

INTERSECTIONAL IMPERIALISM:  
Neoliberal Identity Politics and the American #Girlboss

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## Introduction

One March 9, 2021, President Joe Biden tweeted an image (Figure 1) with the following caption: “I want every child to know that this is what vice presidents and generals in the United States Armed Forces look like.”<sup>1</sup> In this picture are two generals (both women) and Vice President Kamala Harris. In a response to this post, another Twitter user commented: “they say the next ones will be sent by a woman”—a reference to a 2016 political cartoon drawn by Australian artist Sam Wallman that criticizes Hillary Clinton (Figure 2).<sup>2</sup> The phenomenon indicated by both of these



**Figure 1.** An image tweeted by Joe Biden during Women's Month. (Image from Joe Biden via Twitter, used without permission.)



**Figure 2.** A 2016 political cartoon by Sam Wallman. (Image from Sam Wallman via Twitter, used without permission.)

images is popularly known as intersectional imperialism and has become increasingly visible in the United States government in recent years. It is a phenomenon that involves employing women, people of color, LGBTQ+ individuals, and people with other marginalized identities to fulfill an imperialist agenda.

<sup>1</sup> Joe Biden (@POTUS), “I want every child to know that this is what vice presidents and generals in the United States Armed Forces look like,” Twitter, March 9, 2021, 12:35 PM, [twitter.com/POTUS/status/1369386260964532225](https://twitter.com/POTUS/status/1369386260964532225).

<sup>2</sup> See: Bes. D (@besf0rt), “they say the next ones will be sent by a woman,” Twitter, March 9, 2021, 3:36 PM, [twitter.com/besf0rt/status/1369431831217586176](https://twitter.com/besf0rt/status/1369431831217586176); Sam Wallman, 2016, digital political cartoon, Twitter, accessed May 14, 2021, [twitter.com/wallmansam/status/760092107549712385](https://twitter.com/wallmansam/status/760092107549712385).

In the following paper, I intend to explore how this phenomenon came to be. I will specifically focus on how women—and especially women of color—in the U.S. government have harmed communities for the sake of securing power. Beginning with an imperial history of the United States, I will move into a discussion of neoliberalism and neoliberal identity politics—the paradigm that laid the groundwork for intersectional imperialism to flourish. Then, I will discuss the #Girlboss narrative, a framework that descended directly from neoliberal identity politics in the United States with an added focus on women in power. Finally, I will utilize the frameworks I have developed over the course of this paper in a series of case studies that center on contemporary intersectional imperialists in the United States.

Ultimately, intersectional imperialism has come to forefront of U.S. politics, because the free-market oriented neoliberal paradigm in which the U.S. exists has promoted one's financial status as their primary identity while superficially divorcing marginalized identities from their material impact. At the same time, private institutions have commodified these identities into something that can be bought, manipulated, and sold. This commodification has created a political system in which constituents are compelled to remain satisfied with superficial representation, while their representatives carry out actions that harm them in the long run.

### **Part I: A Brief History of the U.S. Empire**

The history of the U.S. empire is a history of war, displacement, and insatiable power. From the original settler-colonial project into the current day, the United States has launched colonial project after colonial project, each justified under the guise of freedom. In the following section, I will highlight moments in the imperial history of the United States through three case studies, beginning in the late 1600s and ending with the current day. Utilizing a framework

developed by Harrison Wright, I conceive of U.S. imperialism as a system in which the United States (as the imperial unit) subjugates individuals and states in an ever-expanding global sphere of influence, coercing them into behavior that monetarily benefits U.S. elites.<sup>3</sup> It must be noted that the case studies included below are not the only examples of U.S. imperialism nor are they necessarily the most important. Instead, they are snapshots of various moments in time chosen because they reinforce the United States as an empire in the first place.

### **The First Thanksgiving: Repainting U.S. Settler-Colonialism**

The first case study in U.S. imperial history is one that centers on the history of Thanksgiving. Using artistic depictions of the “first” Thanksgiving celebration, I explore the disconnects between the reality of the Massachusetts settler-colonial project and the told and retold tale of the Puritan quest for liberty. In the following section (and the remainder of this paper), settler-colonialism refers to “an ongoing system of power that perpetuates the genocide and repression of indigenous peoples and cultures” and “normalizes the continuous settler occupation, exploiting lands and resources to which indigenous peoples have genealogical relationships.”<sup>4</sup> Due to revisionist retellings of U.S. history—including that of Thanksgiving—the violent implications of the initial settler-colonial projects in the United States have not only been excused but are also celebrated.

The importance placed on Thanksgiving for the sake of writing a coherent “American” history is particularly visible in the artistic depictions of the holiday produced in the centuries

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<sup>3</sup> Wright’s framework for imperialism involves defining “(1) some political or social unit (such as a state, nation, or people) which is being imperialistic; (2) some unit which is the object of imperialism; (3) the nature of the relationship between the two; (4) the means of establishing this relationship; (5) the degree of realization of the relationship; and (6) the reasons, or motives, for establishing the relationship.” See: Harrison M. Wright, “Imperialism’: The Word and its Meaning,” *Social Research* 34, no. 4 (1967): 662, [www.jstor.org/stable/40970749](http://www.jstor.org/stable/40970749).

<sup>4</sup> This definition was compiled by Dr. Alicia Carroll. See: “Settler Colonialism,” in *obo* in Literary and Critical Theory, [www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780190221911/obo-9780190221911-0029.xml](http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780190221911/obo-9780190221911-0029.xml) (accessed May 13, 2021).

that followed. The first, indicated in Figure 3, is Jean Leon Gerome Ferris's *The first Thanksgiving 1621*

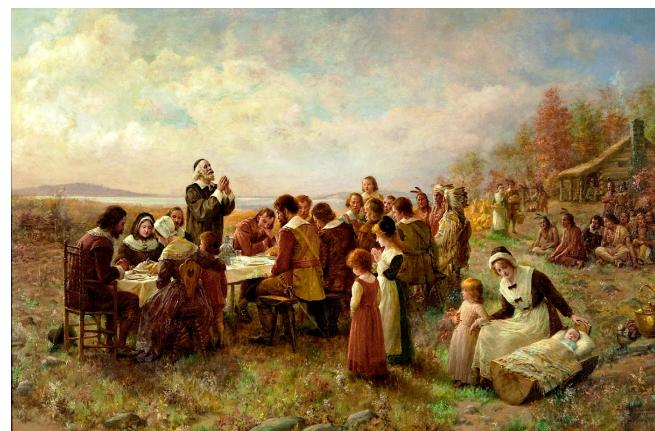


**Figure 3.** The First Thanksgiving 1621, J.L.G. Ferris, c. 1912–1915. Oil on canvas. (Public domain.)

painted sometime between 1912 and 1915. The second, titled *The First Thanksgiving at Plymouth* and depicted in Figure 4, was painted in 1914 by Jennie Augusta Brownscombe. Both of these works include a number of similar details: idyllic, cloud-filled skies; ocean

views; an Indigenous presence; and an abundance of food. However, while the former features a prominent “exchange” between the Wampanoag and the Puritan settlers, the latter relegates the Indigenous community to the background.

