

Remarks of Madeleine K. Albright, NDI Chairman
2008 NDI Democracy Luncheon
December 15, 2008

Thank you Bren and Christiane and good afternoon to you all.

During the past quarter century, these annual NDI events have taken place in times of great celebration and also tribulation.

But I do not recall a year where the two moods were so evenly matched.

This past November, when American voters chose a leader freely, fairly and for the 56th time, we elected a figure who has stirred excitement around the equator and from pole to pole.

Minds everywhere are open to his message and, although the transition still has weeks to run, the president-elect has already assembled a team that is superbly qualified to lead.

This is good because, while every new president inherits headaches, Barack Obama will be asked to cope with the entire emergency room.

The challenges include a global economic crisis, Al Qaeda, hot wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the nuclear ambitions of Iran and North Korea, climate change, and a viper's nest of regional rivalries.

The new administration will be called on to meet these tests despite a depleted treasury, an over-stretched military, an anxious American public, and a deeply divided world.

President Obama, like any president, will need assistance.

For although a democracy depends on good leaders, it also requires a citizenry willing to give its full measure of devotion to help democracy deliver.

That is especially important today, when we have two urgent jobs.

First, here at home, we must restore life to our constitution and reclaim the full meaning of American ideals.

Second, across the globe, we must make the empowering message of democracy once again both welcome and clearly understood wherever people gather to plan their future.

There was a time, not long ago, when democratic momentum appeared unstoppable.

But today, opposing currents are much in evidence.

These currents are fed by a toxic blend of fears about the economy, worries about security, and doubts about the motives of those claiming to speak in democracy's name.

As a result, the opponents of democracy have gone on the offensive.

Some rulers say that their people are too poor and too uneducated to be entrusted with freedom; even as they pursue policies that withhold opportunity and knowledge from their people.

Some autocrats say that order must precede democracy; so that anyone who opposes the status quo should be silenced or locked up.

Some propagandists say that democracy is a trick used by the West to impose its culture, and that the advocates of democratic reform are therefore unpatriotic, even traitors.

And some extremists say that democracy is heresy, for it claims that power comes from the people instead of from the Almighty, so that God must be defended by killing democrats.

My response to each of these arguments can be summed up in a single word -- Balderdash.

We would all concede that democracy's cause can be weakened by its friends--when we claim too much--or select the wrong means--or imply that democracy comes with a guarantee of prosperity.

In fact, democracy secures the right to pursue happiness, not happiness itself.

So let us acknowledge that it is a mistake to oversell democracy.

But let us also affirm that it would be an unforgivable historic error to sell democracy short.

Democracy is not just another form of government, no worse, but also no better than any other.

It does not belong in the waiting room, for no one can learn democratic habits if denied democratic rights.

It is not alien to the needs of any group, nor at odds with the practice of any religious faith.

In fact, democracy is infinitely adaptable for the same reason that it cannot be imposed: it alone can meet popular desires because it alone reflects the popular will.

Finally, democracy is not a luxury to be sacrificed on the altar of RealPolitik; it has a better record of solving real world problems than all the modern day Machiavellis put together.

Contrary to the critics; democracy can make both order and prosperity more likely.

At its best, it leads to the kind of stability that lasts, a stability built on laws and mutual commitments, not unilateral decrees and the stifling of dissent.

And democracy is also an aid to economic growth, because growth depends on productivity which can only flourish when minds are encouraged to debate, explore and invent.

I am not among those who believe that the world is engaged in a clash of civilizations.

But we are engaged in a battle of ideas.

And the time has come to reclaim the higher ground.

This month, as America awaits its new president, NDI will prepare for its twenty-fifth year.

Our organization has every reason to be proud of its leaders, including the inexhaustible Ken Wollack and proud, too, of our incredible staff, our record of accomplishment, and our growth from a tiny nucleus into a global force.

We cherish the thousands of friends we have acquired.

And we are undaunted by those who have made themselves our enemies.

In every region, we have promoted fair elections, taught political skills, expanded opportunities for women, championed the cause of civil society, and worked to assemble the building blocks of democratic institutions--which include accountable political parties, representative legislatures, and governments that are unafraid to operate in the light of day.

