Resolved: The United States Should Not Give Aid to Dictators

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Thank you. I didn't know you got turnouts of groups this large unless you were inviting Iranian dictators. [Laughter] Thanks to all of you.

Just as important as the topics you debate is the fact that you are willing to come together to listen, to argue about various ideas. The most valuable tool a college can bestow is not so much a reservoir of knowledge, but a path to critical thinking. [Applause]

It's what I try to do as a lawyer every day; it's what we do in government. Indeed, while academicians speak at great length about diversity and tolerance, this does not always extend to a diversity of ideas and a tolerance for points of view at odds with the campus zeitgeist, which in our time is known as political correctness. So forums like this can establish a crucible where ideas stand or fall on their merits, and where you hone your own analytical skills are really fundamentally what college is about. So with that I commend you and suggest that all of you send bills to the University for a refund of part of your tuition since you are really the work of the University. [Applause]

North Korean Human Rights Record

What I'm going to speak about tonight is North Korea's human rights record, and what I believe should be the appropriate international response to it. In that respect it is not so much a question of absolutes, should we or should we not give aid to a dictatorships. We gave a great deal of support to Stalin when Stalin was helping us decapitate the Third Reich. On the other hand, I'm not sure anyone would suggest we simply start giving blank checks to dictators like Kim John Il or a generation earlier, Pol Pot. The issue is, what is it that our appropriate response should be to what is developing in North Korea. What should our policies be in the United States and indeed what should the policies of the international community be.

North Korea has loomed large in the media—especially since the regime conducted a nuclear test a year ago. The attention has focused on this ambition to possess a nuclear arsenal but less attention is given to the regime's treatment of its own people—thanks largely to complete censorship inside North Korea. The regime's conduct includes running a large network of political concentration camps, preventing all free speech, religion and virtually all other freedoms that we know, and maintaining statist policies that keep the nation in a perpetual state of hunger and misery. In the 1990s, the last time North Korea was subjected to a famine, these policies killed over 1 million North Koreans and sparked a refugee exodus, primarily into northeastern China. Perhaps the single most significant statistic, or factoid, that I can give you about North Korea—to take away from this evening—is the fact the average North Korean male is seven inches shorter than the average South Korean male. It is a chilling a fact, because less than 30 years ago both countries were largely in parity economically with similar political structures. And today South Korea is one the dozen largest and fastest growing economies in the world, a vibrant democracy, with a tremendous free press. And of course a healthy population. Whereas North Koreans suffer due to policies of their own government.

Human Rights and National Security

Many view the issues of security and human rights as separate. The question is, should they? The answer to that question has a profound effect on how you approach the problem of North Korea. As a government whose interests are threatened by North Korea's actions, do you try simply to strike a bargain that alleviates the immediate issue of security concern—in this case a small but growing nuclear capability? Or do you take the point of view that a regime that treats its own people this way will inevitably extend that mistreatment to neighbors, as North Korea does? In other words, do you seek a grand bargain with the existing government, even if this means bestowing upon it largesse and the veneer of legitimacy, or do you apply international pressure to try to change the nature of the regime, so that it respects both the rights of its citizens and its neighbors? The latter option, which calls for making human rights a priority and seeking to modify the regime's conduct—its own internal conduct—is controversial. It is based on the premise that human rights is not just a laudable end in itself—but indeed a means to a greater end, which is the enhancement of peace and security.

Let's take a look at the policy rationale, first of all, to that approach. Why is the United States focusing so much attention on North Korea and North Korean human rights? Why did Congress unanimously—which means liberals and conservatives [Laughter] —pass a law in 2004 saying that the United States should play a leadership role in seeking improved treatment for the North Korean people? The answer is that is that politicians on both sides of the aisle strongly believe that it is in the interest of the United States and the free world to encourage respect for human rights and ultimately, democracy in North Korea.

It is simply inconceivable in my view that a country whose leaders are chosen by its people, and who respect the dignity of the individual would treat its own citizens in the manner in which Kim Jung Il treats his. Nor does the North Korean regime only endanger its own people through its barbaric actions. The logical outgrowth of a nation that does not respect the rights of its citizens is a nation that does not respect the rights of its neighbors. Indeed, North Korea threatens other nations, including our own, by building a nuclear arsenal and trafficking drugs and trafficking human beings. It repeatedly threatened to turn South Korea—the capital city of Seoul with over 25 million people—to turn it into "sea of fire."