Ultimately, both of these paintings misrepresent the history of Thanksgiving and feed into nationalist narratives that bolster the U.S. empire. Both paintings supposedly depict a “first” Thanksgiving, implying some sort of continuity. Yet, as discussed earlier, this “first” Thanksgiving was a one-off celebration, and in the years that followed, the celebration would be held in honor of the colonists’ extermination of Indigenous peoples in 1637 and 1676 rather than their cooperation with them.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, the Indigenous groups depicted in the paintings resemble communities from the



**Figure 4.** The First Thanksgiving at Plymouth, J.A. Brownscombe, c. 1914. Oil on canvas. (Public domain.)

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<sup>5</sup> Amy Adamczyk, “On Thanksgiving and Collective Memory: Constructing the American Tradition,” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 15, no. 3 (2002): 348, doi.org/10.1111/1467-6443.00182.

Great Plains rather than the Northeast.<sup>6</sup> This is the reality of the early settler-colonial project—stolen land, stolen lives, and stolen histories. These artistic renditions of Thanksgiving revise reality rather than contend with it, yet these artistic renditions are what have made their way into American historical consciousness. One study on national perceptions of Thanksgiving found “evidence for the hypothesised relationship between identity (national glorification) and memory (silence about past wrongdoing) at the level of collective self.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, the “American” identity itself depends on a denial of historicity.

Over the years, various groups and individuals have sought to counteract the nationalist narrative of the first Thanksgiving. In 1970, Wamsutta Frank James, a Wampanoag man, was invited to speak at an event celebrating the 350-year anniversary of the arrival of the Puritans. After reading his speech, however, the organizers of the event sought to alter its content, leading James to read the speech at a protest gathering instead. In this speech, he indicts settlers for their misappropriation of indigenous knowledge and describes how the Wampanoag “welcomed you, the white man, with open arms, little knowing that it was the beginning of the end; that before 50 years were to pass, the Wampanoag would no longer be a free people.”<sup>8</sup> More recently, Wampanoag intellectuals have protested settler-colonial narratives by de-centering 1620—the year the Puritan settlers arrived in North America—and re-centering the lived experiences of Wampanoag and other Indigenous communities in history and into the contemporary period.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Lindsay McVay, “Everyone’s history matters: The Wampanoag Indian Thanksgiving story deserves to be known,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, November 22, 2017, [www.smithsonianmag.com/blogs/national-museum-american-indian/2017/11/23/everyones-history-matters-and-wampanoag-indian-thanksgiving-story-deserves-be-known/](http://www.smithsonianmag.com/blogs/national-museum-american-indian/2017/11/23/everyones-history-matters-and-wampanoag-indian-thanksgiving-story-deserves-be-known/).

<sup>7</sup> Tuğçe Kurtış, Glenn Adams, and Michael Yellow Bird, “Generosity or Genocide? Identity Implications of Silence in American Thanksgiving Commemorations,” *Memory (Hove)* 18, no. 2 (2010): 220, doi.org/10.1080/09658210903176478.

<sup>8</sup> Wamsutta Frank James, “The Suppressed Speech of Wamsutta (Frank B.) James, Wampanoag,” 1970, United American Indians of New England, transcript, [www.uaine.org/suppressed\\_speech.htm](http://www.uaine.org/suppressed_speech.htm).

<sup>9</sup> Lisa Bleee and Jean M. O’Brien, “Decentering 1620,” *Early American Literature* 56, no. 1 (2021): 160-161, doi:10.1353/eal.2021.0008.

Both Wamsutta Frank James's suppressed speech and the actions of Indigenous activists today are an indictment of a system that has not only stolen Indigenous land but that also built widely-accepted mythologies to misrepresent these histories and silence Indigenous voices.

The “first” Thanksgiving is a case study in painting settler-colonialism with broad strokes that encourage us to empathize with the colonizer. Artist representations of the event suggest it was a cooperative effort, but the continued silencing on a national level of Wampanoag communities—many of whom recognize the day as a national day of mourning—indicates otherwise.<sup>10</sup> The failure to recognize the ahistorical nature of these retelling of Thanksgivings is a feature of the system. “Americans” are to recognize settler-colonialism for the benefits it brought to the colonizer, not the colonized, and this particular conception of settler-colonialism remains a hallmark of U.S. imperialism today.

### **Whose Manifest Destiny? Slavery and Westward Expansion**

The next case study in U.S. imperial history discusses the relationship between slavery and westward territorial expansion in the United States. Namely, I will discuss the othering of enslaved people in nineteenth century writings as a tactic of the U.S. empire in its quest for monetary gain. Discussions of U.S. imperialism often focus on U.S. foreign policy, but slavery promulgated an economic system which rested on the labor of individuals classed as perpetually “foreign” and “sub-human.” This, I argue, is undoubtedly a characteristic of empire, regardless of whether the tactics are employed within the borders of the United States or beyond.

The first writing I will analyze is a speech by David Wilmot, an anti-slavery advocate. Though he is most known for his 1846 anti-slavery proviso that twice passed in the House and failed in the Senate, the following excerpt from an 1847 speech indicates his anti-slavery stance

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<sup>10</sup> Kurtis, Adams, and Bird, “Generosity or Genocide,” 212.

was actually rooted in white interests:

The white laborer of the North claims your service; he demands that you stand firm to his interests and his rights; that you preserve the future homes of his children, on the distant shores of the Pacific, from the degradation and dishonor of negro servitude. Where the negro slave labors, the free white man cannot labor by his side without sharing in his degradation and disgrace.<sup>11</sup>

Wilmot creates a clear dichotomy between the “degraded” and “disgraced” enslaved Black individual and the free and “honorable” white individual. It is telling that even the anti-slavery advocates did not actually see the Black individual as any sort of equal.

The debates surrounding the Wilmot Proviso eventually culminated in Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which made it impossible for enslaved individuals to liberate themselves even in territories in which slavery was illegal. What is most telling is that this law makes no mention of the term “slavery.” The official title of the law itself is “An Act to amend, and supplementary to, the Act entitled ‘An Act respecting Fugitives from Justice, and Persons escaping from the Service of their Masters.’” Throughout the body of the law, enslaved people are exclusively referred to as “fugitives.” Section 7 of the law states:

... That any person who shall knowingly and willingly obstruct, hinder, or prevent such claimant, his agent or attorney, or any person or persons lawfully assisting him, her, or them, from arresting such a fugitive from service or labor ... or shall aid, abet, or assist such person so owing service or labor as aforesaid, directly or indirectly, to escape from such claimant ... or shall harbor or conceal such fugitive, so as to prevent the discovery and arrest of such person ... shall, for either of said offences, be subject to a fine not exceeding one thousand dollars, and imprisonment not exceeding six months ...<sup>12</sup>

The law penalizes not only enslaved persons for seeking to liberate themselves but also anyone who seeks to aid them in this endeavor. A line between the upstanding enslaver and the criminal enslaved is drawn clearly; the enslaved is “other,” and to be “other” implies moral deficiency.

<sup>11</sup> Christopher J. Olsen, *The American Civil War: A Hands-on History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), 16.

<sup>12</sup> Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, Pub. L. No. 31–60, 9 Stat. 462 (1850).

A further othering of the enslaved individuals can be seen during the Lincoln-Douglas Debates. In the fourth iteration of these debates taking place on September 18, 1858, Abraham Lincoln clarifies the extent of his previous anti-slavery statements and declares:

I will say then that I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races, that I am not nor ever have been in favor of making voters or jurors of negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor to intermarry with white people; and I will say in addition to this that there is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will forever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality.<sup>13</sup>

Lincoln is certain to refer to white people as “people” but neither in this excerpt nor the rest of this debate does he afford Black individuals the same privilege. He further propagates the notion that the Black individual is perpetually foreign by denying them the same rights as white U.S. citizens. Here, Lincoln strengthens the U.S. empire—an institution evidently constructed by and for white men—by reaffirming the racism extends beyond the scope of slavery alone. Thus, the end of slavery would necessarily *not* translate to an end of oppression.

