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Statement before the
House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Global Human Rights Under Siege

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Chairman Royce, Representative Engel, and distinguished members of the committee, it is an honor to appear here today.

My name is Amanda Schnetzer. I direct the Human Freedom Initiative at the nonprofit, nonpartisan George W. Bush Institute in Dallas, Texas. At the Bush Institute, we believe that freedom is a universal human right, and that freedom is essential to lasting peace and prosperity at home and around the world. We work to develop leaders in emerging democracies, stand with those who still live under tyranny, and foster U.S. leadership through policy and action.

My comments will focus on the connection between promoting human rights and freedom abroad and maintaining our security here at home.

Seventy-five years ago, President Franklin Roosevelt delivered his famous Four Freedoms speech to Congress. He warned that “at no previous time has American security been as seriously threatened from without as it is today.”

In making the case to end U.S. neutrality in World War II, President Roosevelt redefined America’s role in the world by intertwining our national security with the fight against tyranny beyond our shores.

“The future and safety of our country and of our democracy are overwhelmingly involved in events far beyond our borders,” he warned.

As Will Inboden, of the University of Texas, and I wrote in the inaugural issue of *The Catalyst*, a Bush Institute Journal of Ideas, this principle is just as relevant today, as the adversaries of freedom once again gain ground.

Although substantially more people in the world experience liberty today than at the end of World War II, more than half the world’s population still lives in countries where basic political rights and civil liberties are only partly respected, if at all. The last decade in particular has not been good for freedom.

For ten consecutive years, the human rights organization Freedom House has documented more setbacks than gains for freedom around the world.¹ The National Endowment for Democracy has warned of authoritarian regimes cracking down at home while also “seeking to reshape the international order and democratic norms.”²

There are the champions of authoritarian capitalism like China, Russia, and Vietnam. There is the anti-democratic, anti-market club of countries in Latin America like Venezuela, Cuba, Ecuador, and Bolivia. There is the rise of illiberal democracies in places like Hungary and Turkey. There is militant Islamism and other forms of repression that dominate in the Middle East and North Africa.

¹ “Anxious Dictators, Wavering Democracies: Global Freedom Under Pressure,” *Freedom in the World 2016*: https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FH_FITW_Report_2016.pdf.

² “Resurgent Dictatorship: The Global Assault on Democracy”: <http://www.resurgentdictatorship.org/about-us/>.

As these and other challengers to liberalism gain adherents, it is in the direct and immediate interest of the United States to support the advance of human rights and freedom abroad.

The current mood in the United States does not appear conducive to this strategy. New Pew Research polling shows that 69 percent of Americans believe the United States should “concentrate more on our own national problems.” Seventy percent want the next U.S. president to focus on domestic policy over foreign policy. Yet in order to address the “major threats” that keep Americans awake at night—ISIS, foreign cyberattacks, global economic instability, the spread of infectious diseases, the refugee crisis—strong U.S. leadership is required, as are strategies that help advance rule of law, good governance, open markets, and other features of free societies.³

So where do we go from here?

One step would be for policymakers, presidential candidates, and other public office hopefuls to make the promotion of democracy and human rights an important part of their foreign policy agendas. This March, 139 policy experts, civil society leaders, and former elected officials—Republicans and Democrats alike—signed a letter encouraging the presidential candidates to do just that.

While recognizing that “democracy and human rights cannot be the only items on the foreign policy agenda,” the letter calls it a “false choice” to pit the pursuit of democratic ideals against national security. I was proud to sign that letter.

A second step would be to engage the American people in a conversation about the impact of advancing freedom on our own peace, prosperity, and security.

At the end of World War II, for example, many questioned whether democracy was compatible with Germany and Japan. The United States actively supported the development of democratic institutions and practices. Today, Germany and Japan are among our strongest partners and allies in the world, and Americans reap tangible benefits.

In North Texas, where the Bush Institute is located, the relocation of Toyota’s North American headquarters is expected to create jobs and have an economic impact of \$7 billion in the first ten years, according to estimates when the move was announced.

During the Cold War, the United States supported democratic reform in then-authoritarian allies such as Taiwan, South Korea, the Philippines, and Chile. The end of the Cold War was a major victory for freedom in Central and Eastern Europe. After decades of Soviet nuclear threat, it also was a great victory for American peace and security.

Today, the moral and strategic imperatives of advancing human rights can be seen in numerous examples. I will take four from our work at the Bush Institute.

