Remarks by U.S. Ambassador Nikki Haley on “U.S. Withdrawal from Human Rights Council: Impact and Next Steps” at The Heritage Foundation

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Ambassador Nikki Haley

U.S. Mission to the United Nations

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Thank you, very much, thank you.

Thank you so much, Kay. And thank you to the Heritage Foundation. It’s great to be back, and I thank you so much for the work that happens in these halls.

I’ve spent my entire public life using the power of my voice to push for action – and trying to help others do the same. I learned early on that I was not good at sitting back and staying quiet. If something needs to be said and done to improve the lives of people, we have to take a stand. And that’s what I’ve spent my life doing.

For the past 18 months at the United Nations, I’ve been inspired to use the power of my voice by one of my predecessors. Jeane Kirkpatrick once said that, “speech is action – and important action.” She didn’t seek out confrontation with her fellow delegates at the UN, but she didn’t hesitate to speak her mind and stick to her guns when American values and interests were at stake. Many times that meant that Ambassador Kirkpatrick found herself nearly alone – sometimes, completely alone – in the positions that she would take for the United States.

After 18 months in this job, I can tell you I feel her pain.

The United Nations was founded for a noble purpose – to promote peace and security based on justice, equal rights, and the self-determination of people. But it has many member nations whose leaders completely reject that purpose. When that happens, many well-meaning countries adopt a position of neutrality in the hope of coming to an agreement with these nations.

They effectively allow dictatorships and authoritarian regimes to control the agenda.

Resolutions get watered down until they are meaningless – or they become objectively anti-democratic. Moral clarity becomes a casualty of the need to placate tyrants, all in the name of building consensus.

In such a situation it is imperative for the United States to use the power of our voice to defend our values. That’s as true today as it was during the Cold War – maybe even more so.

We are a special nation with a special message for the world. We are a country founded on human dignity; on the revolutionary idea that all men are created equal with rights including, but not limited to, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. If you take this truth seriously – as Ambassador Kirkpatrick did, as I do – it is non-negotiable. You don’t sell out to appease those who deny it. And it’s not a political chit to be traded for something of greater value.

If you take it seriously, you use your voice. You fight for it, even if that means you fight alone.

The United States was instrumental in creating the United Nations Human Rights Commission precisely because we believe in the inherent dignity of all women and men. It was meant to be, in the words of its first chairman, Eleanor Roosevelt, “a place of conscience.” When it has served this function, the Human Rights Council, as it is now known, has provided a voice for the voiceless. It has brought the injustice suffered by political prisoners to international attention. It has put a spotlight on crimes committed by Syria’s Assad and the Kim dictatorship in North Korea.

But these have been the exceptions, not the rule.

More often, the Human Rights Council has provided cover, not condemnation, for the world’s most inhumane regimes. It has been a bully pulpit for human rights violators. And the Human Rights Council has been, not a place of conscience, but a place of politics. It has focused its attention unfairly and relentlessly on Israel. Meanwhile, it has ignored the misery inflicted by regimes in Venezuela, Cuba, Zimbabwe, and China.

Judged by how far it has fallen short of its promise, the Human Rights Council is the United Nations’ greatest failure. It has taken the idea of human dignity – the idea that is at the center of our national creed and the birthright of every human being – and it has reduced it to just another instrument of international politics. And that is a great tragedy. I don’t come to this conclusion happily, or lightly.

The Obama Administration decided to join the supposedly “reformed” Human Rights Council in 2009. Then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton vowed that the United States could improve the Council by working from the inside.

By the time I became the U.S. Ambassador eight years later, it was clear that this strategy had failed. There are lots of problems with the Human Rights Council, but two stuck out for me when I came to the UN.

The first was the Council’s membership. When I arrived, and still today, its members included some of the worst human rights violators. The dictatorships of Cuba, China and Venezuela all have seats on the Council. Not only was Venezuela a member, but in 2015 the Council invited its dictator, Nicholas Maduro, to speak to a special assembly.

He got a standing ovation, which was not surprising given that 62 percent of the Human Rights Council’s members were not democracies.

The other major sign that the United States’ presence had failed to improve the Council was the continuing existence of the notorious Agenda Item Seven.

This is the permanent part of the Human Rights Council agenda that is devoted exclusively to Israel. No other country – not Iran, not Syria, not North Korea – has an agenda item devoted solely to it. Agenda Item Seven is not directed at anything Israel does. It is directed at the very existence of Israel.

It is a blazing red siren signaling the Human Rights Council’s political corruption and moral bankruptcy.

For these reasons and others, there were voices in Congress and elsewhere encouraging the Trump Administration to withdraw from the Human Rights Council immediately when we took office. We could have easily done that. But instead, we made a good-faith effort to see if we could fix the Council’s problems.

We engaged in a public campaign. President Trump called for changes to the Council in his speech before the UN General Assembly last fall, and we also worked relentlessly behind the scenes. We spent the year making the case for reform; meeting with more than 125 Member States and circulating drafts of reform resolutions.

As the year progressed, our case for reform only grew stronger. In October, the Democratic Republic of the Congo was elected to a seat on the Council. The Congo is the setting for atrocities that shock the most hardened international aid workers. They were discovering mass graves in the Congo even as the General Assembly approved its bid to the Human Rights Council.