All of these cases consider the relationship between the expansion of slavery and the expansion of territorial claims. Some bolster the institution of slavery while others seek to weaken it. However, one thing all three have in common is that not one seeks to elevate the status of enslaved individuals to that of white men, and this othering and dehumanization is key to the U.S. empire.

### **Te Matamos, Chiquita: The Banana Massacre**

The final case study in U.S. imperialism focuses on the 1928 massacre of United Fruit Company (now Chiquita Brands International) workers in Santa Marta, Colombia. In 1928, workers began striking to obtain collective insurance and hazard pay, wage increases, and

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<sup>13</sup> Abraham Lincoln, Stephen A. Douglas, and Alfred Whital Stern Collection of Lincolniana, Illinois Political Campaign of 1858 (Springfield, IL, 1858), Manuscript/Mixed Material, [www.loc.gov/item/2004573227/](http://www.loc.gov/item/2004573227/).

hygiene and health services, among other necessities.<sup>14</sup> In response, the U.S. government advocated for them to be massacred. Below are various declassified telegrams exchanged between the U.S. and Colombian governments that highlight the willingness of the United States to sacrifice the lives of Colombian workers for the sake of U.S. monetary gain abroad.

In the telegrams, an explicit link is drawn between the interests of the United Fruit Company and the United States. In a telegram sent on December 5, the U.S. Bogotá Embassy told the U.S. Secretary of State that Colombia would “send additional troops and would arrest all strike leaders and transport them to a prison in Cartagena; that government would give adequate protection to American interests involved.”<sup>15</sup> In the telegram, there is no mention of what the workers are going on strike for; instead, the workers are arbitrarily declared criminals simply because their self-advocacy failed to fall in line with U.S. commercial interests.

In the telegrams, blame is placed on communists. A December 6 telegram condemns the “proletariat,” while in a December 9 telegram, the Santa Ana consulate shared that “military forces are actively engaged in clearing the district of the Communists.”<sup>16</sup> The U.S. government was cognizant of the working-class politics at play, but rather than bettering the working conditions of this working class, it sought to silence them.

Ultimately, it is the joy with which the U.S. Bogotá Embassy shared the death toll with the U.S. Secretary of State that calls attention to the sinister motives of the U.S. government. On December 29, the embassy said, “I have the honor to report that the legal advisor of the United

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<sup>14</sup> Jorge Enrique Elias Caro and Antonino Vidal Ortega, “The worker's massacre of 1928 in the Magdalena Zona Bananera - Colombia. An unfinished story,” *Memorias* 18 (2012), [www.scielo.org.co/pdf/memor/n18/n18a03.pdf](http://www.scielo.org.co/pdf/memor/n18/n18a03.pdf).

<sup>15</sup> Paul Wolf, “The Santa Marta Massacre,” Colombia War, accessed May 13, 2021, [web.archive.org/web/20120717004708/http://www.icdc.com/~paulwolf/colombia/santamarta.htm](http://web.archive.org/web/20120717004708/http://www.icdc.com/~paulwolf/colombia/santamarta.htm) (original site discontinued).

<sup>16</sup> Wolf, “The Santa Marta Massacre.”

Fruit Company here in Bogotá stated yesterday that the total number of strikers killed by the Colombian military authorities during the recent disturbance reached between five and six hundred.”<sup>17</sup> Later, on January 16, the embassy shared, “I have the honor to report that the Bogotá representative of the United Fruit Company told me yesterday that the total number of strikers killed by the Colombian military exceeded 1000.”<sup>18</sup> That it is consistently an “honor” for the embassy to share how many exploited workers have been killed for the sake of profit is exactly what defined and continues to define U.S. imperialism. As the story goes, a private enterprise sets up an exploitative system, while the government utilizes its “diplomatic” tools to keep the system in place.

### **Implications of U.S. Imperialism**

All three of these case studies affirm the United States as a growing global empire. The first highlights the United States as an ongoing settler-colonial project, the second points out the persistent othering and dehumanization of non-white individuals, and the third emphasizes the U.S. imperial project as one that centers profit above all else. It is clear through these case studies that, in the U.S. empire, it is the wealthy white man whose identity does not lead to any material loss. Meanwhile, Indigenous people have had their land stolen, Black Americans have had their bodies abused and exploited for labor, and workers abroad have been murdered for requesting basic necessities. In the remainder of this paper, I will consider what happens when these identities are divorced from their material reality. Namely, I will consider the construction of an “intersectional” imperialism that is insidious, *because* it employs those that are not white men to serve the state.

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<sup>17</sup> Wolf, “The Santa Marta Massacre.”

<sup>18</sup> Wolf, “The Santa Marta Massacre.”

## Part II: Neoliberal Identity Politics

In the following section, I will explore how the U.S. empire has developed under neoliberal policies. Beginning with independent analyses of identity and neoliberalism, I will eventually merge the two in a discussion on neoliberal identity politics—a mode of politics that commodifies identity to maintain power political, economic, and social power both domestically and abroad. In recent years, both public and private U.S. institutions have turned to neoliberal identity politics to serve their monetary interests.

### Exploring Identity and Intersectionality

Despite its use across various spectra, the term “identity” itself is not necessarily so clear-cut. According to Marie Moran, a lecturer in social justice and equality studies, “The term identity was originally used to indicate ‘the sameness of an entity to itself.’”<sup>19</sup> This is a conception of identity that closely mirrors the conception of identity in mathematics in which an “identity function” is a function that, when applied to a value, returns the same value. Today, identity is not often defined in this fashion, but the semblance of “sameness” present in this definition of identity still remains important to our conception of identity today. Indeed, identities can serve as a unifying factor among unique individuals.

Other definitions of identity distinguish between different *types* of identities as they apply to individuals and communities. Mary Wrenn, a scholar of identity and neoliberalism, draws on the work of economist John B. Davis and distinguishes between self-ascribed personal identities, other-assigned collective social identities, and relational social identities, “which consist of voluntary self-identification with social groups, both formal and informal, with varying levels of

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<sup>19</sup> Marie Moran, *Identity and Capitalism* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2015), 35, dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781473910560.

loyalty to each social group.”<sup>20</sup> All three of these types of identities are relevant in the political sphere and inform how individuals interact with other individuals, how individuals interacts with groups (and vice versa), and how groups interact among each other.

Understanding the material impact of identity is necessary to understanding intersectionality. As proposed by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, a prominent critical race theory scholar and legal practitioner, intersectionality “was introduced in the late 1980s as a heuristic term to focus attention on the vexed dynamics of difference and the solidarities of sameness in the context of antidiscrimination and social movement politics.”<sup>21</sup> Her initial studies centered extensively on the compound discrimination faced by Black women due to their intersecting gender and racial identities, though the term is now often broadly applied to circumstances in which individuals and groups hold multiple oppressed identities.