Henry Jackson who was a Democratic Senator in the 1970s from Washington State, and today would probably neither be a Republican nor a Democrat—he was Cold Warrior, he was a hawk, but he was a proud Democrat, made it clear that how a nation treats its own citizens, is the first indication of how it will treat others.

But government conduct at home also influences its conduct toward other nations. With the maximum dictators of the 20th century—Hitler, Stalin and Mao—the march of tyranny at home was an antecedent to international aggression. Even repressive regimes without stated ambitions of conquest and expansion cause problems for their neighbors. For example, the illegitimate, unelected junta that runs Burma, in addition to creating an economic and humanitarian black hole in the heart of Southeast Asia, has caused a refugee crisis that puts serious strains on its neighbors. Its presence also contributes to a community of repressive nations that are today cooperate with China in preserving an illiberal model of government that does not seek its citizens' consent to govern. Dictatorships therefore threaten security by their very being. Their arsenals are simply the most visible means of such a threat; the root cause of the threat is actually their illiberal nature—prone to violence at home and abroad. For this reason, making human rights part of our national security agenda is not only an appropriate policy, but also a necessary one.

Refuting Opponents

Now, there are many people who disagree flat-out with that articulation of human rights as being a core part of a foreign policy. And there are different rationales opposing that. Some argue that our concern about human freedom amounts to interference in internal affairs of another state—a sort of new imperialism. Others do not protest raising the human rights issue, but believe that with respect to North Korea, it is a matter that should be solely worked out on the Korean peninsula by the North and South Koreans in the context of and ultimate drive toward unification. Finally, some recognize that human rights is a legitimate area of concern, but they argue that raising it will prevent us from making progress on more immediate security concerns like North Korea's nuclear arsenal or their potential transfer of weapons and nuclear materials to other rogue states, like Iran or Syria. All of these approaches implicitly or explicitly reject the notion that the promotion of human rights can be a means to the end of greater security—or at least hold that such an approach is foolish. And let me explain why they are wrong.

The Chinese government today is perhaps the foremost adherent in the world to the notion that raising human rights concerns amounts to improper interference in the internal matters of another state. For example, China recently delayed a UN Security Council condemnation of violence against the people of Burma by its ruling junta, declaring that they were Burma's "internal problems." The vice chairman of China's Communist Party recently reaffirmed its stated policy of "non-interference in the internal affairs of other states." In other words, what happens in Rangoon, stays in Rangoon—and the same is true of Pyongyang, Beijing or the Darfur region of Sudan. Of course if we don't take action in the face of massive human rights abuses like in Pyongyang, we will be faced in the future with many more movies, like the movie about the genocide in Rwanda – Hotel Rwanda – it will simply go by another name: Hotel Pyongyang. And so we do have to take these issues seriously.

Unfortunately, countries, indeed China in particular, has refused to use its leverage in a serious manner in order to improve human rights conditions in North Korea. China is not very interested in developing an economic relationship because North Korea has very little in return to offer. Likewise, South Korea, which has a tremendous interest in developing an economic relationship with North Korea, doesn't want anything in return – doesn't ask for anything in return – because what they are getting right now, which is a form of very cheap labor, some would say really slave labor, by paying money to the North Korean government in exchange for a cheap work force; they are satisfying their own economic ambitions. The problem of course is, when those countries that have the leverage to exert, fail to exert any leverage, the human rights abuses in the host country become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

And China is not alone in its actions. Repressive regimes the world over do not wish for attention to be paid to their conduct. Last week, the North Korean Vice Foreign Minister addressed the UN General Assembly and demanded that the U.S. "hostile policy' on North Korea should be brought to an end. This, the very same week that the United States announced the imminent shipment of millions of dollars in fuel to North Korea.

In my view, the free world has to reject this type of narrow approach, and segregationist approach to the issue of human rights and national security. We certainly must note that in founding the United Nations, and certainly in adopting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the international community discarded any notion that a country is above reproach for what happens within its own borders. [Applause]

Indeed, if you have examined atrocities like the Holocaust or the killing fields of Cambodia, and ever vowed that they should never be allowed to happen again, then you necessarily must reject this notion that a dictator is free to do what he wishes to his own people. If we do not call human rights abusers to account when we identify them, does our silence not invite further atrocities? With North Korea, we cannot afford inaction, when that inaction will allow millions more to suffer and even to die.

