

(as prepared for delivery)

**The Future of Human Rights**  
**Madeleine Albright**  
**Washington D.C.**  
**April 8, 2008**

Thank you John and greetings to you all.

This morning, we assemble with one purpose in mind - and that is to prove that a day long conference devoted to foreign policy need not, in itself, be a violation of human rights.

It helps that the topics we will address are timely, our panelists charismatic, our purpose just -- and that a delicious lunch will be served.

For this bounty, we have our sponsors to thank.

The Samuel Dash center pays tribute to a true champion of law.

No young attorney could ask for a better career model than Sam Dash.

As for the Center for American Progress, before this century began, CAP did not even exist.

Before the decade is out, it will have made a positive impact in virtually every arena of domestic and world affairs.

CAP is where great ideas come to be nurtured and where American patriots draw up plans for bringing out the best in our country.

So I commend John Podesta and every foot soldier in his growing empire.

I also want to congratulate Bill Schulz and the contributors to his thoughtful new book "the Future of Human Rights."

As that volume reflects, we can expect the future of human rights to be both controversial and complex, a reality that provides a useful starting point for my own remarks this morning.

Perhaps we should begin with the question of what a human rights policy actually is.

In one conception, such a policy consists of measuring the actions of each country against the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, identifying bad actors, and adopting resolutions aimed at shaming them into doing better.

In another conception, human rights are thought of more broadly, taking into account issues of war, peace, terrorism, development, disease and the environment.

There are variations, too, in thinking about the basis for human rights.

For some, rights are derived primarily from law; for others ideology; to still others, they stem from beliefs about religion or ethics.

There are also people with a more suspicious view; who see human rights as propaganda designed to help one group of countries undermine the sovereignty of others.

Adding to the complexity is the longstanding debate about the relative legitimacy of economic and social rights compared to civil and political.

In earlier times, this debate raged against the backdrop of the rivalry between communism and capitalism.

It persists now in the context of globalization and the emergence of a governmental model that combines economic reform with political repression.

This model appeals to leaders who would like to benefit from the global economy without putting at risk their own position or power.

In China's case, the model has been called "Market Leninism" and it creates a stiff political challenge for the West.

To compete, we must prove that freedom leads not only to the voting booth, but also to food on the table and a better life.

This requires a balance.

The power of the market must be connected to social justice.

But the promise of economic security can't be used to deny individual freedom.

We can't allow voting and eating to be viewed as opposing concepts; in any successful system, they must reinforce each other.

Another complicating factor in our discussion is that - as important as human rights are - they are far from the only issue a president must take into account when managing world affairs.

Consider, for example, North Korea.

It's no secret that the government in Pyongyang is wretched, repressive and cruel, and so the argument is made that we should not deal with it until it reforms.

But engagement and appeasement are not the same.

Support for human rights should be a central part of our policy, but food aid may be essential to keep innocent people from dying -- and protection from nuclear war is as basic a human right as I can imagine.

If we have the opportunity to create a nuclear free Korean Peninsula, we should seize it.

A refusal to negotiate might leave us with no chance for a nuclear agreement and still no improvements in the way North Korea treats its people - and what would be the benefit of that?

We must remember that foreign policy cannot be managed with a cookie cutter.

In a diverse world, flexibility will sometimes be more important than consistency.

And in an imperfect world, perfect solutions are often not possible - while imperfect means are all that exist.

Human rights, then, are complicated.

So is morality.

We would be well advised to approach these issues with humility.

We cannot pretend to know all the answers.

But neither can we be so conscious of what is complex that we lose sight of what is clear.

Humility is no excuse for silence.

For although we may not know all the truth about anything, we do know something about truth.

For example, we know that torture is both a strategic blunder and a moral abomination; it is not a weapon in the fight against terror.

Torture is a gift to al Qaeda.

In this case, our interests and ideals are identical - - torture should never again be practiced by the United States or excused by our president - or, for that matter, by our vice-president.

Due process of law was developed for a reason - to protect the rights of the innocent.

And more specifically, to provide a fair means by which the innocent may be separated from the guilty.

Emergency situations do arise.

But six and a half years have passed since 9/11.

In the time since, the spectacle of Guantanamo has not prevented terror --- it has served as a powerful recruiting tool.

The time has long since past to close that prison and throw away the key.

It was also a mistake for the United States, under this administration, to withdraw its signature from the International Criminal Court.

No country has a greater stake than America in a global legal system that protects rights and enforces responsibilities.