In this paper, I frequently refer to what has come to be known as “intersectional imperialism.” Related to intersectional imperialism is imperial feminism, which refers to how “a particular tradition, white Eurocentric and Western, has sought to establish itself as the only legitimate feminism in current political practice.”<sup>22</sup> In my discussion of intersectional imperialism, I will draw on this definition, as well as my earlier definition of U.S. imperialism. Thus, in the context of the United States, intersectional imperialism refers to a tradition in which individuals with marginalized (and often intersectional) identities participate in the subjugation of other individuals and communities (with whom they often share a number of identities) in a

<sup>20</sup> Mary Wrenn, “Identity, Identity Politics, and Neoliberalism,” *Panoeconomicus* 61, no. 4 (2014): 504, doi.org/10.2298/PAN1404503W.

<sup>21</sup> Sumi Cho, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall, “Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis,” *Signs* 38, no. 4 (2013): 788, doi.org/10.1086/669608.

<sup>22</sup> Valerie Ann Amos is a British Labour Party politician and diplomat, and Pratibha Parmar is a British feminist filmmaker. See: Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar, “Challenging Imperial Feminism,” *Feminist Review* 17 (1984): 3, doi.org/10.2307/1395006.

manner that ultimately serves a white elite class. These intersectional imperialists are afforded some concession in the form of money or influence and, in turn, allow the elite class to circumvent criticism of the inequitable systems they uphold.<sup>23</sup>

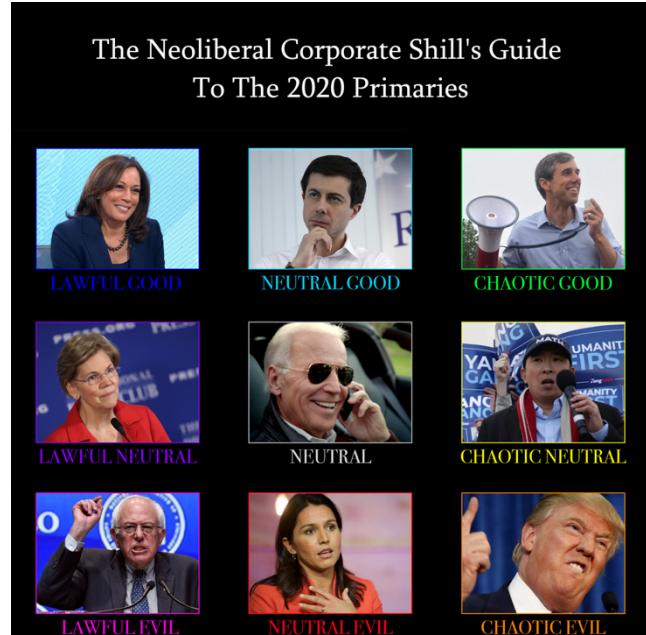
## Neoliberalism 101

Understanding neoliberalism is integral to understanding the spread of intersectional imperialism in the United States. It is a neoliberal conception of identity that makes intersectional imperialism possible at all.

Neoliberalism is an economic paradigm that, in the 1980s, rose to prominence—particularly in the United States and United Kingdom.<sup>24</sup> Figure 5 presents a popular conception of neoliberalism via a meme posted in community of self-proclaimed neoliberals on Reddit (Figure 5).<sup>25</sup>

In the following section, before

delving more deeply into this discussion of neoliberal identity politics, I turn to environmental sociologist Md Saidul Islam's *Development, Power, and the Environment* to describe the origins



**Figure 5.** An alignment chart for 2020 presidential candidates developed by a self-proclaimed neoliberal. (Image from Reddit, used without permission.)

<sup>23</sup> Journalist Isabel Wilkerson expands on this phenomenon in *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontent*. In describing race as the chosen tool of oppression in a larger American “caste system,” she states, “The enforcers of caste come in every color, creed, and gender. One does not have to be in the dominant caste to do its bidding. In fact, the most potent instrument of the caste system is a sentinel at every rung, whose identity forswears any accusation of discrimination and helps keep the caste system humming.” See: Isabel Wilkerson. *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* (New York: Random House, 2020), 224.

<sup>24</sup> Md Saidul, Islam, *Development, Power, and the Environment: Neoliberal Paradox in the Age of Vulnerability* (New York: Routledge, 2013): 81.

<sup>25</sup> NotAYeuropean, “All these tier lists, how about a classic alignment chart?” Reddit, May 10, 2019, [www.reddit.com/r/neoliberal/comments/bmzpwz/all\\_these\\_tier\\_lists\\_how\\_about\\_a\\_classic/](http://www.reddit.com/r/neoliberal/comments/bmzpwz/all_these_tier_lists_how_about_a_classic/).

of neoliberalism, as well as the paradoxes associated with its rise. Although Islam's analysis is largely focused on the environment, his claims remain relevant to the present discussion as well.

Neoliberalism was preceded first by classical liberalism and later by Keynesian liberalism. The former, largely supported by Adam Smith and David Ricardo, is an economic model that treasures a free-market economy based on private property.<sup>26</sup> The latter model was proposed by John Maynard Keynes who, skeptical of the sustainability of an economy guided by private property alone, advocated for governments to intervene in the economy during times of crisis.<sup>27</sup> Keynes, unlike Smith and Ricardo, did not have faith in the market's ability to naturally adjust to crises.

Neoliberalism was a response to Keynesianism and a return to classical liberalism. The difference was the increasingly globalized nature of the world economy in which neoliberalism was set to take flight (evidenced by institutions like the International Monetary Fund and World Bank).<sup>28</sup> Neoliberalism sought to expand the "free market" and "free trade" on a global scale, demanding governments "refrain from intervening excessively in economic activities, removing those regulations that may inhibit the ease of doing business."<sup>29</sup> Islam describes two waves of neoliberalism. Beginning in the 1980s with Ronald Reagan in United States and Margaret Thatcher in United Kingdom, the first wave of neoliberalism was avowedly anticommunist and "enshrined the neoliberal principles of deregulation, liberalization, and privatization as a formula for promoting economic growth and progress."<sup>30</sup> The second wave, which continued in the 1990s

<sup>26</sup> Gerald Gaus, Shane D. Courtland, and David Schmidtz, "Liberalism," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Stanford University, 1997–, article published November 28, 1996; last modified January 22, 2018, plato.stanford.edu/entries/liberalism/.

<sup>27</sup> See: Gaus, Courland, and Schmidtz, "Liberalism" and Islam, *Development, Power, and the Environment*, 82.

<sup>28</sup> Islam, *Development, Power, and the Environment*, 82.

<sup>29</sup> Islam, *Development, Power, and the Environment*, 82–83.

<sup>30</sup> Islam, *Development, Power, and the Environment*, 84.

with Bill Clinton in the United States and Tony Blair in the United Kingdom, held close the principles of deregulation, liberalization, and privatization with the added implementation of a “socially progressive agenda.”<sup>31</sup> This agenda, however, would come second to the free market.

In his analysis, Islam points out three particularly relevant paradoxes associated with the rise of neoliberalism. First, the global north vs. global south paradox criticizes the wealthy “global north” for exploiting economic resources while it is the “global south” that is left to suffer the majority of the consequences.<sup>32</sup> Second, the paradox of wealth accumulation highlights how the rhetoric surrounding neoliberalism claims it is a paradigm that will advance the collective wellbeing yet “in practice only serves to restore or to create the power of a few global elites while disempowering and dispossessing the masses of their rights.”<sup>33</sup> The final paradox is the paradox of neoconservatism. Though neoconservatism is often thought to be a response to a radical leftist paradigm, its primary concern is actually that “neoliberalism’s emphasis on individualism may lead to a chaos of individual interests and the breakdown of social solidarity, resulting in anarchy and nihilism.”<sup>34</sup> Despite, sharing the same foundational principles of free markets and free trade, neoliberalism and neoconservatism diverge in their understanding of how governments must act to ensure order. All three of these paradoxes pose a serious concern for the sustainability of neoliberalism in terms of the toll it will take on the labor force and natural resources.

