans 1:26-27). These verses are used against those who identify as gay, lesbian, or any other sexual and romantic identity.

They also go back to the Genesis 1:27 verse to argue against 'transgenderism'. It states that God created male and female, so by their logic it cancels out the validity of those who identify as neither. The Family Foundation, a faith-based organization in Virginia that became more popular due to their opposition to sex education, has a page on their website dedicated to 'Gender and Human Design'. They claim that 'transgenderism' is a false ideology, and that it causes more harm than good for a person's gender dysphoria, by affirming the person's "gender confusion" (Family Foundation). The organization also stated that it causes those who transition to become more depressed and suicidal than they were before they transitioned.

From the riots after the Stonewall police raid in 1969 (Metcalf), to the landmark court case *Obergefell v. Hodges*, that gave people the right to marry those of the same sex (HRC), those in the LGBTQ+ community were always determined to fight for their rights. Even as the Moral Majority — the far right Christian organization formed by Reverend Jerry Falwell, which aimed to inject Christian values into American politics (as stated in page 2 of the journal article, "Second Coming:" by Mark J. Rozell et al.) — tried to use their religious rhetoric against the community, they continued on.

Around eight-hundred and sixty-seven bills regarding transgender people were proposed, as of 2025, according to Erin in the Morning. Seventy-seven of those are bills preventing transgender people from using the bathrooms that match their gender (Reed). There were even multiple instances of queer

people being called “pedophiles” and “groomers”, according to the article by Henry Berg-Brousseau, “NEW REPORT: Anti-LGBTQ+ Grooming Narrative Surged...” with the Human Rights Campaign.

The history of Christianity and its influence on the LGBTQ+ community runs deep, with beliefs rooted in God that devalue the lives of those who stray away from the heteronormality they built society on.

Case Study VI: Nex Benedict

[neks ben-eh-dikt]

Nex Benedict was a sixteen year-old student at Owasso High School in Oklahoma. According to “Honoring Nex Benedict,” by Jose Soto, Nex enjoyed *The Walking Dead*, and being outside. They liked to draw and read, and to play video games like *Minecraft* (Soto). Benedict was raised by their grandmother, Sue Benedict, according to “After Nex Benedict's death,” by Adamp Kemp, and they had a cat, named Zeus (Soto). Their family’s origins lay in the Choctaw Nation, which, like other Native American cultures, recognized different gender identities, including Two-Spirit.

Nex had been the target of bullies during 2023 and early 2024, according to the article “Preventing Suicidal Behavior in Gender-Diverse Youth” by Janet M. Bechtold et al., due to their gender expression and their gender identity. On February 7th, 2024, while Nex was in the bathroom, they were assaulted by three female classmates (Bechtold). The attacks advanced until Nex fell unconscious, said Max Bryan in NPR News’ *All Things Considered*, broadcast: “Nex Benedict's hometown holds vigil...”. Nex was sent to the emergency room shortly after, but went home later that day. The next day, February 8th, Nex Benedict took their life.

That same day, bills were passed regarding students using the bathrooms that correlated to the gender assigned at birth (Soto). When Republican Senator Tom Woods was asked about the importance of those bills, he made this comment: “We are a religious state. We are going to fight and keep that filth out of the state of Oklahoma because we're a Christian state” (qtd. in Soto). There is no such thing as a religious state in the US, the Constitution made sure of it. That is not the issue here. The problem is how Woods’ religious rhetoric becomes politicized. The ‘filth’ in his statement, is referring to members of the LGBTQ+ community. Words become a weapon, the same words that met Nex at school for the last year of their life. Nex’s case is different from the others. They were not killed by strangers looking for American pride, and they were not killed by undispelled fetal tissue in their uterus. Nex took their life. The ugliness of rhetoric can take the form of a knife or the form of a patriot, but sometimes, it can take

the form of oneself. But in a way, Nex Benedict shared one similarity with Candi Miller — they died in fear of their own government.

Nex Benedict was a child.

Case Study VI: O'Shae Sibley

[o-shay sihb-lee]

O'Shae Sibley, a twenty-eight year old Black gay man from Brooklyn, New York, loved to dance.

He was known for dancing, according to the article "Remembering O'Shae Sibley", by Lana Leonard, especially voguing, as well as being a ballroom performer, and an artist (Leonard). His family and friends said that Sibley had a big heart, and would always defend his family.

Sibley and his friends were at a Mobile gas station on July 29th, 2023, where they were outside voguing, listening to Beyonce's *The Renaissance* (Leonard). It was then when a group of men came and started to harass Sibley and his friends, according to the statement the Legal Defense Fund made regarding Sibley. The men berated Sibley and his friends, and called them homophobic slurs (LDF). Among the harassers was a seventeen year-old, Dmitiry Popov, according to NBC News. The teen was in possession of a knife, in which he used to fatally stab Sibley (Leonard).

The rhetoric spoken against O'Shae Sibley and his friends was influenced by the same religious rhetoric Nex Benedict had faced before they died. And although their cases are similar, there was no politician calling Sibley 'filth'.

America is not a Christian Nation, but religious rhetoric has made its way into politics, into bills passed, and mindsets influenced by discrimination. There are those who understand that there should be no such thing as a religious country, and there are those who believe that every law should be based on the Bible. But that pushes other religions to the side, prevents specific medical procedures, and discriminates based on how a person loves.

Conclusion

From the tragic fall of the Twin Towers, to Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority, the politicization of different events and concepts in America has directly and indirectly affected marginalized groups. If it wasn't for the "all Muslims are terrorists" (Corbin) rhetoric, then perhaps Balbir Singh Sodhi would not have been shot. Maybe "Grandpa Vicha", would still be completing his morning walks if it weren't for anti-Asian hate influences, like President Trump's "kung flu" rally in Phoenix (BBC). Young Wadea would be celebrating his ninth birthday this year, if it wasn't for the fighting in the Middle East, and the "Jihadist" rhetoric (qtd. in "Fact Sheet"), that caused his landlord to turn against him. "Nurse Thurman" would have spent the rest of her life helping people if it wasn't for the indoctrination of Christian beliefs into the political system, and maybe Nex Benedict could have been playing Minecraft at this very moment.

How rarely does one hear these names? These deaths did not have the coverage they deserved (a child being stabbed to death is something every American should be angry about, if angry about anything), and one should wonder, why? Instagram memorials and birthday posts on Tiktok, once or twice a year, will never suffice. Perhaps, these deaths are examples of the deterioration of a country. These deaths are examples of how much of a weapon politicization can be, how rhetoric can kill and hurt in the same ways as a gun, or a knife.

Such an armament is pointed towards the marginalized groups in America, and those in the majority do nothing but watch — there are even those in the marginalized groups that deny the influences of political rhetoric, or even rhetoric in general. But what is worse, and what is the case for many, there are those who do not know or understand what is happening. And that is why this will continue to happen. The media has covered laws, violence, and bills that influence a string of rhetoric that lead to marginalized groups.

What can people do to prevent the negative outcomes of the influences of political rhetoric? One word: awareness. Be aware of history, be aware of the faults in the American systems, and be aware of the repercussions of political rhetoric.

Who lies in an unmarked grave? Awareness etches a name into the stone. It is the only way to prevent more deaths, and it's the only way to give those who have already died the justice they deserve. Because those seven are not the only ones, and there will be more to come. So please, be aware, and give respect to those who have already passed.

Amber Thurman.

Balbir Singh Sodhi

Candi Miller.

Nex Benedict.

O'Shae Sibley.

Vicha Ratanapakdee.

Wadea Al-Fayoume.

Say their names.

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