The second critique accepts that discussion of human rights issues is legitimate, but it asserts that in this case it is really a regional issue. The United States should have no involvement, no issue, no stake and no voice, in the human rights policies in North Korea. Well, would anyone have seriously argued that people being shot for trying to flee former East Germany was an issue solely for West Germany to address? Was that not an issue that had the potential to affect a number of other countries, and thus justify their concern and involvement?

When hundreds of thousands of North Koreans are able, as they have been over the last decade, to escape into northeastern China, and then, at great risk to their own lives, flee across land boarders into Mongolia or into Thailand, or Vietnam, or set sail and try and go to Japan, is that an issue that we should simply entrust the North and South Koreans to address?

Events in Korea have an impact on the U.S. and our partners in Asia. Our interests there run very deep. South Korea is not only an ally of the United States but it is our 7th largest trading partner. And, we have agreed, in security agreements, to work together on security issues relating to the entire Korean peninsula. We cannot simply turn the oversight of our interests over to another nation, and neither can the other countries in Asia.

Finally, there is the argument that focusing on human rights will forestall an agreement that alleviates more immediate security concerns. In the case of North Korea, some – indeed some people, many people in Washington today – urge that we should focus only on the nuclear issue, and that any serious mention of human rights will distract the parties involved from reaching an agreement. The facts however, prove just the opposite. I would suggest that highlighting human rights, rather than stopping the progression of security talks, have actually reinforced for North Korea the United States' commitment to continuing to spotlight the regime's abuses.

Perhaps the best example is the fact that about two years ago, two and a half years ago, the North Koreans simply broke off all discussions in the six-party talks—refused to agree to any further meetings—and after some time, the President decided to hold a meeting with the most famous of North Korean defectors, Kang Chol-hwan, a gentleman who has written a book which I commend to all of you called *Aquariums of Pyongyang*. It is his first hand account about his life growing up in the concentration camps and finally his escape from the concentrations camps and eventually to freedom. The President held a meeting with Kang Chol-hwan, and initially the meeting was a private meeting, it wasn't publicized, but the President was so overwhelmed by meeting this gentleman – by his story – that the White House decided to publicize the meeting widely, after the fact. And needless to say there was all the internal questioning within the government – how is North Korea going to respond to this? Well, two days later, Kim Jong Il announced that the North Koreans were prepared to come back to the table to restart the six-party talks. I would suggest that indeed every time the United States has raised in a very serious way, at the very highest level, the issues of the atrocities in North Korea, it has in fact seen more activity, more dialogue and greater opportunities to reaching some common ground on the nuclear issue.

Historical Analogies

History has shown that there is nothing contradictory or incoherent with an approach that has as one of its components a discussion of human rights. Speaking with clarity on human rights does not prevent or even discourage progress on immediate security concerns.

Consider the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty signed by Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev in 1987. For the first time in history, the agreement eliminated an entire of class of nuclear weapons—in a manner that provided for thorough inspection and verification. Many factors contributed to this difficult achievement, but we should note that it occurred against the backdrop of severe criticism of the then-Soviet Union's human rights records. Indeed, at every step of the way, when Ronald Reagan or the Secretary of State George Shultz, would meet with their Soviet counterparts, they would raise the issue of the emigration of Jews from the Soviet Union – the dissidents, the Refusenik community – indeed, building on the Carter Administration, the Nixon Administration's work towards the Jackson-Vanik amendment tying – directly linking – security, economic issues and human rights; paved the way for Reagan and Gorbachev to make their historic nuclear agreement.

President Reagan did not mince words when describing Soviet totalitarianism. He called it an evil regime, evil, not primarily because it had an abundance of weapons. After all, we had an even larger abundance, but because of its treatment of its own people and the way it threatened its neighbors. And yet this did not derail an agreement with the very regime he criticized. Cutting through diplomatic niceties when characterizing human rights and other abuses can actually signal a regime about the seriousness with which we approach their actions against our interests.