Ultimately, neoliberalism necessitates that the government stand aside for the sake of commercial interests. In contemporary iterations of neoliberalism, this supposed nonintervention

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<sup>31</sup> Islam, *Development, Power, and the Environment*, 84.

<sup>32</sup> Islam, *Development, Power, and the Environment*, 87.

<sup>33</sup> Islam, *Development, Power, and the Environment*, 88.

<sup>34</sup> Islam, *Development, Power, and the Environment*, 91.

economic strategy results in private corporations holding immense political power as they, for example, fund political campaigns, lobby legislators, and install executives in key government positions.<sup>35</sup> Because of the power they hold, corporations and corporate messaging is of particular interest in the continuing discussion of neoliberal identity politics.

### **Conceiving of an Identity Politics**

The term “identity politics” was coined by the Combahee River Collective, a Black feminist collective, in 1977. In their state of purpose, they wrote:

We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression. ... We reject pedestals, queenhood, and walking ten paces behind. To be recognized as human, levelly human, is enough.<sup>36</sup>

Ultimately, these women defined identity politics in a way that centers their humanity and lives experiences.

Historically, identity politics has also been analyzed from a Marxist perspective.

Sociologist and political scientist Frances Fox Piven describes how, “for more than a century, the Left has been guided by the conviction that industrial capitalism would inevitably homogenize social life, and thus lay the basis for a universalizing politics ... instead of wiping out all ancient prejudices, a globalizing capital is prompting a rising tide of fractious racial, ethnic, religious and gender conflict.<sup>37</sup> Marie Moran proposes the reason for this rise of identity-based conflict to be

<sup>35</sup> See: Jeff Bukhari, “Wall Street Spent \$2 Billion Trying to Influence the 2016 Election,” *Fortune*, March 8, 2017, accessed May 13, 2021, [fortune.com/2017/03/08/wall-street-2016-election-spending/](http://fortune.com/2017/03/08/wall-street-2016-election-spending/); Robert Maguire, “Nearly 190 companies pulled political donations after the insurrection. That's not enough,” Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington, February 1, 2021, accessed May 13, 2021, [www.citizensforethics.org/reports-investigations/crew-investigations/nearly-190-companies-pulled-political-donations-after-the-insurrection-thats-not-enough/](http://www.citizensforethics.org/reports-investigations/crew-investigations/nearly-190-companies-pulled-political-donations-after-the-insurrection-thats-not-enough/); Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States* (United Kingdom: HarperCollins, 2010).

<sup>36</sup> The Combahee River Collective, “The Combahee River Collective Statement,” 1977, accessed May 13, 2021, [americanstudies.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/Keyword%20Coalition\\_Readings.pdf](http://americanstudies.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/Keyword%20Coalition_Readings.pdf).

<sup>37</sup> Frances F. Piven, “Globalizing Capitalism and the Rise of Identity Politics,” *Socialist Register* 31 (1995): 102–103, [www.socialistregister.com/index.php/srv/article/view/5652/2550](http://www.socialistregister.com/index.php/srv/article/view/5652/2550).

the restructuring of capitalism in a way that suppresses organized labor and, due to “globalization,” has dislocated workers on a “vast scale.”<sup>38</sup> Moran further notes that those who have been most disenfranchised are “women and non-whites”—reiterating the identity does materially impact individuals’ lives.<sup>39</sup>

### **The Myth of Representation**

Neoliberal identity politics recognizes the material impact of identity on an institutional level but then proceeds to deny this impact in its interactions with individuals and communities. This is because, under neoliberal conditions, the only relevant identity is one’s financial success as denoted “not only in class categories, but especially through their ordinal rankings: upper, middle, lower, or proxies for these ranks, such as ‘working’ that still clearly indicate rank in the ordinal hierarchy.”<sup>40</sup> Thus, individuals are led to embrace group identities that theoretically exist outside the economic landscape, but that are, due to the intersectional nature of identity, not entirely extra-economic.

After neoliberal institutions divorce identity from its material impact, it merely becomes another commodity to buy and sell. Philosopher and theologian Carl Raschke describes this phenomenon in the ability of businesses to “mass-produce and proliferate these empty signifiers, which have all the appearance of ‘real’ human assemblages. The kind of ‘identity politics’ which has fed upon these algorithms of exclusion now reorganises itself into the politics of ‘inclusion.’”<sup>41</sup> This is how the LGBTQ+ identity is reduced to a rainbow (Figure 6),<sup>42</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Moran, *Identity and Capitalism*, 101–102.

<sup>39</sup> Moran, *Identity and Capitalism*, 104–105.

<sup>40</sup> Wrenn, “Identity, Identity Politics, and Neoliberalism,” 509.

<sup>41</sup> Carl Raschke, “Globalism, Multiculturalism and the ‘Politics of Recognition’,” in *Neoliberalism and Political Theology: From Kant to Identity Politics*, 116–36 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 132, Accessed April 6, 2021, doi.org/10.3366/j.ctvrs90mz.10.

<sup>42</sup> Ryan Prior, “Bud Light will sell beer in rainbow bottles for Pride Month,” CNN, May 7, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/05/06/us/bud-light-pride-rainbow-beer-bottles-trnd/index.html>.

womanhood is reduced to pink color palettes and curly fonts (Figure 7),<sup>43</sup> and race becomes relevant to the NFL only when it is profitable (Figure 8).<sup>44</sup> This is the myth of representation; consumers are expected to remain satisfied with superficial representation alone while the material impact of their identities is ignored. This expectation has now made its way into the public sphere, as those in the United States (and other neoliberal states) are expected to remain satisfied with superficial political representation even when the actions of these elected representatives actually harm communities rather than help them.



**Figure 6.** Bud Light sells rainbow colored beer bottles for Pride Month in 2019. (Image from GLAAD, used without permission.)



**Figure 7.** BIC sells pens targeted towards women. (Image from Forbes, used without permission.)



**Figure 8.** Still from a Super Bowl LV social justice campaign by the NFL entitled “Inspire Change.” (Image from NFL, used without permission.)

### Part III: The #Girlboss

The narrative of the #Girlboss is a microcosm of the myth of representation. Popularized by authors like Sheryl Sandberg, the chief operating officer of Facebook, and Sophia Amoruso,

<sup>43</sup> David Vinjamuri, “Bic For Her: What They Were Actually Thinking (As Told By A Man Who Worked On Tampons),” *Forbes*, August 30, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidvinjamuri/2012/08/30/bic-for-her-what-they-were-actually-thinking-as-told-by-a-man-who-worked-on-tampons/?sh=4e539d933ab8>.

<sup>44</sup> NFL, “Inspire Change,” Television advertisement, 72AndSunny, 2021, [www.ispot.tv/ad/teGd/nfl-super-bowl-2021-inspire-change-it-takes-all-of-us](http://www.ispot.tv/ad/teGd/nfl-super-bowl-2021-inspire-change-it-takes-all-of-us).

the founder of Nasty Gal, the #Girlboss narrative presents ideal of the successful, self-reliant corporate woman. In the following section, I will explore the narratives of Sandberg and Amoruso and conclude by pointing out their most problematic features utilizing the framework of neoliberal identity politics.

