

**Statement of Tom Malinowski**  
**Former Member of Congress and Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor**  
**House Committee on Foreign Affairs**  
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Chairman Mast, Ranking member Meeks, and to all my friends on both sides of this Committee, thank you for inviting me to testify. It's always good to be with you in this room.

As many of you know, I wasn't born in the United States. I emigrated here with my mom from Poland when I was six years old, back when it was a Communist country. I came from one of those families from behind the Iron Curtain that idolized the United States — they got their news from Radio Free Europe and Voice of America; they saw this great country as a beacon of hope for freedom and democracy for the whole world; they passed that idea down to me before and after we emigrated. It had a huge influence on me.

In 1981, when I was 15 years old, I spent the summer back in Poland visiting relatives, and had the amazing opportunity to go to the shipyard in Gdansk from which Solidarity was waging its struggle against Communism. I got to meet Lech Walesa, the leader of that movement. I was so proud to know that the United States, my country, through institutions like the National Institute for Democracy, was helping this great hero of democracy carry on his fight, sending radios, and copying machines, and cash that the Polish trade union could use to survive and eventually to win. It was the right thing to do, and as it turned out, it changed the world.

The NED was a Ronald Reagan idea brought to life by Democrats and Republicans in Congress. It's founders, many of whom are looking down on us from the portraits that hang on the walls of this committee chamber, explicitly designed it to be bipartisan — overseeing a National Republican Institute and a National Democratic Institute — to mobilize Americans of both parties to support the cause of freedom in the world, to signal that it represented all of us, and to ensure it would stand the test of time.

We should all be proud that in the years since its founding, the NED family has provided direct or indirect support to 22 people who won the Nobel Peace Prize, from Shirin Ebadi in Iran, to Liu Xiaobo in China, to the dissidents of Memorial in Russia, and to countless others who are less famous but just as courageous. This work remains incredibly valuable today, as we hope for democratic change in countries like Iran, and Cuba, and Venezuela, and counter the billions of dollars spent by China to promote its authoritarian model around the world. That cannot be done by traditional government to government diplomacy alone; we need to build connections of trust with ordinary people working for change in these societies, and that's what NED is for.

For me, it's enough that the work is morally right; but I also firmly believe that it serves America's national interests.

One of America's biggest comparative advantages in the world is that we have allies and our adversaries do not. We have allies in part because we have values — values with universal appeal, that people in other countries want their governments to get behind.

Our enemies have long resented that American advantage, and for that reason, they have long hated, disparaged, and tried to discredit the NED. When I represented America as our Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy and Human Rights, leaders from authoritarian countries would often complain to me about its supposedly nefarious activities. That told me it was doing something right.

So it didn't surprise me to see so many of America's enemies rejoicing when it looked like the NED might be eliminated last year — the Cuban government, the Taliban, the Chinese Communist Party, Iran. When the Iranian Revolutionary Guards praise the attempted dismantlement of an American program, that's a pretty good argument for continuing the program. I could rest my case right there.

Now I get that the Trump administration — at least some parts of it may not agree. As some of my Republican friends in Congress say, President Trump has a unique way of expressing himself. Like when he said in Saudi Arabia that America would no longer “sit in judgment of foreign leaders” and “use American policy to dispense justice for their sins.” Like when he called the Chinese Communist dictator a “great leader,” while lamenting that an imprisoned Chinese dissident had caused his country a “lot of bedlam.” Like when he responded to complaints about Putin killing innocent people by saying that America kills, too.

It makes me incredibly sad to hear the leader of our government speak in this way, and to know that this is the image of America that billions of people across the world are getting right now.

I also acknowledge that it is his prerogative as president to set the foreign policy of our government, whether I agree with it or not. Just as Presidents Biden and Obama and Bush and Clinton put their own stamp on our foreign policy, whether their critics agreed with them or not.

But this is precisely why Congress has from time to time in our history created institutions that don't radically change depending on who is in the oval office. Congress created the NED and other similar entities to reflect and represent what its members believed should be an enduring and consistent American commitment to freedom and democracy in the world. That's one reason there is a bipartisan board, and for the degree of separation that is supposed to exist between NED and the State Department.

Yes, the State Department manages democracy grant programs, too, which more closely reflect the priorities of the administration in power. But I'm trying to imagine how the then Chairman of this Committee, Mr. Engel, would have replied if I'd gone to him when I was Assistant Secretary of State administering those programs and said, “Eliot, come on, we're both Democrats. You love President Obama. Just give me the NED money to spend as I see fit.” I imagine he'd have uttered some words that would not be appropriate to put in the record.

Congress has also understood that the NED does edgy work that pisses foreign dictators off, that those dictators complain to our presidents, and that those presidents might sometimes be tempted to pull an NED program down — to cut off a Lech Walesa of today — to preserve some element of diplomatic cooperation with a distasteful government. When that happens, Congress wanted presidents to be able to say that NED is not under their direct day to day control; this protects our presidents' flexibility, as well as the fine work the institution does.

That's not to say that the NED is some kind of free agent. What it does, in fact, is to answer directly to Congress, instead of functioning as just another office in the State Department. It is part of the stamp Congress has put on our foreign policy for four decades.

The question for you is whether that will continue, or whether Congress will cede yet another piece of its power and independence to the executive branch — something not just this president but his successors will exploit to the fullest, to your detriment.

I hope you will preserve your prerogative to shape American foreign policy independently of the executive branch, and that you will continue to support institutions that consistently, on a bipartisan basis, advocate for American values in the world