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**SECRETARY OF STATE HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON
THE HUMAN RIGHTS AGENDA FOR THE 21ST CENTURY
GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY
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Thank you Jasdeep, Dean Lancaster, and President DeGioia for that kind introduction and thank you for having me here today.

There is no better place than Georgetown University to talk about human rights. President DeGioia, the administration, and the faculty embody the university's long tradition of supporting free expression and free inquiry and the cause of human rights around the world.

I know that President DeGioia himself has taught a course on human rights, as well as one on the ethics of international development with one of my old colleagues, Carol Lancaster. And I want to commend the faculty, who are helping to shape our thinking on human rights, conflict resolution, development and related subjects; and the university community overall, including the students, for working to advance interreligious dialogue, for giving voice to many advocates and activists working on the front lines of the global human rights movement through the Human Rights Institute at the law school and other programs; and for the opportunities you provide for students to work in a fine international women's rights clinic.

All of these efforts reflect the deep commitment of the Georgetown administration, faculty, and students here to this cause. Thank you.

Today I want to speak to you about the Obama administration's human rights agenda for the 21st century. It is a subject on the minds of many people who are eager to hear our approach, and understandably so. It is a crucial issue that warrants our energy and attention.

My comments will provide an overview of our thinking on human rights and democracy, and how they fit into our broader foreign policy, as well as the principles and policies that guide our approach. But let me also say that what this is not: It is not a comprehensive accounting of abuses or nations with whom we have raised human rights concerns. It is not a checklist or a scorecard. In that light, I hope that we can all use this opportunity to look at this important issue in a broader light and appreciate its full complexity, moral weight, and urgency. With that, let me turn to the business at hand.

In his acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize last week, President Obama said that while war is never welcome or good, it will sometimes be right and necessary. Because, in his words: "only a just peace based upon the inherent rights and dignity of every individual can be truly lasting."

Throughout history and in our own time—there have been those who violently deny that truth. Our mission is to embrace it, to work for lasting peace through a principled human rights agenda and a practical strategy to implement it.

President Obama's speech also reminded us that our basic values, the ones enshrined in our Declaration of Independence—the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—are not only the source of our strength and endurance, they are the birthright of every woman, man, and child on earth.

That is the promise of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; the prerequisite for building a world in which every person has the opportunity to live up to his or her God-given potential; and the power behind every movement for freedom, every campaign for democracy, every effort to foster development, and every struggle against oppression.

The potential within every person to learn, discover and embrace the world around them; the potential to join freely with others to shape their communities and their societies so that every person can find fulfillment and self-sufficiency; the potential to share life's beauties and tragedies, laughter and tears with the people we love—that potential is sacred.

That is a dangerous belief to many who hold power and who construct their position against an “other”—another tribe or religion or race or gender or political party.

Standing up against that false sense of identity and expanding the circle of rights and opportunities to all people—advancing their freedoms and possibilities—is why we do what we do.

This week we observe Human Rights Week. At the State Department, though, every week is Human Rights Week. Sixty-one years ago this month, the world's leaders proclaimed a new framework of rights, laws, and institutions that could fulfill the vow of “never again.” They affirmed the universality of human rights through the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and legal agreements including those aimed at combating genocide, war crimes and torture, and challenging discrimination against women and racial and religious minorities. Burgeoning civil society movements and non-governmental organizations became essential partners in advancing the principle that every person counts, and in exposing those who violated that standard.

As we celebrate that progress, our focus must be on the work that remains to be done. The preamble of the Universal Declaration encourages us to use it as a “standard of achievement.” And so we should.

But, we cannot deny the gap that remains between its eloquent promises and the life experiences of so many of our fellow human beings.

Now we must finish the job.

Our human rights agenda for the 21st century is to make human rights a human reality.

The first step is to see human rights in a broad context. Of course, people must be free from the oppression of tyranny, from torture, from discrimination, from the fear of leaders who will imprison or “disappear” them. But they must also be free from the oppression of want—want of food, want of health, want of education, and want of equality in law and in fact.

To fulfill their potential, people must be free to choose laws and leaders; to share and access information, to speak, criticize, and debate. They must be free to worship, associate, and to love in the way that they choose. And they must be free to pursue the dignity that comes with self-improvement and self-reliance, to build their minds and their skills, bring their goods to the marketplace, and participate in the process of innovation.