### **Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In***

Sandberg is primarily concerned not with the systemic obstacles faced by women in the corporate workplace but rather with the obstacles women apparently create for themselves. In the introduction to *Lean In* (2013), Sandberg writes, "Throughout my life, I was told over and over about inequalities in the workplace and how hard it would be to have a career and a family. I rarely heard anything, however, about the ways I might hold myself back."<sup>45</sup> Whether intentional or not, Sandberg's conscious choice to focus on these supposed internal obstacles appears to reduce the impact of the external ones. At the very least, it might have been beneficial to qualify in some way the relative power of these different types of obstacles. Instead, Sandberg doubles down on her individualist rhetoric (typical of neoliberalism) and declares that "we can reignite the revolution by internalizing the revolution. The shift to a more equal world will happen person by person. We move closer to the larger goal of true equality with each woman who leans in."<sup>46</sup>

Sandberg suggests that fear is one of the primary obstacles women create for themselves. In the first chapter of *Lean In*, she urges women: "So please ask yourself: What would I do if I weren't afraid? And then go do it."<sup>47</sup> Sandberg appears to suggest that women's' fear is unfounded. Yet women have consistently had to face material consequences for transgressing the

<sup>45</sup> Sheryl Sandberg, *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013), 9.

<sup>46</sup> Sandberg, *Lean In*, 11.

<sup>47</sup> Sandberg, *Lean In*, 26.

boundaries of “acceptable” behavior in the workplace.<sup>48</sup> For women without any emotional support, the consequences of such transgressions can hit particularly hard, further validating fear not as an obstacle but as a symptom of deep-rooted systemic issues. In 2016, Sandberg herself recognized *Lean In*’s shortcomings when it came to discussing such systemic issues like maternity leave policies, sick leave, and welfare.<sup>49</sup>

Sandberg again doubles down on her commitment to centering “internal” obstacles as she brushes over the impact of sexism in the workplace. In a chapter titled “Sit at the Table,” she says, “I still sometimes find myself spoken over and discounted while men sitting next to me are not. But now I know how to take a deep breath and keep my hand up. I have learned to sit at the table.”<sup>50</sup> Sandberg recognizes that women are spoken over, and she recognizes that they have to work harder than the men with whom they are working, yet her solution is simply to “take a deep breath.” The rest of the book continues as such, offering pithy anecdotes in response to systemic issues of workplace sexism, misogyny, and harassment. In interview that took place four years after the publication of *Lean In*, Sandberg herself admitted that “in terms of women in leadership roles, we are not better off.”<sup>51</sup>

### **Sophia Amoruso’s #GIRLBOSS**

Sophia Amoruso’s 2014 autobiography titled #GIRLBOSS displays many of the same characteristics as Sandberg’s *Lean In*. One particular visible similarity is that both individualize

<sup>48</sup> See: Alice Truong, “‘You are too bossy’: Women in tech reveal what it’s really like,” *Quartz*, January 13, 2016, [qz.com/593412/you-are-too-bossy-women-in-tech-reveal-what-its-really-like/](http://qz.com/593412/you-are-too-bossy-women-in-tech-reveal-what-its-really-like/); Chris Wofford, “Women are ‘Bossy’ and Men are ‘Decisive,’” *eCornell #IMPACT*, January 24, 2018, [ecornell-impact.cornell.edu/women-are-bossy-and-men-are-decisive/](http://ecornell-impact.cornell.edu/women-are-bossy-and-men-are-decisive/).

<sup>49</sup> Sheryl Sandberg (@sheryl), 2016, “On Mother’s Day, we celebrate all moms,” Facebook, March 6, 2016, [www.facebook.com/sheryl/posts/10156819553860177](https://www.facebook.com/sheryl/posts/10156819553860177).

<sup>50</sup> Sandberg, *Lean In*, 38.

<sup>51</sup> Jessica Guynn, “Sheryl Sandberg: Four years after ‘Lean In’ women are not better off,” *USA Today*, March 29, 2017, [www.usatoday.com/story/tech/news/2017/03/29/sheryl-sandberg-interview-lean-in-four-years-later/99749464/](http://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/news/2017/03/29/sheryl-sandberg-interview-lean-in-four-years-later/99749464/).

women's corporate success. Amoruso declares that "a #GIRLBOSS is someone who's in charge of her own life. She gets what she wants because she works for it. As a #GIRLBOSS, you take control and accept responsibility."<sup>52</sup> The unspoken corollary here is that women who do not succeed in the corporate world do not succeed because they simply are not working hard enough. This is untrue.<sup>53</sup>

Later, Amoruso presents a caricatured version of feminism in order to distinguish her book from this caricature to assert some semblance of superiority. She writes that "#GIRLBOSS is a feminist book, and Nasty Gal is a feminist company in the sense that I encourage you, as a girl, to be who you want and do what you want. But I'm not here calling us 'womyn' and blaming men for any of my struggles along the way."<sup>54</sup> First, in referencing feminism, Amoruso uses the terminology of trans-exclusionary radical feminists to make her case. The term "womyn" first originated in the 1970s with the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, a festival whose organizers have maintained is for who are "womyn-born, womyn-identified" (i.e. cisgender).<sup>55</sup> Needless to say, not every feminist is trans-exclusionary, and trans-exclusionary feminism often fails to be intersectional. Second, Amoruso seems to suggest that her success is somehow superior because she did not blame men as she sought it out. Yet, Amoruso does not delve deeper into *why* blaming men—or misogyny more broadly—is necessarily a bad thing.

Finally, Amoruso centers the elite class as the ideal of success. Towards the end of the

<sup>52</sup> Sophia Amoruso, *#GIRLBOSS* (New York: Penguin, 2014), 11.

<sup>53</sup> Amoruso fails to contend with the fact that there is more to achieving corporate success than simply "working hard." She also fails to recognize that women actually often work harder than men. See: Jasmine Tucker and Julie Vogtman, "When Hard Work Is Not Enough: Women In Low-Paid Jobs," National Women's Law Center, April 4, 2020, nwlc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Women-in-Low-Paid-Jobs-report\_pp04-FINAL-4.2.pdf; "State of the Workplace, Part 1: Gender," Hive, October 1, 2018, hive.com/state-of-the-workplace/gender-2018/.

<sup>54</sup> Amoruso, *#GIRLBOSS*, 14.

<sup>55</sup> Elizabeth A. McConnell, Nathan R Todd, Charlynn Odahl-Ruan, and Mona Shattell, "Complicating Counterspaces: Intersectionality and the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival," *American Journal of Community Psychology* 57, no. 3-4 (2016): 477, doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12051.

book she shares the following anecdote about herself and her ex-boyfriend, Gary:

“In the wake of a bunch of bad press, the American Motorcyclist Association once claimed that 99 percent of its members were regular citizens and only 1 percent were outlaws ... While we weren’t outlaws, Gary and I identified with their ethos that when you are a one-percenter, you live your life your way. Currently, the popular meaning of the so-called 1 percent refers to Wall Street, and that ethos is completely different. This idiomatic shift has become especially ironic for me, but the tattoo hasn’t lost any of its significance. It’s a reminder of how unlikely it was that I’d ever find myself seated in the corner office.<sup>56</sup>

Here, Amoruso centers the “corner office” of the “so-called” wealthiest one percent as something to aspire to. Meanwhile, she fails to contend with the necessarily exploitation that comes with wealth accumulation in a neoliberal system. Instead, she reiterates that her “1%” tattoo has remained meaningful as she has become a member of the elite class.

