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Courageous Women in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Beyond: A Record of Success in Democratic Transition

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I would like to express my heartfelt appreciation to Helle Dale and The Heritage Foundation for hosting our discussion today. It is a personal privilege to be hosted by The Heritage Foundation as it celebrates its 35th anniversary, and we continue to support its vision of building an America where freedom, opportunity, prosperity, and civil society flourish.

I am also pleased to welcome a number of representatives from leading women's organizations, and from the diplomatic, NGO, and think-tank communities, as well as a number of my colleagues from U.S. government agencies. Thank you all for coming.

This forum provides an important opportunity to highlight recent successes in democratic transition, showcase the courage of women standing up for liberty around the globe, and discuss the priorities of an Administration that continues to make significant strides toward achieving the United States' mission of freedom for all.

Women and Fundamental Rights

I emphasize the word *all* to make certain the inclusion of women is understood. Unfortunately, in too many countries and cultures around the world, this is not understood. Women are *not* considered worthy of equal human rights. This is unacceptable.

President George W. Bush is steadfast in his commitment to ensuring democracy and respect for universal human rights. As he stated during his recent trip to the Middle East:

Talking Points

- All over the globe women are backed with strong support from the United States government.
- Throughout the developing world, even in places ravaged by conflict—such as Iraq, Afghanistan, as well as various countries in the Middle East and the African continent—women are increasingly emerging as courageous leaders.
- With our encouragement and support, they are surmounting deeply entrenched cultural and legal barriers in order to secure freedom, advance democracy, and create pathways to prosperity for themselves, their families, their communities, and their countries.
- Iraq needs a robust civil society, one that respects the rights of women, and treats ethnic and religious minorities equally regardless of their political beliefs.
- The United States and our international partners have much to do, but we do have progress to build upon.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
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All societies are enriched by the participation of women. I happen to believe very strongly in the freedom agenda, and I think an integral part of that agenda is making sure that all participants in society have got an equal voice.... I think when people look back at the history of the Middle East and history of the world it's going to be women who helped lead the freedom agenda.

All over the globe women are backed with strong support from the United States government—from the American people, women and men alike. Throughout the developing world, even in places ravaged by conflict, such as Iraq, Afghanistan, as well as various countries in the Middle East and the African continent, women are increasingly emerging as courageous leaders. With our encouragement and support, they are surmounting deeply entrenched cultural and legal barriers in order to secure freedom, advance democracy, and create pathways to prosperity for themselves, their families, their communities, and their countries.

We believe that advancing democracy, prosperity, and security worldwide cannot be possible without the empowerment of women. The United States is not only committed to the advancement of women worldwide, but we are invested in improving women's equality and empowerment.

The United States recognizes that women leaders showing courage should be applauded and celebrated in a public way. Next week, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice will present the second annual Award for International Women of Courage to eight women who have shown exceptional bravery in advocating for women's rights. The women were nominated by our embassies around the world and were selected for their work in transforming their societies by tackling such issues as ending human trafficking; fighting HIV/AIDS; combating female genital mutilation; standing against political corruption; and guaranteeing women's access to justice.

We know when women courageously stand up for their rights, freedom, and dignity, it benefits not only women and their families; it also strengthens democracy, bolsters economic prosperity, and encourages tolerance. It helps a people realize its full potential.

We know when women are empowered and educated, almost every other aspect of a society is improved and strengthened. We see that when women are given access to health care, their families' health improves as well.

Forging Partnerships

President Bush and his Administration are making this a priority by working to forge partnerships with countries around the world to improve the status of women and children, in great part through improved education and health care.

In the broader Middle East, of the estimated 70 million people who are illiterate, two-thirds of them are female. This Administration is dramatically expanding our English-language programs to address this issue. For example, we are providing English language study to over 1,500 underserved youth from 13 countries in the Middle East through a micro-scholarship program.

In Africa, the U.S. is proudly providing teacher training for 920,000 teachers in 20 countries, and scholarships for more than a half million girls to enroll in school. Reading for women is critical to human development, and to promoting peace and economic progress in all regions of the world.

