

Madeleine K. Albright

NDI Democracy Luncheon

Omni Shoreham Hotel, Washington DC

October 24, 2007

(as prepared)

Thank you, Ken, for your kind words and for your continued superb leadership at NDI.

I also want to congratulate Jean Dunn, Kristin Haffert and all the rest of our colleagues for organizing this event and for your incredible efforts throughout the year.

Although I am grateful to everyone for joining us and pleased to see so many friends, I would like to begin with two salutations that sound particularly sweet to my ear: “Madam President” and “Madam Speaker,” welcome to NDI’s annual awards luncheon.

Our gathering today bears witness to a remarkable fact: it is possible, even in the midst of an American presidential campaign, to have faith in democracy.

During this afternoon’s program, I expect you will notice certain recurring themes.

The first is that although democracy is often frustrating and always imperfect, it is still by far the best system of government that humans have devised.

The corollary is that NDI is doing indispensable work when it supports fair elections, trains political leaders, promotes opportunities for women, and helps to build democratic institutions.

For more than twenty years, NDI has acted on the belief that democratic aspirations are universal, and that the values of freedom are not the property of any one region, race, culture, gender, or creed.

Where other systems are rigid, democracy is adaptable -- all it requires at the outset is that power be derived from the consent of the governed.

Today, our focus is Africa, where we celebrate what is most vibrant about democracy at the grassroots and also honor a national leader who has championed the cause of development and empowerment at the local level.

We are privileged, as well, to have with us the Speaker of the United States House of Representatives.

Anyone who is familiar with Congress knows that the institution is not entirely free of chauvinism or jealous egos.

To reach a position of leadership, you have to understand how to make people do what you want but, more important, you have to persuade them to *want* what you want.

That is the true test of a leader.

And it is a test that Speaker Nancy Pelosi is passing with the kind of grades I wish I received, but never did, in grade school geography.

Nancy Pelosi is what we at NDI mean when we talk about winning with women.

She has proven herself over and over again as someone who knows how to set priorities, assemble coalitions, mobilize support, and get results that lift the lives of people both at home and overseas.

She is not only an advocate of democracy, but also an inspiring example of how to *practice* democracy.

She is tough, smart, caring and a loyal friend to NDI.

Please join me in welcoming America's first-ever "Madam Speaker" --- Nancy Pelosi.

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(After the premier of the film "Side by Side" on the 50/50 Group of Sierra Leone, winner of the Madeleine K. Albright Grant)

I must tell you, that as I watched that film, I was reminded yet again of why we care about democracy.

We can attach whatever labels we want – whether they are academic, strategic or political – but what they boil down to is the most basic of human questions: how do we treat each other?

Do we recognize our common humanity, or divide all the world into a battle between us and them?

Do we see government as a means to serve the people, or as a way to silence those with whom we disagree?

Do we nurture each child, or chop off the limbs of those who happen to belong to the wrong group or clan?

We in Washington sometimes forget that liberty, justice and peace are not just words that we use to decorate our speeches; they are hard-to-achieve goals that must be pursued every day so that families can live normal lives and children may grow up without fear.

When I visited Sierra Leone a decade ago, it was hard to imagine that the country would ever become democratic and stable.

But giving birth to democracy has always depended on a combination of dreamers and doers.

And over the past ten years, people from around the world have joined with the survivors of Sierra Leone to help move it away from civil war to political competition, and from the rule of the machete to the ballot box.

I find that inspiring, but let's be honest; not everyone feels that way.

Primarily because of Iraq and the outcome of elections in the Palestinian Authority, many Americans now say that advocating freedom abroad is neither a smart policy for our country, nor an effective one.

They suggest that we should be more realistic and stop talking about democracy and focus instead on national security.

Vladimir Putin couldn't put it any better.

America is not Russia, nor are we China.

The truth is that if we fail to speak up for democracy, we will cast aside the cornerstone upon which America's national security is built.

Because the alternative to supporting democracy is complicity in backing governments that lack credibility with their own people.

That approach creates an addiction to stability at all costs – the kind of stability that tries to suppress change even when change is needed, creating the kind of security that crumbles into sawdust when change inevitably comes.

True security, like true democracy, begins at the grass roots.

So make no mistake, democracy builders such as NDI are vital assets in our confrontation with extremism, for it is no accident that terrorists thrive where democracy struggles.

Certainly, terrorists can exist and strike in any country.

But they cannot long flourish in a society where leaders are held accountable and the rule of law is applied.

So let us not hesitate to proclaim our support for democracy.

And let us get on with the work of building the kind of democracies that dig deep and last.

But let us also remember that there is both a right way and a wrong way to go about the job.

It is not for the United States to try to dictate to other societies how they should live.

But there is a vast difference between trying to dictate and responding to calls for help.

Oscar Wilde defined philosophy as the ability to bear with equanimity the misfortunes of others.

NDI has a different philosophy.

We believe that Americans have a responsibility to speak up for Cuba's Oswaldo Paya and the Varela project, which is trying to plant the seeds of civil society in their long-troubled land.

We have a responsibility to answer the call of tribal sheiks in Yemen who have asked for our help in ending cycles of violence, putting down their weapons, and developing a competitive and democratic political system.