### **The Shortcomings of the #Girlboss Narrative**

Although I have already pointed out a number of the individual issues in both Sandberg and Amoruso’s narratives, the larger trend of #Girlboss narratives in general have some incredibly harmful implications for women across the world.

First, in the context of the #Girlboss narrative, women are charged with both having caused the problem and needing to be the solution. In a systematic study of *Lean In* messaging. Psychology researchers Jae Yun Kim, Gráinne M Fitzsimons, and Aaron C Kay found that:

When society points to how women can change—they can dream bigger, talk louder—it also points to who and what should change. Now, if it turns out that dreaming bigger and speaking more loudly will solve gender inequality, these results are perhaps no cause for concern. However, if structural and societal change is also needed, these results should worry those who seek gender equality in the workplace.<sup>57</sup>

This criticism calls back to Sandberg’s claim that women who are spoken over should simply

<sup>56</sup> Amoruso, #GIRLBOSS, 233–235.

<sup>57</sup> Jae Yun Kim, Gráinne M Fitzsimons, and Aaron C. Kay, “Lean in Messages Increase Attributions of Women’s Responsibility for Gender Inequality,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 115, no. 6 (2018): 997, doi.org/10.1037/pspa0000129.

take a deep breath and continue on, as well as Amoruso's claim that women should just take better charge of their own lives. #Girlboss messaging completely overlooks the fact that women are not at the root of this systemic problem, yet, somehow, they are the ones that must solve it.

The #Girlboss narrative also individualizes a collective struggle. Helena Liu, a business school lecturer, describes this individualization through the lens of postfeminism. Liu describes postfeminism as a neoliberal phenomenon that (1) casts gender equality as an “individualistic, entrepreneurial project that can be inculcated by the self;” (2) reinforces “patriarchal notions of feminine beauty and sexuality;” and (3) denies structural gender equality, instead transferring “the responsibility to overcome sexism onto the individual.”<sup>58</sup> This process of individualization is part and parcel of the neoliberal framework. Here, Liu hints at how the corporate elite is aspirational because it implies an accumulation of wealth. Meanwhile, Liu’s womanhood is stripped of its material impact and commodified in such that it is the patriarchal conception of femininity that holds the highest market value.

This commodification of womanhood leads into the third concern: that the #Girlboss narrative forces women to perform the shared social identity of womanhood while denying its impact. Sarah Marks, a business scholar, describes women’s entrepreneurial success as a “performance,” but she states that this performance is paradoxical because “the political imperative to inspire and empower disadvantaged entrepreneurs requires the simultaneous performance and denial of social embeddedness.”<sup>59</sup> Women are simultaneously encouraged to embrace their womanhood (and ultimately commodify and sell it to other women), yet they must

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<sup>58</sup> Helena Liu, “An Embarrassment of Riches: The Seduction of Postfeminism in the Academy,” *Organization (London, England)* 26, no. 1 (2019), 22, doi.org/10.1177/1350508418763980.

<sup>59</sup> Sarah Marks, “Performing and Unperforming Entrepreneurial Success: Confessions of a Female Role Model,” *Journal of Small Business Management*, ahead-of-print (2021): 24, doi.org/10.1080/00472778.2020.1865539.

also deny that this womanhood has materially impacted their success as entrepreneurs.

In order to become successful in the first place, the #Girlboss template compels women to adopt the same oppressive practices employed by men and sanctioned by the patriarchy. Women are encouraged to become successful by adopting the tactics that were used against themselves. In her criticism of the #Girlboss phenomenon, journalist Amanda Mull describes how “the confident, hardworking, camera-ready young woman of a publicist’s dreams apparently had an evil twin: a woman, pedigreed and usually white, who was not only as accomplished as her male counterparts, but just as cruel and demanding too.”<sup>60</sup> Mull’s criticism touches on Amos and Parmar’s definition of imperial feminism in which it is the Euro-American white woman whose experience becomes the standard. Meanwhile, it is the Euro-American white man who ultimately benefits the most.

Finally, the #Girlboss narrative is problematic simply because it unreservedly promotes intersectional imperialism. As described earlier, this framework centers the corporate experience of the Euro-American white woman, yet this same experience is then universalized as the ideal for all women around the world. Gender studies scholar Catherine Rottenberg describes how this variety of feminism “further entrenches neoliberal rationality and an imperialist logic. Each woman’s success becomes a feminist success, which is then attributed to the USA’s enlightened political order, as well as to its moral and political superiority.”<sup>61</sup> In a vicious cycle, the United States simultaneous defines the ideal trajectory for women while also declaring itself to have achieved the ideal better than anyone else.

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<sup>60</sup> Amanda Mull, “The Girlboss Has Left the Building,” *The Atlantic*, June 5, 2020, Accessed April 6, 2021, [www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2020/06/girlbosses-what-comes-next/613519/](http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2020/06/girlbosses-what-comes-next/613519/).

<sup>61</sup> Catherine Rottenberg, “The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism,” *Cultural Studies* 28, no. 3 (2014): 420, doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2013.857361.

Like neoliberalism, the term #Girlboss has grown increasingly popular on social media.

Figure 9 depicts a widespread meme in which “gaslight, gatekeep, girlboss” as a parody of the popular “live, laugh, love.”<sup>62</sup> In a political context, the meme can be understood as a criticism of intersectional imperialist politicians who gaslight their constituents into believing their demands are too radical, gatekeep institutions by claiming to be the sole political representatives of their identity groups, and fuel the #Girlboss narrative by ultimately centering state interests and personal gain above all else.



**Figure 9.** A parody of "Live, Laugh, Love" developed by Tumblr users in 2021. (Image from Know Your Meme, used without permission.)

#### Part IV: Contemporary Intersectional Imperialists

Thus far, I have provided a history of the U.S. empire—a history defined in large part by stolen land, slavery, and profits. I have also detailed the framework of neoliberal identity politics and the myth of representation in which individuals’ social identities can be commodified and sold back to them by the structures and institutions that exploit them. Finally, the #Girlboss narrative demonstrates how, under these neoliberal conditions, women are encouraged to adopt the tactics of their oppressors for personal gain as their struggles are individualized. In the following section, I will apply these historical, political, and economic paradigms to four

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<sup>62</sup> Phillip Hamilton, "Gaslight, Gatekeep, Girlboss," Know Your Meme, February 19, 2021, Accessed May 14, 2021, [knowyourmeme.com/memes/gaslight-gatekeep-girlboss](http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/gaslight-gatekeep-girlboss).

different case studies in U.S. intersectional imperialism—Madeleine Albright, Hillary Clinton, Neera Tanden, and Kamala Harris.

### **Madeleine Albright: “The Price is Worth It”**

In a May 12, 1996, *60 Minutes* aired an interview with Madeleine Albright, who was then the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations. The interviewer, referring to sanctions against Iraq, asked, “We have heard that half a million children have died. I mean, that is more children than died in Hiroshima. And, you know, is the price worth it?”<sup>63</sup> Without denying the statistic quoted by the interviewer, Albright responded, “I think this is a very hard choice, but the price—we think the price is worth it.”<sup>64</sup> In this exchange, Albright embodied exactly what Amanda Mull indicted the #Girlboss narrative for endorsing—a woman who is “as accomplished as her male counterparts, but just as cruel and demanding too.” Albright also espouses an imperialism that falls directly in line with the imperialism of the 1928 United Fruit Company worker massacre—the bodies of those outside the borders of the United States are expendable and may be rightfully exploited to preserve U.S. imperial interests.