Knowing how critical it is to address health needs, President Bush announced his Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, or PEPFAR, in 2003. This is the largest commitment ever made by a single nation toward an international health initiative. It started as a five-year, \$15 billion multi-faceted approach to combating HIV/AIDS around the world. There are bilateral programs underway right now in 15 focus countries in sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean. The vast majority of those receiving treatment are women and children.

First Lady Laura Bush has also made women's health care a priority. Last year, she helped launch the groundbreaking U.S.–Middle East Partnership for Breast Cancer Awareness and Research. This program joins medical and community organizations from the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan with medical expertise in the U.S.

This is the first partnership for breast cancer awareness and research between the United States and a country in the Middle East. By talking openly

about the disease and sharing methods of treatment, we help women in the Middle East overcome the strong stigma and shame often associated with this disease.

These examples of partnership and progress will leave an indelible mark on societies in years to come. By addressing these basic needs of women, America further strengthens the concept of democracy in these regions. This is progress to be celebrated.

Ongoing Challenges

However, there is much work that remains to be done in order to continue strengthening democracies and ensuring human rights for all. A challenge still before us is the trafficking of women and girls around the world, which unfortunately continues to increase. This is an awful reality for too many women and children in many countries, including the United States.

Gender-based violence and horrific examples of it, such as honor-killing, is too common in too many cultures. In many places around the world, women are beaten, raped, and abused, and they have no idea they can demand more respect. The United States helps to address these problems.

In 2004, President Bush announced approximately \$55 million to support the Women's Justice and Empowerment Initiative in Africa. This project works to assist existing efforts of four African countries to combat sexual violence and abuse against women. It seeks to strengthen the services given to victims, while also strengthening the law enforcement response directed at abusers.

In the Middle East, there has been significant progress around this issue. For example, last September, Queen Rania of Jordan, in partnership with the United States, launched a \$1 million project to provide violence abuse victims with badly needed care and to raise awareness among the public on the ramifications of abuse. I have visited Jordan and have seen the coordinated effort underway that will lead to progress.

Empowering women around the world with the necessary tools to participate in their societies gives them the opportunity to make courageous strides in promoting a free and just democracy. Without these tools, societies suffer.

Afghanistan

We have learned the type of society envisioned by extremists, and we know that when women's voices are silenced, the consequences are tragic. After September 11, 2001, the United States was faced with a whole new sort of war—a war against extremists who battle on many fronts.

One of the most chilling examples of brutal, extremist rule was in Afghanistan under the Taliban. Young girls were not allowed to go to school and women were not allowed to work to support themselves, even those whose husbands had been killed. An entire society was oppressed; music was banned, books were burned, and cultural icons were destroyed.

With America's support, we've seen Afghanistan make great strides since the Taliban era. Our partnership is providing results. Afghan women and men are working to build a stable democratic society. Afghanistan has already held two peaceful and democratic elections in which millions of Afghans—about 40 percent of women—voted.

There are some truly inspiring stories coming out of Afghanistan which indicate a future that is positive and bright.

Women are advancing in leadership roles in politics. In 2006, for the first time in Afghanistan's history, a woman, Maria Bashir, was appointed Provincial Prosecutor General of Herat Province. Additionally, Runa Tareen was named director of Women's Affairs in Khandahar province, one of the country's most conservative provinces. Runa has courageously spoken out against the powerful religious establishment.

We've seen Afghanistan's child mortality rate drop significantly—nearly 25 percent. More than 80,000 infants and children have been saved.

As for education in Afghanistan, we've seen some striking changes. Only 900,000 children were in school when the Taliban ruled—almost all of them boys. Today, schools are being rebuilt, teachers are being trained, millions of textbooks are being translated, printed, and distributed to schoolchildren, and more than 5 million children are in school—almost 2 million of them girls. This would not be possible without the partnership

between Afghanistan, the United States, and the international community.