We have a responsibility to former combatants in Aceh, Indonesia, who are attempting to create a governing process that will enable them to settle differences without fighting.

We have a responsibility to Europe's Roma population, who are seeking fair representation and full recognition of their rights.

We have a responsibility to legislators in Africa, who are striving to develop political institutions that will respond effectively to the terrible challenges posed by HIV/AIDS.

And we have a responsibility to the democratic opposition in Burma.

It has been a dozen years since I visited Aung San Suu Kyi in Rangoon.

Throughout that time, she has refused to leave her homeland because she would not be permitted back.

She has refused to be silent, because words and reason are the only weapons she has.

And she has refused to give up because her faith in democracy and her love for Burma are unshatterable.

Government thugs can beat the opposition, torture and kill peaceful demonstrators, toss religious leaders in jail, and shut down the Internet, but they cannot shackle the human spirit or destroy truth.

For almost two decades Aung San Suu Kyi and Burma have been at the front lines of the battle between liberty and tyranny.

It is our responsibility—and our privilege--to stand with her, to demand reform, and to push and push and push until her faith is rewarded and the regime of fear gives way to a future of hope.

Supporting democracy is the right thing to do, but it is not easy, nor is it risk-free, even for an organization as established as ours.

In 1993, a former employee of NDI was killed in South Africa while working for social justice.

Her legacy lives on in the projects of the Harriman-award-winning Amy Biehl Foundation, and we are pleased that Linda Biehl, Amy's mother, is with us today.

Last January 17, we were shocked and deeply grieved by the loss of another irreplaceable fighter for democracy, an NDI staff member in Iraq.

Andi Parhamovich, 28 years old, was killed in an assault on a civilian convoy in Baghdad.

At the time, she had been endeavoring to build the kind of national political institutions that are essential to end sectarian strife and create a climate of safety for the Iraqi people.

In Andi's memory, I am announcing today a fellowship that, each year, will bring a young woman who is working with NDI overseas to Washington to learn from us and also to teach us.

The Andi Parhamovich Fellowship reflects Andi's dedication to the participation of women in politics, to democracy, and to reconciliation between people of different ideologies and faiths.

The fellowship is named in her honor, but it was Andi who brought honor to the name and work of NDI, through her selflessness, dedication and courage.

We are grateful to be joined here this afternoon by Andi's mother and father, Vicki and Andre, her sister Marcy and husband Joseph, their daughters Abby Rose and Kayla Grace and some of Andi's closest friends, including Michael Hastings and Jamie Horn.

Our hearts are with you, and we welcome you all.

We now come to my favorite part of any NDI event – the awards.

And although I have nothing against Governor Harriman, I do feel a particular connection to the MKA grant.

As you have learned from the video, Sierra Leone's 50/50 group is an extraordinary band of democracy-builders.

To use a diplomatic term of art: these women rock.

The obstacles to their work include the lack of a democratic tradition in their country, a history of civil strife, and a patriarchal culture that has discouraged the participation of women in political affairs at any level.

Of course, we know that the empowerment of women does not happen over night.

After all, Nancy Pelosi is in her first year as speaker of an institution that is 217 years old.

And Ellen Johnson Sirleaf is the first woman elected president in the long history of Africa.

As their examples show, change comes as the result of an evolution in attitudes, as stereotypes are disproven and prejudice gives way to knowledge.

In Sierra Leone, through the efforts of 50/50, women are gaining confidence, the society is gaining a new perspective, the government is gaining from the participation of women, and the future is looking brighter as yesterday's progress becomes the platform upon which further gains will surely be made.

I am proud that NDI has been 50/50's partner almost from the beginning, and I am delighted to present the 2007 Madeleine K. Albright grant to this marvelous group, and especially to my new sisters Nemata Eshun-Baiden and Harriett Turay.

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf

One of the amazing, recurring stories of history is that of the advocate for freedom who is first imprisoned because of his or her convictions, then later emerges as a national leader.

We think, for example, of Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela, Lech Walesa and Vaclav Havel.

Today, we recognize the accomplishments of another of those rare truth-tellers who made the incredible journey from the dissident's cell to the highest position of national honor.

President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf spent more than a year in prison during the military dictatorship of Samuel Doe.

She gained experience of a different sort as the administrator and then director of the UN Development Program's regional bureau for Africa.

In 1997, she ran for president and finished second in a field of thirteen.

In 2005, she ran again and won, becoming Africa's first woman president and taking one of the world's hardest jobs.

Today, she is renowned for her courage, respected for her knowledge, admired for her leadership, and beloved for her understanding that development, like democracy, is built from the grass-roots.

In just a short time on the global stage, she has established herself as one of the true champions of African democracy, and as a vital voice in the deliberations of the world.

Over the years, the W. Averill Harriman award has been given to democratic leaders from every continent – to dissidents and presidents, great orators and people as soft-spoken as they are brave.

The award recognizes individuals and groups who embody what NDI is all about; people who build democracy through their words and actions every day, no matter what the barriers, no matter how much cynicism, bigotry, opposition, and danger they might endure.

If ever there were a perfect fit between the recipient of an honor and the purpose of that honor, we have it here this afternoon.

Please join me in congratulating President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf as we at NDI present to her the 2007 W. Averill Harriman democracy award.