### **Hillary Clinton: “Slowly Bleed to Death”**

Like Madeleine Albright, Hillary Clinton has also faced criticism for promoting violence in the Middle East. On September 13, 2010, Clinton received a letter from former Ambassador Joe Wilson that read: “My trip to Baghdad (September 6-11) has left me slack jawed. I have struggled to find the correct historical analogy to describe a vibrant, historically important Middle Eastern city being slowly bled to death.”<sup>65</sup> At this time Clinton was the U.S. Secretary of

<sup>63</sup> Rahul Mahajan, “‘We Think the Price Is Worth It’: Media uncurious about Iraq policy’s effects--there or here,” FAIR, November 1, 2001, [fair.org/extra/we-think-the-price-is-worth-it/](http://fair.org/extra/we-think-the-price-is-worth-it/).

<sup>64</sup> Mahajan, “We Think the Price Is Worth It.”

<sup>65</sup> Zaid Jilani, “Joe Wilson to Hillary Clinton In 2010: Baghdad ‘Has Been Bled To Death,’” *The Intercept*, March 2, 2016, [theintercept.com/2016/03/02/joe-wilson-to-hillary-clinton-in-2010-baghdad-has-been-bled-to-death/](http://theintercept.com/2016/03/02/joe-wilson-to-hillary-clinton-in-2010-baghdad-has-been-bled-to-death/).

State. Perhaps, one might want to give Clinton the benefit of the doubt, since her response to this



**Figure 10.** Hillary Clinton's 2016 presidential campaign messaging. (Hillary for America via Twitter, used without permission.)

letter has not been made public. However, just five years later, Clinton went on to describe the war in Libya (a war that displaced hundreds of thousands of Libyans) as “smart power at its best.”<sup>66</sup> Here, Clinton, like Albright, places U.S. imperial interests above all else and refuses to acknowledge the humanity of the victims of U.S. imperialism. This, coupled with the fact that Clinton’s 2016 campaign centered quite extensively on her identity as a woman (Figure 10),

once again demonstrates the insidious neoliberal myth of representation. A woman committing wholeheartedly to U.S. imperialism is supposed to be aspirational solely because she is a woman.

### **Neera Tanden: “Only Adult in the Room”**

Neera Tanden is the president of the Center for American Progress (CAP) and a former staffer for Hillary Clinton. Like Clinton, her interests often appear tied to political gain. For example, on October 21, 2011, Tanden emailed another CAP staffer suggesting Libya turn over its oil revenue in return for the U.S. assistance during the war in Libya. In the email, she writes: “We have a giant deficit. They have a lot of oil. Most Americans would choose not to engage in the world because of that deficit. If we want to continue to engage in the world, gestures like having oil rich countries partially pay us back doesn’t seem crazy to me.”<sup>67</sup> Tanden’s positioning

<sup>66</sup> Conor Friedersdorf, “Hillary Defends Her Failed War in Libya,” *The Atlantic*, October 15, 2015, Accessed May 14, 2021, [www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/10/hillary-clinton-debate-libya/410437/](http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/10/hillary-clinton-debate-libya/410437/).

<sup>67</sup> Glenn Greenwald, “Leaked Emails From Pro-Clinton Group Reveal Censorship of Staff on Israel, AIPAC Pandering, Warped Militarism,” *The Intercept*, November 5, 2015, [theintercept.com/2015/11/05/leaked-emails-from-pro-clinton-group-reveal-censorship-of-staff-on-israel-aipac-pandering-warped-militarism/](http://theintercept.com/2015/11/05/leaked-emails-from-pro-clinton-group-reveal-censorship-of-staff-on-israel-aipac-pandering-warped-militarism/)

of the United States as the global power other countries must obey was not a one-time-occurrence. Yet is infinitely more problematic, because Tanden's entire political career is one

that supposedly dedicated to "progress." On September 1, 2013 (Figure 11), she tweeted—again in support of U.S. interventionism—"On Syria, while I don't want to be the world's policeman, an unpoliced world is dangerous. The US may be the only adult in the room left."<sup>68</sup> Tanden's line of thought reinforces the dangerous implications of the #Girrboss narrative in which the U.S. conception of the global arena is considered the only correct one. In this case, the U.S. alone conceiving of an "unpoliced" world as "dangerous" is enough to justify intervention.

### **Kamala Harris: "This Was a Little Controversial"**

The final case study in intersectional imperialism centers on the dehumanization of people of color within the borders of the continental United States. On January 14, 2010, then San Francisco District Attorney Kamala Harris spoke at a meeting of the Commonwealth Club of California. At one point during this meeting, she proclaimed childhood chronic absenteeism as tantamount to criminal and then, while laughing, described a "controversial" plan she had put in place in which her office prosecuted the parents of these truant children.<sup>69</sup> That the parents of these children—mostly Black and Latino *and* members of her own community—would be seen as criminals and not as individuals in need of additional support is concerning. On the one hand,

Figure 11. Neera Tanden tweets in support of U.S. interventionism.

<sup>68</sup> Neera Tanden (@neeratanden), "On Syria, while I don't want to be the world's policeman, an unpoliced world is dangerous. The US may be the only adult in the room left," Twitter, September 1, 2013, 12:26 PM, [twitter.com/neeratanden/status/374251840323334144](https://twitter.com/neeratanden/status/374251840323334144).

<sup>69</sup> Kamala Harris, "Kamala Harris (1/14/10)," Commonwealth Club of California, published January 29, 2010, YouTube video, 1:05:48, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=QKaCFmNefHA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QKaCFmNefHA).

Harris has often drawn on her own experiences with the California education system over the course of her political career.<sup>70</sup> On the other hand, she was so willing to criminalize the parents of students struggling to succeed in that same education system. In Harris's intersectional imperialism, Black communities are, as they were in the nineteenth century, classed as "less than." Yet, when it is convenient, Harris will claim to be a member of that very community—crystallizing her commitment to intersectional imperialism.

## Conclusion

Under the conditions of neoliberalism in the United States, the commodification of identity has produced a political landscape in which the intersectional imperialism of individuals like Madeleine Albright, Hillary Clinton, Neera Tanden, and Kamala Harris has now become something to which women should aspire. The commodified identities of these women are pushed to the front and center while their policies follow directly from the U.S. imperial project that began with settler-colonialism in the seventeenth century. Under the paradigm of neoliberalism, community identities are not considered materially relevant. Instead, a rhetoric of individualism further excuses the behavior of politicians who betray the communities they supposedly represent—how can you betray your identity group, if you have been told there is no real purpose to the identity that holds you together at all? As we move forward, it is important that individuals and communities in the United States recognize the insidious nature of the myth of representation. Representation without material progress will not liberate a single community. Instead, it will only service this vicious cycle of election, imperialism, and betrayal.

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<sup>70</sup> Kamala Harris (@KamalaHarris), "There was a little girl in California who was bussed to school. That little girl was me. #DemDebate," Twitter, June 27, 2019, 7:11 PM, [twitter.com/kamalaharris/status/1144427976609734658](https://twitter.com/kamalaharris/status/1144427976609734658).

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