Human rights have both negative and positive requirements. People should be free from tyranny in whatever form, and they should also be free to seize the opportunities of a full life.

That is why supporting democracy and fostering development are cornerstones of our 21st century human rights agenda.

This administration, like others before us, will promote, support, and defend democracy. We will relinquish neither the word nor the idea to those who have used it too narrowly, or to justify unwise policies. We stand for democracy not because we want other countries to be like us, but because we want all people to enjoy consistent protection of the rights that are naturally theirs, whether they were born in Tallahassee or Tehran. Democracy has proven the best political system for making human rights a human reality over the long term.

But it is crucial that we clarify what we mean when we talk about democracy. Democracy means not only elections to choose leaders, but also active citizens; a free press; an independent judiciary and legislature; and

transparent and responsive institutions that are accountable to all citizens and protect their rights equally and fairly. In democracies, respecting rights isn't a choice leaders make day-by-day, it is the *reason* they govern. Democracies protect and respect citizens every day, not just on Election Day. And democracies demonstrate their greatness not by insisting they are perfect, but by using their institutions and their principles to make themselves—and their union—"more perfect," just as our country continues to do after 233 years.

At the same time, human development also must be part of our human rights agenda. Because basic levels of well-being—food, shelter, health, and education—and of public common goods—environmental sustainability, protection against pandemic disease, provisions for refugees—are necessary for people to exercise their rights. And because human development and democracy are mutually reinforcing. Democratic governments are not likely to survive long if their citizens do not have the basic necessities of life. The desperation caused by poverty and disease often leads to violence that further imperils rights and threatens the stability of governments. Democracies that deliver on rights, opportunities, and development for their people are stable, strong, and most likely to enable people to live up to their potential.

Human rights, democracy, and development are not three separate goals with three separate agendas: that view doesn't reflect the reality we face. To make a real and long-term difference in people's lives we have to tackle all three simultaneously with a commitment that is smart, strategic, determined, and long-term.

We should measure our success by asking this question: Are more people in more places better able to exercise their universal rights and live up to their potential because of our actions?

Our principles are our North Star, but our tools and tactics must be flexible and reflect the reality on the ground wherever we are trying to have a positive impact. In some cases, governments are willing but unable without support to establish strong institutions and protections for citizens, for example the nascent democracies in Africa. We can extend our hand as a partner to help them try to achieve authority and build the progress they desire. In other cases, like Cuba or Nigeria, governments are able but unwilling to make the changes their citizens deserve. There, we must vigorously press leaders to end repression, while supporting those within societies who are working for change. And in cases where governments are both unwilling and unable—places like the eastern Congo—we have to support those courageous individuals and organizations who try to protect people and who battle against the odds to plant the seeds for a more hopeful future.

The challenges we face are diverse and complicated. And there is not one approach or formula, doctrine or theory that can be easily applied to every situation. But today I want to outline four elements of the Obama administration's approach to putting our principles into action, and share with you some of the challenges we face in doing so.

First, a commitment to human rights starts with universal standards and with holding everyone accountable to those standards, including ourselves. On his second full day in office, President Obama issued an executive order prohibiting the use of torture or official cruelty by any US official and ordered the closure of Guantanamo Bay.

Next year we will report on human trafficking not only in other countries but also in our own, and we will participate through the United Nations in the Universal Periodic Review of our own human rights record, just as we encourage other nations to do.

By holding ourselves accountable, we reinforce our moral authority to demand that all governments adhere to obligations under international law, among them not to torture, arbitrarily detain and persecute dissenters, or engage in political killings. Our government, and the international community, must counter the pretensions of those who deny or abdicate their responsibilities and hold violators to account.

Sometimes, we will have the most impact by publicly denouncing a government action, like the coup in Honduras or the violence in Guinea. Other times, we will be more likely to help the oppressed by engaging in tough negotiations behind closed doors, like pressing China and Russia as part of our broader agenda. In every instance, our aim will be to make a difference, not to prove a point.

Calling for accountability doesn't start or stop at naming offenders. Our goal is to encourage—even demand—that governments must also take responsibility by putting human rights into law and embedding them in government institutions; by building strong, independent courts and competent and disciplined police and law enforcement. And once rights are established, governments should be expected to resist the temptation to restrict freedom of expression when criticism arises, and be vigilant in preventing law from becoming an instrument of oppression, as bills like the one under consideration in Uganda to criminalize homosexuality would do.