In December and into this year, the Iranian people took to the streets in peaceful protest against their horrendous regime. The government responded with beatings, arrests, and killings. The Human Rights Council was silent.

And throughout the year, Venezuela descended further and further into misery and dictatorship. But the Council didn’t address the massive abuses in Venezuela for the reason I’m sure you’ve guessed by now: Venezuela sits on the Human Rights Council.

In the end, the United States couldn’t convince enough countries to stand up and declare that the Human Rights Council was no longer worthy of its name. Why this happened is telling. The first and most obvious reason is that authoritarian regimes are happy with the status quo.

Many seek membership to protect their own and their allies’ human rights records from scrutiny. Russia, China, Cuba, and Egypt – they all benefit from making a mockery of the Human Rights Council. So it’s no surprise that they openly resisted our efforts to reform it.

What was more baffling was the resistance we received from groups and countries that should know better – from those who believe in human rights and human dignity.

First, there were the nongovernmental institutions, or NGOs – the private groups that usually do good work on behalf of human rights. They agreed with the need to keep human rights violators off of the Council. So you can imagine our surprise when they came out publicly against our reforms telling other countries to vote against us. Groups like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch sided with Russia and China on a critical human rights issue. And I’ll let you be the judge of their reasoning.

The NGOs were afraid that opening up the Human Rights Council to changes would result in hostile amendments in the General Assembly that would make the Council even worse.

Think about that for a second. Their view is that a bad situation can’t be improved because it could get worse?

This is yet another example of the world’s worst human rights regimes calling the shots at the United Nations.

These NGOs’ unwillingness to challenge the status quo also comes from their institutional comforts. They have big staffs and lots of relationships with the UN bureaucracy. Change is threatening to them. If we approached everything with their attitude, nothing would ever improve and complacency would rule the day.

Even more troubling was the pro-human rights countries that refused to speak up. These are countries that, in quiet, off-the-record conversations, share our embarrassment and concern with the actions – and inactions – of the Council. They told us in confidence that they, too, are disgusted with countries like Cuba and Venezuela, Saudi Arabia and the Congo serving on the Council, as well as the constant attacks on Israel.

We gave them opportunity after opportunity. But after months of agreeing with us on all of the flaws of the Human Rights Council, they would not take a stand unless it was behind closed doors, and out of public view.

These countries share our belief in the inherent dignity of every human being, and yet they lack the courage to make a difference.

They have a voice. They just refused to use it.

On June 19th, Secretary Pompeo and I made an announcement that the United States was withdrawing from the Human Rights Council. Many of our friends urged us to stay for the sake of the institution. The United States, they said, provided the last shred of credibility the Council had.

But that was precisely why we withdrew.

The right to speak freely, to associate and worship freely; to determine your own future; to be equal before the law – these are sacred rights. We take these rights seriously – too seriously to allow them to be cheapened by an institution – especially one that calls itself the “Human Rights Council.”

No one should make the mistake of equating membership in the Human Rights Council with the support for human rights. To this day, the United States does more for human rights, both inside the UN and around the world, than any other country. And we will continue to do that. We just won’t do it inside a Council that consistently fails the cause of human rights.

We have already begun to make the case for human rights, and that it should be addressed in the UN Security Council in New York.

Last year, during the U.S. presidency, we held the first ever Security Council session dedicated to the connection between human rights and peace and security.

The fighting and instability that has spilled over the borders of countries like Syria and Burma began with extreme or massive violations of the human rights of the people of those countries.

Human rights violators deserve our condemnation on their own terms, but they also often lead to conflicts which threaten the peace of an entire region. When we act to protect human rights, we act to prevent conflict.

Just this month, we successfully fought back Russian and Chinese efforts to drastically reduce the number of UN peacekeepers dedicated to human rights protection and promotion.

And the United States has taken the initiative to do what the Human Rights Council refused to do. Despite protests orchestrated by the Venezuelan government, the United States organized an event on Venezuela outside the Human Rights Council in Geneva. This January we had a Security Council session on human rights violations of the Iranian regime. And just last week the United States led a historic effort in the Security Council to impose an arms embargo and sanctions on the combatants in South Sudan, which has been the scene of enormous suffering and human rights abuses in the country’s short life.

And as I have said before, our withdrawal from the Human Rights Council does not mean that we give up our fight for reform. On the contrary, any country willing to work with us to reshape the Council need only ask. Fixing the institutional flaws of the Human Rights Council was, is, and will remain one of the biggest priorities at the UN.

I have traveled to refugee camps in Ethiopia, Congo, Turkey, and Jordan. I have met with mothers that have been scarred by trauma. I have seen battered, aimless children lost to ignorance and extremism. Their memories will always haunt me. As long as we have a voice, we must use it to advocate for these mothers and children. I will use my voice. Not just because I am a mother. Not just because I am an ambassador. But because I am an American. And America can no more abandon the cause of human rights than abandon itself.

It is who we are.

It is who we are proud to be. And it is who we will always be.

Thank you, and God bless you.