

National Democratic Institute Dinner

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PRESERVATION**

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REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT  
AT NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTE DINNER

Washington Hilton  
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10:00 P.M. EDT

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you very much. If you've been following the news, you probably know I'm a little hoarse, and I know you're a little tired, so you won't have to put up with me for very long here.

But I'm grateful for the chance to be here. I strongly support the NDI. I thank Ken Wollock and Paul Kirk and all the rest of you for the work you do. I thank my friend, Senator Kennedy, for being the embodiment of the commitment to democracy and freedom and human rights.

Mrs. Kirkland, we're glad to see you here tonight, and I was honored to be at the service at Georgetown today. I want to thank you for giving this award to President Shevardnadze. He has been a friend of the United States and a friend of ours. He has stood for democracy. You heard him tell the story tonight -- he's like anybody who has converted, once he converted, he was really stuck as a true believer.

He has endured assassination attempts, illegal coup attempts. He has been through ethnic difficulties in his own country. He has been through pressures from the outside and problems from the inside. He has watched the economy go down and things come apart and come back together again. But once he decided he believed, he stayed hitched. He embodies something that I think we don't think about enough.

We talk a lot about what it takes to establish democracy, but once, having established it, there are always people who will try to twist it to their own end, because we may eliminate communism from the world, but we have not eliminated lust for power or greed that leads to corruption, or the hatreds and fears in the human heart that lead to the oppression of those who are different from us in race or religion or belong to some other minority group. This man has stayed the course when the price was high, and I thank you for awarding this to him tonight. (Applause.)

I thank you for giving Hillary this award tonight. I'm sorry Monica McWilliams couldn't be here. That's the only problem -- a ruptured appendix -- I have seen those Irish women unable to overcome almost instantaneously. (Laughter.)

I was hoping -- Hillary just got in today from out of town and I didn't have a chance to talk to her about what she was going to say tonight. And I was sitting there in my chair, saying, gosh, I hope you're going to tell them about those people in that African village. And I hope all my fellow Americans were listening tonight.

I'll tell you, we walked in that room in Senegal, and all those women came with their token men supporters -- (laughter) -- a role with which I am becoming increasingly familiar -- (applause) -- I'm telling you, it made chills run up and down my spine. And I wish, too, that every American could have seen it because then we would understand what a precious thing a vote is. And we would understand what a precious responsibility the public trust is.

We, in our country, we want democracy for everybody else, but sometimes we forget that it carries responsibilities of citizenship and responsibilities for those of us in representative positions to keep it going. We think we're so strong, nothing can happen to our democracy. But when a man like Itzhak Rabin is killed, when we see our friends in Northern Ireland in both communities vote for a clear path to the future of peace and reconciliation and then vote for representatives to get the job done and they still can't seem to get it done -- we're nowhere near giving up, by the way; George Mitchell is over there working on it right now -- but when you see that, it is an agony because you're always afraid somehow, something will happen to twist it awry.

But what Hillary has done with this Vital Voices movement is simply to give voice and power to practical and compassionate women who find real human answers to human problems, and who don't let lust for political power in and of itself or fear of those who are different from them, or the desire for personal recognition get in the way of their desire to perfect democracy.

What I would like to say to all of you tonight is, when we go to Bosnia or we go to Kosovo to stop ethnic cleansing, or we help to train Africans so that they can prevent another Rwanda or Burundi from occurring again, when we labor in America for peace in the Middle East and try to empower ordinary people everywhere, we should remember with humility that we are supposed to behave in our respective positions of citizenship and authority the way those village women did in Senegal, the way the Irish women do in the Vital Voices conference, the way the women did who had the microcredit loans that I have seen my wife visit on the Indian subcontinent or in Southeast Asia, or in countless African and Latin American villages.

People who have never had it before, you see, when they get it, they know what they want to do. And we in the United States have a serious responsibility to the rest of the world and to our own people to stand for peace and freedom and democracy and human rights, and to stand for it at home as well as abroad, and to never forget that the purpose of power is to liberate the human spirit, not to grasp onto yesterday's arrangements in a fleeting life that no matter how long we hold to power, will be over all too soon, anyway.

Lane Kirkland was over 75 years old; to me, he was a very young man. We are all just here for a little while. The premise of democracy is, if people are truly empowered to live out their dreams and help other people solve their problems, that will bring more happiness and self-fulfillment than picking a few of us to increase our wealth and power, or the power of our crowd to oppress another. And we need a little humility here along with our devotion to democracy.

We need to remember the travails of a man like President Shevardnadze who puts his life on the line when he shows up for work. And we need to remember the courage of people like those Irish women or those Senegalese women and their hardy male supporters who believe they could change the world if they only had a voice.

I am grateful to you for honoring this President and my wife, who has done more than anyone I know to give those kinds of people a voice. But when you leave here, remember that all of us can do that every day, right here.

Thank you, and God bless you. (Applause.)

END

10:10 P.M. EDT