

Remarks of Madeleine K. Albright as Prepared for Delivery  
Dinner Hosted by the National Democratic Institute and the International Republican Institute in  
Honor of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi  
September 19, 2012

Good evening.

I'm delighted to be here and pleased to see so many friends, including my distinguished counterpart, Senator McCain, colleagues from NDI and NRI and, most especially, our guest of honor.

I have spoken about Daw Aung San Suu Kyi on many occasions in the past and have often had the privilege of introducing her in the form of an inspiring but nevertheless pre-recorded video message – delivered from afar.

In 1996, on behalf of NDI, I gave her our organization's highest award – in absentia.

And so tonight, I think I speak for us all when I say to this amazing woman – welcome to Washington – but what on Earth took you so long?

It has been two decades since Michael Aris—Suu Kyi's husband--came to me with a request.

He asked me to inquire whether Vaclav Havel would be willing to draft a foreword to a collection of her writings – which of course he was happy to do.

This was no big deal, but for me it was the start of a personal connection that has grown over time.

In 1995, when I was America's ambassador to the United Nations, word arrived that Suu Kyi had been released from house arrest; this was five years after the elections in which her party had triumphed, only to have the outcome subverted by the military.

The Clinton Administration saw her release as a hopeful sign and so, when given the chance to visit Burma, I quickly agreed.

During a breakfast meeting at her home, Suu Kyi spoke about the issues that would dominate her agenda for years to come – including the need for a democratic opening, an amnesty for those unjustly imprisoned, a plan for economic renewal, and an end to government by fear.

In the seventeen years between that breakfast and this gathering, events did not move along the path we had envisioned either for her or for her country.

Instead, there were more crackdowns, more years under house arrest, more personal tragedy, and periods in which people of lesser strength would have surrendered all hope.

But the yearning for freedom is relentless and so is Aung San Suu Kyi.

In 2008, the ruling junta adopted a new constitution and in 2010, elections were held.

That balloting was far from democratic and seemed only to promise more of the same -- yet over the past year, a series of positive steps have been taken.

These include a reduction in censorship, the legalization of labor unions, the release from prison of many democratic activists, and Suu Kyi's historic decision to re-enter the political process.

And nothing shows better how hungry the Burmese people are for democratic than the overwhelming support given to Suu Kyi's party in last April's parliamentary election.

This week, as we welcome Suu Kyi to our shores, we should do her the courtesy of thinking beyond the drama of her personal story to the hopes of the people she is here to represent – not just the members of her own party, but all who desire a role in choosing their own leaders and shaping their own laws.

We recognize that there remains a constitutional bias in Burma that favors the military, the judicial branch lacks independence, the legislative system is fragile, civil society is just beginning to put down roots, the media have yet to fully test their freedom, and ethnic violence tragically continues in some areas

As Americans, it is not our job to chart Burma's direction, but we have a responsibility to help when and where we can.

The people of that country should know that the West wants nothing more than to see a Burma that is free, independent, united, and prosperous.

That kind of future is far from assured, but the path to extraordinary progress is open, provided the nation's leaders have the courage to embrace change, the willingness to implement democracy, and the good sense to listen to this woman.

When I first met Suu Kyi, back in 1995, I marveled at her discipline in being able to survive five whole years of house arrest.

Now it is 2012.

At almost any point between then and now she could have obtained her liberty simply by asking to leave the country.

But she refused to depart under those circumstances because she knew that she would not be allowed to return.

She refused to remain silent, because words were the only weapons she had.

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

In the room where we had breakfast 17 years ago, there was a huge picture of Burma's founding leader, General Aung San.

There was also a smaller photo of the general surrounded by his family, including a two year old girl with deep piercing eyes.

In 1947, Aung San was assassinated, but his vision of a democratic Burma lives on in the eyes of that little girl, known to us now as a Nobel Prize winner, a member of parliament, and a source of inspiration to people everywhere who cherish freedom.

In her recent address in Oslo, Suu Kyi spoke of the importance of kindness and the desire for harmony.

For two decades, these qualities – though ever-present in Burmese hearts – were pushed to the side of public life.

Just recently, they have begun to flourish -- and she is the reason why.

Now, in that same spirit of harmony and bipartisanship, I am pleased – on behalf of NDI and NRI – to invite Aung San Suu Kyi to come forward and receive a token of our joint admiration and respect.