One of our most valuable traits is that we have never stopped learning.

And that is because the environment in which democracy must thrive never stops changing.

Although lessons learned in one place might well apply in another, no two countries are the same; and no two seasons are the same.

Each year, we must adjust to the impacts of innovative technology, emerging leaders, novel ideas, and unforeseen obstacles.

In January of last year, we had to cope with the loss of a valued staff member, when Andi Parhamovich—whose family and friends are with us today--was killed in an assault on a civilian convoy in Baghdad.

Today, we are awarding the first Andi Parhamovich fellowship, to be given each year to a young woman who is working to strengthen democracy in her own country.

Our recipient this year, a colleague of Andi's in Iraq, has been affiliated with NDI since 2005.

She is dedicated to enabling women in that embattled land to create a just, stable and open political system.

Her efforts are a fitting tribute to Andi's vision and legacy.

The fellowship will help her to succeed--while also reminding the world that NDI does not respond to setbacks by turning its back; we respond by doing more.

I hope you will join me in recognizing both the Parhamovich family and the first recipient of the Andi Parhamovich fellowship – Ms. Ferdos Majeed.

We all know that promoting freedom against the wishes of a brutal military government is both dangerous and difficult.

But as the film, “No Women, No Peace” illustrates, this does not stop NDI from trying.

Since 1995, we have been helping to assemble a global network of support for democracy in Burma.

We do this through assistance to groups that are struggling to improve social conditions, raise the quality of life, and enhance the prospects for change.

No less than twelve such groups belong to the Women's League of Burma which advocates for women's empowerment, inter-ethnic understanding, national reconciliation, peace, and democratic reform.

The league is currently in the process of training women in core political skills.

And it is one of many pro-democracy voices calling for the release of political prisoners, including opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

Several years ago, NDI created an annual grant to help women who are striving under difficult circumstances to build democracy.

Contrary to what you might think, I was not the one who chose the award's name.

But I do care passionately about helping those who have faith in a democratic future for Burma.

The Madeleine Albright grant will make it easier for members of the women's league to stand with their sisters and brothers – with OUR sisters and brothers – in keeping alive the dream of a country and a government worthy of its people.

Please join me in honoring the Women's League of Burma, represented by its founding member, Ms. Thin Thin Aung.

Harriman award

Over the years, the W. Averill Harriman award has been given to standard bearers of freedom from five continents – to people who fight for democracy no matter what the barriers or cost.

In 1996, I was privileged to give the award to Aung San Suu Kyi and to Michael Aris, her husband who accepted on her behalf.

This year, we will present the award to a man who has been an advocate of democracy not simply as a political form, but as an expression of belief in the importance and value of every human being.

Introducing Archbishop Desmond Tutu is a great honor for me personally; it is also a little redundant.

Because this is a leader who has long since introduced himself to the world.

By the power of his example, he has made his presence known in a host of ways:

As a source of irritation to the self-satisfied, arrogant and complacent;

As a relentless partisan on behalf of those whose voices too often go unheard;

As a stubborn opponent of racism, violence, repression, and hate;

As a nag to hypocrites who proclaim their love for democracy in the manner of St. Augustine's prayer for chastity – please Lord, but not yet.

And above all, Archbishop Tutu is known as a fearless teacher of truth.

He instructs us gently but in a way that is hard to escape, asking that we not only have the right sentiments, but that we place respect for others at the center of our existence.

Through his words and through his life, he has taught us that injustice can best be overcome without violence; that reconciliation is a more reliable remedy than revenge; that religion can be a source of unity rather than division; and that there is never a wrong time to speak up for freedom.

He has taught us, as well, that in a world divided by hate and driven by a competition to show how tough we can be; there are worse things to speak of than love.

If I had no other arguments to make for democracy; I could still make an ironclad case simply by pointing to this man – and saying, we have Desmond Tutu on our side.

It has been almost a quarter century since the Archbishop received the Nobel Peace Prize.

You might think that we here at NDI are a little slow.

The truth is that we had about twenty years of scheduling issues.

But today, we know, the wait was worth it.

It is one of the most welcome duties of my lifetime to present the 2008 W. Averell Harriman democracy award to the Archbishop of Capetown, Desmond Tutu.