The prioritization of human rights is not a novel concept in foreign policy, nor is the exclusive province of either party. To be sure, it was a dominant theme of this President's second inaugural address. But quoting from Strobe Talbott, President Clinton's deputy secretary of state; in 1996 he wrote in *Foreign Affairs*:

"In an increasingly interdependent world Americans have a growing stake in how other countries govern, or misgovern, themselves. The larger and more close-knit the community of nations that choose democratic forms of government, the safer and more prosperous Americans will be, since democracies are demonstrably more likely to maintain their international commitments, less likely to engage in terrorism or wreak environmental damage, and less likely to make war on each other.

There are indeed examples of democracies that have fought each other, but there is no instance I can think of, of a democracy with universal suffrage waging war against another. Governments that consistently respect the rights of their own citizens are more likely to work out difference with other countries.

Our Approach

So what is our approach in terms of human rights with respect to North Korea today? We will keep working to advance the cause of freedom for all Koreans by pressing in a few particular areas.

Number one, we continue to press for more international attention and consensus on the issue. Probably our biggest achievement of the last couple of years has been finally bringing the South Korean government into the community of nations, where they finally last year, for the first time, registered a vote condemning North Korea for its human rights atrocities. Up until last year they had always refused to even participate in the vote.

The second thing we are doing, from a humanitarian perspective, is we are trying to work out ways to help the refugees living in northeastern China, pass through China, and get to freedom, either to South Korea or the United States or in other host countries. Of course this requires making progress with China, and I believe that there is a tremendous opportunity in the coming year in this respect, because as the world turns its sights on Beijing for the Olympics, China will be under the microscope. And China is going to have more members of the media present for a three or four week period before and during the Olympics, than probably has ever existed in China before. And hopefully the international community will spotlight what's going on, not only in the Olympic fora but throughout China.

And finally, and perhaps most importantly we are continuing to work to ramp up our broadcasting activities. One of the most striking meetings I had with a North Korean refugee, a defector, was an individual who had been a high ranking member of the North Korean military. While he was serving on the border he had access to a radio because of his military position, he was a captain, and he started listening to the South Korean radio, and in the course of about three weeks he learned for the very first time that he was not living in a socialist paradise. He had never understood that anyone outside North Korea lives on more than the 400 calories a day that the average North Korean subsists on. It is because he had access to radio in South Korea that he was impelled to risk his life and to escape.

So what we are doing is working through the Voice of America and Radio Free Asia, but also coordinating now with several of our allies and friends in the region, in trying to develop a much more enhanced set of broadcasts, so that the people of North Korea can learn about the outside world.

I would suggest that as we move forward we need to keep our focus on the fact that the most imminent issue with respect to how North Korea threatens the United States and the rest of the world is its nuclear ambitions. Both with respect to the security threat it poses to South Korea, but also with respect, as we saw over the last month, to the threat it poses if it transfers nuclear technology or even nuclear weaponry to other rogue nations. But as we approach those issues, I think we need to keep our eyes on the ball, and that means linking economic aid or any other assistance with genuine progress on human rights.

Conditions to Industrial Projects and Humanitarian Assistance

So, in answer to your debate question, I don't think you can take an absolute position that we should never give any aid to despots, because there may be times, as I pointed out, when we were at war with Hitler, where we needed to cooperate and ally ourselves with Stalin. On the other hand, when we do give any aid to dictatorships, we need accountability, we need to know what we are getting in return. When the South Korean government simply sends hundreds of millions or billions of dollars of food aid to North Korea in a way that is totally unrestricted, unmonitored, unsupervised, that is aid that may do much more harm than good if its sold on the black market, if the money is used for the military – so that is the wrong kind of aid to provide. [Applause] Likewise if they are trying to do economic development with North Korea and they are paying the North Korean government so that the North Korean government can ship thousands of workers to industrial parks in North Korea where the fruits of their labor are sold by South Korean companies and the workers get no money—that is a misuse of international aid. But, if countries like South Korea, or China, or potentially the United States, could in fact use some of the aid that we can provide and actually have accountability, genuine accountability, in a way that helps ensure that these regimes start to change, start to open up, then it is a much closer call. And so I don't think there is a black or a white here, but I do think that human rights has to stay at the forefront of our national security policy.

Thank you very much. [Applause]

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