After all, we created Nuremburg.

We were the driving force behind the International Court of Justice.

During Vietnam, we repeatedly invoked the Geneva Conventions on behalf of our POWs.

In the 1990's, we led the fight to create a war crimes tribunal for Rwanda and the Balkans.

Even today, we rely on treaty commitments and the UN Security Council to help block Iran's quest for nuclear arms.

The America I love is not a child that pouts when rules good enough for others are suddenly applied to us; the America I love is the world's leading defender--and exemplar--of international law.

Correcting the Bush administration's more obvious errors is the beginning of what the next president must do -- but only the beginning.

Perceptions of America will not change without a persistent and determined effort.

The average age of people in many countries in South Asia, North Africa and the Middle East is only about seventeen.

For those so young, the scope of memory is short.

For many, America's role in the world prior to this century has no meaning.

To some, America is symbolized not by the Statue of Liberty or the defeat of Hitler, but by images from Abu Ghraib.

These unfair impressions have been made worse by agents of hate.

For although the mistakes our nation has made in recent years have hurt us, not all our wounds are self-inflicted.

We have enemies who long preceded the Bush administration and will surely persist after it has gone.

The world is not, as some suggest, headed toward a clash of civilizations -but we ARE engaged in a battle of ideas - a test as to whether people should be governed by laws or by passion -- by agreed principles or by fear.

It is essential that, in the years ahead, the United States re-occupy the high ground in this battle.

That will not happen overnight, but it WILL happen if we adopt a broad approach to protecting human rights, acknowledge our own shortcomings, and strive to strengthen global norms.

It will happen if we employ our nation's ingenuity and wealth to defeat the axis of evil - poverty, ignorance and disease.

It will happen if we show that America is exceptional because of our powerful commitment to justice, not by using our power to carve out exceptions for ourselves.

And it will happen if we engage patiently in the competition of ideas, demonstrating daily the benefits of free institutions, open minds, unfettered debate, and concern for our collective future.

It follows that the foundation for any human rights policy should be the promotion of democracy.

Human rights depend on the proper relationship between governments and the people.

In a democracy, power itself comes from the people.

Now, I have been around a long time; there are no stars in my eyes.

I understand well that democracy is only a form of government, not a pathway to paradise where bad ideas are vanquished and everyone agrees with us.

Democracy doesn't guarantee anything, but it does provide the best chance that leaders will be held accountable, minority rights respected, and abuses corrected over time.

I know there are some who believe that electoral gains made by Islamist candidates in such places as Iraq, Egypt and the Palestinian Authority should cause us to refrain from encouraging elections in certain parts of the world.

I do not share that conclusion.

Every candidate and every party who runs in a free election has an obligation to renounce violence and observe constitutional procedures.

But every government has an obligation to establish means that allow for the peaceful expression of dissent and the popular election of candidates.

Failure to do so leads not to stability but to its counterfeit - causing pressure for change to build until it is released explosively instead of gradually - often replacing one form of despotism with another.

At the same time, we must understand that democracy is not instant coffee, but rather a slow-brewing process in which fair elections are merely one stage.

True democracy requires an independent judiciary, a free press, political parties, and the right of civil society to organize.

There is also a more basic reason for promoting democracy.

If the United States loses its passion for liberty, we will no longer be America.

In 1861, speaking on the occasion of George Washington's birthday, Abraham Lincoln said that the Declaration of Independence did more than bestow liberty on America; it gave hope to the world "that in due time the weights should be lifted from the shoulders of all men [and women] and that all should have an equal chance."

Rather than surrender that principle, said Lincoln, he would choose to be assassinated on the spot.

We know that the list of human rights challenges is long, from the brutal repression in Rangoon to the rolling genocide in Darfur, from the prisons of Havana to the streets of Zimbabwe, from the future health of our planet to the use of religion as a club.

We have learned too much of life to expect perfection, but we care too much to settle for the world as it is.

Ultimately, we understand that the issue of human rights is about more than law or the specific interests of any nation; it is about the attitude we have toward one another and towards life.

To me, it boils down to a simple but profound principle - every individual counts.

This is the principle that is at the heart of every democracy.

It provides the basis for the kind of leadership that could restore respect for America around the world.

It creates the foundation for unity across every barrier of geography, race, gender and creed.

It will enable us, if acted upon, to benefit from the contributions of all people.

And it can serve as the starting point for a serious discussion about the future of human rights.

Thank you very much.