In 2002, President Bush and Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai created the United States–Afghan Women’s Council, a public–private partnership with a mission to assist Afghan women in gaining the skills and education they need to fulfill their rightful role in society. The Council continues to flourish today.

All of these developments are bringing hope to the people of Afghanistan and are successes we unfortunately don’t hear enough about in the public arena. Of course, that is not to say we do not acknowledge there are still many challenges before us.

Rural areas in Afghanistan lack the basic infrastructure of roads, irrigation, and electricity. These areas are cut off from access to education and from economic development opportunities. Many that live in these areas are struggling for basic human needs for themselves and their families—food, shelter, and clean water. Despite these obvious challenges, the progress made thus far is undeniable.

Iraq

Contrary to popular opinion or that of the press, we are also seeing some success in Iraq, which is now a much different place than even one year ago. Much hard work remains, but as the President has reported, violence has significantly decreased. Since the surge began about a year ago, civilian deaths are down 60 percent nationwide and 75 percent in Baghdad.

Life is slowly returning to normal in communities across Iraq. Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) are working to help facilitate this transition and maintain progress. PRTs are a central part of the President’s “New Way Forward” in Iraq.

The “New Way Forward” strategy is built around three key elements: a surge of additional troops into Iraq, a surge of operations, and a surge of the PRT efforts in local communities. The PRTs help strengthen moderate leaders at the local, municipal, and provincial level by providing assistance to help create jobs, deliver basic services, and build up local economies.

Since 2004, my office, the Office for International Women’s Issues, has focused specifically on ways

to improve the lives of women in Iraq. We have overseen and implemented the \$24.5 million Iraqi Women’s Democracy Initiative (IWDI).

To date, programs under the IWDI already have trained about 7,000 Iraqi women in several key skill areas, including leadership, political participation, entrepreneurship, women’s rights advocacy, coalition building, and negotiation. In addition, this grants program has helped women create non-governmental organizations devoted to women’s issues and provided training on Iraqi women’s constitutional rights and developing media skills.

Through the IWDI program, a Women’s Leadership Institute has been established in Baghdad, and democracy resource centers have been created in four universities. These have provided political training to female candidates for public office and to female Members of the Iraqi Parliament.

The President of the Women’s Leadership Institute, Dr. Sundus Abbas, said recently:

From the beginning, my activities and work were not aimed at obtaining a certain political position. My goal was clear and specific: to define women’s rights in Iraq and to contribute to stopping the appearance of violence and discrimination that women oppose.... I found that the meaning of life is through work. I might lose my life at any second. So I will live, for whatever time is left to me, serving women in my country in any way that might contribute to building Iraq. In doing this, I would not regret losing my life.

By the way, this remarkable woman was one of the Secretary of State’s International Women of Courage Awardees from last year. Her commitment and passion is inspiring.

Despite some progress made in their representation, Iraqi women still face considerable challenges, and their status as equal citizens in Iraq is seriously threatened by political realities. Political instability, the lack of security, and ultra-traditional social and religious mores continue to prevent women from being full participants in the political process.

To ensure the future of this nascent democracy, Iraq needs a robust civil society, one that respects the rights of women, and treats ethnic and reli-

gious minorities equally regardless of their political beliefs.

As is the case in Afghanistan, the battle continues to rage on. The United States and our international partners have much to do, but we do have progress to build upon. We also have no choice, but to meet these remaining challenges head on.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude my remarks with a quote by the late President Ronald Reagan from his speech at the 10th anniversary of The Heritage Foundation in 1983. He said, “This, then, is our task. We must present to the world not just an America that’s militarily strong, but an America that

is morally powerful, an America that has a creed, a cause, a vision of a future time when all peoples have the right to self-government and personal freedom.”

The inspiration of these words still holds true. America is standing behind its mission and holds strong its support of societies struggling with democratic transition. This belief, and this moral strength, is the legacy left behind. It is our history. It is our commitment to our vision for our own country, and for a free, secure, and prosperous world.

—*Andrea G. Bottner is Senior Coordinator in the Office of International Women’s Issues at the U.S. Department of State.*