We know that all governments—and all leaders—sometimes fall short. So there have to be internal mechanisms of accountability when rights are violated. Often the toughest test for governments, this is essential to the protection of human rights. And here, too, we should lead by example. In the last six decades we have done this—imperfectly at times but with significant outcomes—from making amends for the internment of our own citizens in World War II, to establishing legal recourse for victims of discrimination in the Jim Crow South, to passing hate crimes legislation to include attacks against gays and lesbians. When injustice anywhere is ignored, justice everywhere is denied. Acknowledging and remedying mistakes does not make us weaker, it reaffirms the strength of our principles and institutions.

Second, we must be pragmatic and agile in pursuit of our human rights agenda, not compromising on our principles, but doing what is most likely to make them real. We will use all the tools at our disposal. And when we run up against a wall we will not retreat with resignation—or repeatedly run up against it—but respond with strategic resolve to find another way to effect change and improve people's lives.

We acknowledge that one size does not fit all. When old approaches aren't working, we won't be afraid to attempt new ones, as we have this year by ending the stalemate of isolation and instead pursuing measured engagement with Burma. In Iran, we have offered to negotiate directly with the government on nuclear issues, but have at the same time expressed solidarity with those inside struggling for democratic change. As President Obama said in his Nobel speech last week, "they have us on their side".

And we will hold governments accountable for their actions as we have by terminating Millennium Challenge Corporation grants this year for Madagascar and Niger in the wake of government actions.

As the President said last week, "we must try as best we can to balance isolation and engagement; pressure and incentives, so that human rights and dignity are advanced over time."

We are also working for positive change within multi-lateral institutions. They are valuable tools that, when at their best, leverage the efforts of many countries around a common purpose. So we have re-joined the UN Human Rights Council, not because we don't see its flaws, but because we think that participating gives us the best chance to be a constructive influence.

In our first session, we co-sponsored the successful resolution on Freedom of Expression, a forceful declaration of principle at a time when that freedom is jeopardized by new efforts to constrain religious practice, including recently in Switzerland, and by efforts to criminalize the defamation of religion—a false solution which exchanges one wrong for another.

And in the UN Security Council, I chaired the September session where we passed a resolution mandating protections against sexual violence in armed conflict.

Principled pragmatism informs our approach on human rights with key countries like China and Russia. Cooperation with each is critical to the health of the global economy and the non proliferation agenda, to managing security issues like North Korea and Iran, and to addressing world problems like climate change.

The United States seeks positive relationships with China and Russia. That means candid discussions of divergent views. In China we call for protection of rights of minorities in Tibet and Xin xiang; for the rights to express oneself and worship freely; and for civil society and religious organizations to advocate their positions within a framework

of the rule of law. And we believe that those who advocate peacefully for reform within the constitution, such as Charter 2008 signatories, should not be persecuted.

With Russia we deplore the murders of journalists and activists and support the courageous individuals who advocate at great peril for democracy.

With China, Russia, and others, we are engaging on issues of mutual interest while also engaging societal actors in these same countries who are working to advance human rights and democracy. The assumption that we must either pursue human rights or our “national interests” is wrong. The assumption that only coercion and isolation are effective tools for advancing democratic change is also wrong.

Across our diplomacy and development efforts, we also keep striving for innovative new ways to achieve results. That’s why I commissioned the first ever Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review, to develop a forward-looking strategy built on analysis of our objectives, our challenges, our tools, and our capacities to achieve America’s foreign policy and national security objectives. And make no mistake, issues of Democracy and Governance—D&G as they call it at USAID—are central to this review.

The third element of our approach is that we support change driven by citizens and their communities. The project of making human rights a human reality cannot be just a project for governments. It requires cooperation among individuals and organizations—within communities and across borders—who are committed to securing lives of dignity for all who share the bonds of humanity.

Six weeks ago, in Morocco, I met with civil society activists from across the Middle East and North Africa. They exemplify how lasting change comes from within. How it depends on activists who create the space in which engaged citizens and civil society can build the foundations for rights-respecting development and democracy. Outside governments and global civil society cannot impose change, but we can promote and bolster it.

We can encourage and provide support for local grassroots leaders: providing a lifeline of protection to human rights and democracy activists when they get in trouble—as they often do—for raising sensitive issues and voicing dissent. This means using tools like our Global Human Rights Defenders Fund, which in the last year has provided targeted legal and relocation assistance to 170 human rights defenders around the world.