³ “Public Uncertain, Divided Over America’s Place in the World,” Pew Research Center, May 2016: <file:///C:/Users/aschnetzer/Downloads/05-05-2016-Foreign-policy-APW-release.pdf>

As First Lady, and still today, Laura Bush has made the empowerment of women in Afghanistan a priority. Women and girls have made important gains in education, the economy, and society since the end of Taliban control. Yet those achievements are fragile and need continued U.S. support and engagement.

It matters to Americans because investing in women in Afghanistan promotes stability and helps reduce the possibility of future terrorist attacks on the United States emanating from that country.⁴

The Institute is also investing in the next generation of women leaders in the Middle East, because we know that women are agents of peace, prosperity, and stability in their communities and countries. Our Women's Initiative Fellowship Program has graduated more than 60 women from Egypt and Tunisia since 2012.

Tunisia may be the only success story of the Arab Spring, but the sentiments that inspired democratic uprisings across the region remain: frustration with injustice, lack of freedom, and a dearth of economic opportunity. The same factors were present in Syria, but the failure to liberalize there and elsewhere in the Middle East has had devastating consequences and helped lay the groundwork for Islamic extremism and ISIS. It is in the economic and security interests of the United States to see the forces of freedom eventually prevail.

The Bush Institute's Liberty and Leadership Forum is helping develop young leaders in Burma who are playing important roles in their country's democratic opening. For more than two decades U.S. policy focused on isolating Burma's military junta and advancing the cause of Aung San Suu Kyi and the democratic opposition. Important human rights concerns remain, including the severe plight of Rohingya Muslims and other ethnic and religious minorities. Burma's strategic importance to the United States is also rising as China grows more aggressive in consolidating influence and power in Asia.

Pandemic disease and other health crises are also threats to our national security. In an interconnected world, disease can spread rapidly and cripple societies caught in its path. In Africa, the Pink Ribbon Red Ribbon, a global partnership fighting women's cancers with which the Bush Institute is affiliated, is building on the PEPFAR platform and the global health community's progress in reducing deaths from HIV/AIDS to address cervical and breast cancer. The recent Ebola crisis in West Africa brought the risk to Americans extremely close to home, including in Dallas where the first patient in the country was diagnosed.

There's also the example of North Korea. In 2015, the Bush Institute released a report calling for new approaches to address the human rights abuses of the Kim regime. One of the report's recommendations is to treat human rights and the nuclear threat as symbiotic. Policy opportunities include integrating human rights into mainstream diplomacy, the sanctions regime, and frameworks for looking at future unification of the peninsula.⁵ The recent decision to

⁴ "Afghanistan and U.S. Security," Atlantic Council, October 2015:

http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/publications/20151016_Afghanistan_and_us_security.pdf

⁵ Victor Cha, "Light Through the Darkness: Improving the Human Condition in North Korea. Defining a New Path Forward," January 2015: http://bushcenter.imgix.net/legacy/gwb_north_korea_report_call_to_action.pdf

sanction Kim Jong Un and ten other North Koreans for human rights abuses is a move in that direction.

A third step in breaking down the false dichotomy of human rights and national security would be to encourage and increase support for relevant research. The Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, for example, has done important work documenting the DPRK's human rights abuses and use of forced labor to generate revenue for the government, including its nuclear program.⁶

A fourth step would be to seek immediate opportunities for bipartisan action. Franklin Roosevelt's Four Freedoms speech stands against the backdrop of a bipartisan tradition of support for liberty. Both Republican and Democrat presidents have affirmed the U.S. commitment to standing for freedom at home and leading the advance of freedom abroad. Congress, too, has played an important role.

In 1982, in his now-famous address to the British Parliament at Westminster, President Ronald Reagan acknowledged that policy makers can disagree on many things but, he said, "on one point all of us are united—our abhorrence of dictatorship in all its forms." He then called on leaders in Europe and the United States to "take actions to assist the campaign for democracy."

The founding of the National Endowment for Democracy followed a year later with strong bipartisan support. The creation of the Millennium Challenge Corporation in 2004 is another example of important bipartisan action. Ensuring continued support for democracy and development assistance overseas, promoting progress on human rights in trade and economic agreements, and continuing support for initiatives like PEPFAR that relieve human suffering are just some of the options available to policymakers today.

In the current political environment, this may be a tall order, but the stakes at home and abroad are high and American leadership is essential.

Thank you.

⁶ Kim Kwang-Jin, "Gulag, Inc.: The Use of Forced Labor in North Korea's Export Industries," Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, 2016: http://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/KKJ_Gulag_INC_FinalFinal_WEB.pdf