We can stand with them publicly—as we have by sending high-level diplomatic missions to meet with Aung San Suu Kyi, and as I have done around the world from Guatemala to Kenya to Egypt to speak out for civil society and political leaders and to work backchannels to push for the safety of dissidents and protect them from persecution.

We can amplify the voices of activists and advocates working on these issues by shining a spotlight on their progress—so often courageously pursued in isolation—and by endorsing the legitimacy of their efforts. We can recognize their efforts with honors like the Women of Courage awards that First Lady Michelle Obama and I presented earlier this year and the Human Rights Defenders award I will present next month, and we can applaud others like Vital Voices, the RFK Center for Justice and Human Rights, and the Lantos Foundation, that do the same.

We can give them access to public forums that lend visibility to their ideas, and continue to press for a role for non-governmental organizations in multilateral institutions like the United Nations and the OSCE. We can enlist other allies like international labor unions who were instrumental in the Solidarity movement in Poland or religious organizations like those championing the rights of people living with HIV/AIDS in Africa.

We can help change agents to gain access to and share information through the Internet and mobile phones so that they can communicate and organize. With camera phones and facebook pages, thousands of protestors in Iran have broadcast their demands for rights denied, creating a record for all the world, including Iran’s leaders, to see. I’ve established a special unit inside the State Department to use technology for 21st century statecraft.

In virtually every country I visit – from Indonesia to Iraq to South Korea to the Dominican Republic -- I conduct a town hall or roundtable discussion with groups outside of government to learn from them, and to provide a platform for their voices, ideas, and opinions. When I was in Russia I visited an independent radio station to give an

interview, and to express through word and deed our support for independent media at a time when free expression is under threat.

On my visits to China, I have made a point of meeting with women activists. The U.N. World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 inspired a generation of women civil society leaders who have become rights defenders for today's China. In 1998, I met a small group of lawyers in a crowded apartment on the fifth floor of a walk-up building, who described their efforts to win rights for women to own property, have a say in marriage and divorce, and be treated as equal citizens.

When I visited again earlier this year, I met with some of the same women, but their group had grown and expanded its scope. Now there were women working not just for legal rights but for environmental, health, and economic rights.

Yet one of them, Dr. Gao Yaojie [Gow Yow Geeyah], has been harassed for speaking out about AIDS in China. She should, instead, be applauded by her government for helping to confront the crisis.

NGOs and civil society leaders need the financial, technical and political support that we provide. Many repressive regimes have sought to limit the independence and effectiveness of activists and NGOs by restricting their activities—including more than 25 governments that have recently adopted new restrictions. Our funding and support can give a foothold to local organizations, training programs, and independent media.

And of course one of the most important ways that we and others in the international community can lay the foundation for change from the bottom up is through targeted assistance to those in need, and through partnerships that foster broad-based economic development.

To build success for the long run our development assistance needs to be as effective as possible at delivering results and paving the way for broad-based growth and long-term self-reliance. Beyond giving people the capacity to meet material needs, economic empowerment gives them a stake in securing their futures, a stake in seeing their societies become the kind of democracies that protect rights and govern fairly. We will pursue a rights-respecting approach to development—consulting with local communities, ensuring transparency, and midwife-ing accountable institutions—so that our development activities act in concert with our efforts to support democratic governance. That is the pressing challenge we face in Afghanistan and Pakistan today.

The fourth element of our approach is that we will widen our focus—we will not forget that positive change must be reinforced and strengthened where hope is on the rise; and we will not ignore or overlook places of seemingly intractable tragedy and despair: where human lives hang in the balance we must do what we can to tilt that balance toward a better future.

Our efforts to support those working for human rights, economic empowerment, and democratic governance are driven by commitment not convenience, and must be sustained for the long run. Democratic progress is urgent but it is not quick, and we should never take for granted its permanence. Backsliding is always a threat, as we've learned in places like Kenya where the perpetrators of post-election violence have thus far escaped justice; and in the Americas where we are worried about leaders who have seized property, trampled rights, and abused justice to enhance personal rule.

And, when democratic change occurs, we cannot become complacent. Instead we must continue reinforcing NGOs and the fledgling institutions of democratic governance. Young democracies like Liberia, East Timor, Moldova and Kosovo need our help to secure improvements in health, education and welfare. We must stay engaged to nurture democratic development in places like Ukraine and Georgia, which experienced democratic breakthroughs earlier this decade but have struggled because of internal and external factors to consolidate democratic gains.

So we stand ready—both in our bilateral relationships and through international institutions—to help governments who have committed to improving their institutions, by assisting them in fighting corruption and helping train police forces and public servants. And we will support others, including regional institutions like the Organization of

American States, the African Union, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, where they take their own steps to defend democratic principles and institutions.

Success stories deserve our attention so that they continue to make progress in building sustainable democracies.

And, even as we reinforce successes, conscience demands that we are not cowed by the overwhelming difficulty of making inroads against misery in the hard places like Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo, North Korea, and Zimbabwe, or on the hard issues like ending gender inequality and discrimination against gays and lesbians ---from the Middle East to Latin America, Africa to Asia.

We must continue to press for solutions in Sudan where ongoing tensions threaten to add to the devastation wrought by genocide in Darfur and an overwhelming refugee crisis. We will continue to identify ways to work with partners to enhance human security there while at the same time focusing greater attention on efforts to prevent genocide elsewhere.

As I said in Beijing in 1995 “human rights are women’s rights, and women’s rights are human rights” but that ideal is far from being realized in Goma, the last stop I made in the Democratic Republic of Congo in August, and the epicenter of one of the most violent and chaotic regions on earth. When I was there, I met with victims of horrific gender and sexual violence and refugees driven from their homes by the many military forces operating there. I also heard from those working to end the conflicts and to protect the victims in unfathomably dire conditions. I saw the best and worst of humanity in a single day in Goma: the unspeakable acts of violence that have left women physically and emotionally brutalized, and the heroism of the women and men themselves, and of the doctors, nurses and volunteers working to repair their bodies and their spirits.

They are on the front lines of the struggle for human rights. Seeing firsthand the courage and tenacity of these Congolese people – and the internal fortitude that keeps them going – is humbling, and it inspires me to keep working.

These four aspects of our approach—accountability, principled pragmatism, partnering from the bottom up, and keeping a wide focus where rights are at stake—will help build a foundation that enables people to stand and rise above poverty, hunger, and disease and that secures their rights under democratic governance. We must lift the ceiling of oppression, corruption, and violence. And we must light a fire of human potential through access to education and economic opportunity.

Build the foundation, lift the ceiling, and light the fire. All together. All at once. Because when a person has food and education but not the freedom to discuss and debate with fellow citizens—he is denied a life he deserves. And when a person is too hungry or sick to work or vote or worship, she is denied a life she deserves. Freedom doesn’t come in half measures, and partial remedies cannot redress the whole problem.

Now, the champions of human potential have never had it easy. We may call rights inalienable, but making them so has always been hard work. And no matter how clearly we see our ideals, taking action to make them real requires tough choices. Even if everyone agrees that we should do whatever is most likely to improve the lives of people on the ground, we won’t agree on what course of action fits that description in every case. That is the nature of governing.

We all know examples of good intentions that did not produce results. And we can learn from instances in which we have fallen short. Past failures are proof of how difficult progress is, but we do not accept claims that progress is impossible.

Because progress does happen. Ghana emerged from an era of coups to one of stable democratic governance. Indonesia moved from repressive rule to a dynamic democracy that is Islamic and secular. Chile exchanged dictatorship for democracy and an open economy.

Mongolia's constitutional reforms successfully ushered in multiparty democracy without violence. And there is no better example than the progress made in Central and Eastern Europe since the fall of the Berlin Wall twenty years ago, an event I was proud to help celebrate last month at the Brandenburg Gate.

While the work in front of us is vast, we face the future together with partners on every continent, partners in faith-based organizations, NGOs, and socially-responsible corporations, and partners in government. From India—the world's largest democracy, and one that continues to use democratic processes and principles to perfect its union of over 1.1 billion people—to Botswana where the new president in Africa's oldest democracy has promised to govern according to what he calls the "5 D's"—democracy, dignity, development, discipline, and delivery, providing a recipe for responsible governance that contrasts starkly with the unnecessary and man-made tragedy in neighboring Zimbabwe.

In the end, this isn't just about what we do; it's about who we are. And we cannot be the people we are — people who believe in human rights—if we opt out of this fight. Believing in human rights means committing ourselves to action. When we sign up for the promise of rights that apply everywhere, to everyone, the promise of rights that protect and enable human dignity, we also sign up for the hard work of making that promise a reality.

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