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Remarks By John McCain on His Vision for Defending the Freedom and Dignity of the World's Vulnerable

May 7, 2008

U.S. Senator John McCain delivered the following remarks as prepared for delivery at Oakland University, in Rochester, MI, today at 10:00 a.m. EDT:

Thank you. Last year the world celebrated the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the British and American slave trade in 1807. Nearly fifty-six years would pass before Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, signaling the end of slavery in the United States. But the achievement of both countries in terminating the international slave trade and setting into motion the titanic and bloody struggle to close a shameful chapter in the history of our country should be remembered as a turning point in mankind's long and fitful progress toward a more just world. William Wilberforce had struggled for years in the British parliament to strike the lethal blow against the abominable institution that had scarred Western civilization for centuries. He was a humble Christian man, powerfully motivated by his faith, whose example instructs every person born in freedom that we have a moral obligation not to turn a blind eye to assaults on the collective dignity of humanity wherever they occur.

There is a tendency in our age to accede to the spurious excuse of moral relativism and turn away from the harshest examples of man's inhumanity to man; to ignore the darker side of human nature that encroaches upon our decency by subtle degree. There are many reasons for this. Blessed with opportunity, and intent on the challenges of work and family, our own lives often seem too full and hectic to take notice of offenses that seem distant from our own reality. There is also the threat in a society passionate about its liberty that we can become desensitized to the dehumanizing effect of the obscenity and hostility that pervades much of popular culture. It is in our nature as Americans to see the good in things; to face even serious adversity with hope and optimism. And yet, with so much good in the world, for all the progress of humanity, in which our nation has played such an admirable and important role, evil still exists in the world. It preys upon human dignity, assaults the innocence of children, debases our self-respect and the respect we are morally obliged to pay each other, and assails the great, animating truths we believe to be self-evident – that all people have a right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness -- by subjecting countless human beings to abuse, persecution and even slavery.

Confronting evil has never been easy – in our age or any other. But the failure to do so affects even those who are complacent with our own blessings and secure in our human rights. Accepting the degradation of values we believe are universal is to relinquish some of our own humanity. America was founded on the belief in the inherent dignity of all human life and that this dignity can only be preserved through shared respect and shared responsibility. We can retain our own freedom when others are robbed of theirs, but not the sense of virtue that made our revolution a moral as well as political crusade, and which recognizes that personal happiness is so much more than pleasure, and requires us to serve causes greater than self-interest.

There is no right more fundamental to a free society than the free practice of religion. Behind walls of prisons and persecuted before our very eyes in places like China, Iran, Burma, Sudan, North Korea and Saudi Arabia are tens-of-thousands of people whose only crime is to worship God in their own way. No society that denies religious freedom can ever rightly claim to be good in some other way. And no person can ever be true to any faith that believes in the dignity of all human life if they do not act out of concern for those whose dignity is assailed because of their faith. As President, I intend to make religious freedom a subject of great importance for the United States in our relations with other nations. I will work in close concert with democratic allies to raise the prominence of religious freedom in every available forum. Whether in bilateral negotiations, or in various multi-national organizations to which America belongs, I will make respect for the basic principle of religious freedom a priority in international relations.

There is another form of human oppression that persists in the world today that demands our urgent attention and should sting the conscience of every good person. Inexcusably, it is a crime that, while prevalent elsewhere, exists within our own borders as well. Human trafficking – slavery, by another name – exists not just in places like Thailand, Kuwait and Venezuela. It is a serious problem here in the United States. It is a tragic reality that, two hundred years after Wilberforce won his battle to end the slave trade between Britain and the United States, and nearly 150 years after our nation ended the institution here, the practice still thrives in the dark corners of our society. Most of the victims of human trafficking in the United States and in most other places in the world are the most vulnerable among us, destitute women and children who are sold into bondage as sex slaves. A 2004 State Department report concludes that of the estimated 600,000 to 800,000 men, women, and children transported across international

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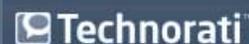


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borders each year, approximately 80 percent are women and girls, and up to 50 percent are minors. The State Department estimates that between 15,000 and 18,000 human slaves are brought into the United States, many of whom are forced into the sex trade every year.

While the past few years have seen increased efforts on the part of the State and Justice Departments and the FBI to combat the human slave trade, we must do more. As President, I'll increase cooperation and communication between all agencies of the federal government by establishing an Inter-Agency Task Force on Human Trafficking, whose purpose will be to focus exclusively on the prosecution of human traffickers and the rescue of their victims. The Task Force will strengthen cooperation between federal officials, state and local law enforcement and prosecutors to ensure that jurisdictional issues are not a barrier to success, and that we have a coordinated international response to this scourge. I will require the Task Force agencies to report directly to me on the status of the problem and the progress we are making to defeat this stain on the reputation and character of the United States. And we will take care to show compassion for victims of this despicable crime against humanity by making sure shelter, counseling and legal assistance is available and accessible to them.

We must also do more to ensure governments that tolerate human trafficking crack down on this modern form of slavery. We can support efforts to change the economic incentives and do more to aid the victims. But we must view this evil form of twenty-first century slavery every bit as important as drug trafficking. All too often the same criminal networks that trade in fourteen-year-old girls also trade in narcotics--and even in materials that can be used by terrorists. Identifying and destroying criminal networks that evade national boundaries is also a matter of our national security.

It is also the appropriate concern of a nation conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all people are equal, to encourage and coax other cultures into abandoning practices that afflict the happiness and health of women and children, whether they be practices that mutilate their bodies or impose on them marriage before their maturity and without their informed consent. I would insist that our diplomacy actively raise and discourage in our relationships with other countries customs that so degrade and physically threaten people, and explain that the full benefits of friendship with the United States are predicated on a shared respect for the basic right of women and children not to suffer atrocities to their physical and emotional health to protect traditions that should have been ended long ago.

While the Internet has brought many benefits to our society in the form of economic and educational opportunities, political organization and the free exchange of ideas, information and knowledge, there are those who exploit the very pervasiveness and anonymity the medium provides to trade to prey upon our children. I respect those who are advocates for an unregulated Internet in defense of freedom of expression. However, the Internet cannot be used as a safe haven for criminals and predators. The home has traditionally been a safe harbor for families, where children are safe from the dangers of a world that can sometimes threaten their innocence. But with the proliferation of Internet access, come those who would rob them of their innocence through the computers we provide them to learn, to socialize and to explore the world.

Recent years have seen an explosion both in the proliferation of child pornography and in child sexual exploitation cases involving the use of the Internet and email as a means for predators to stalk and lure children. I have worked aggressively over the years to promote the safe use of the Internet and to craft legislation designed to ensure that children are secure as they use this transformative technology. Child pornography is a terrible crime involving the abuse of children and the trafficking in images of this abuse. Child exploitation in any form must be stopped and those responsible must be punished to the maximum extent of the law. The FBI and Justice Departments, as well as state and local law enforcement, have worked aggressively in recent years to arrest and prosecute those who traffic in child pornography over the Internet, and who prey upon our children on-line or by other means. Progress has been made.

Just last month, for example, South Carolina's Attorney General Henry McMaster announced that the state's Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force had arrested its one hundred and twenty first child predator. Aided with funding from the Justice Department, the South Carolina task force has made significant progress in tracking down, arresting and prosecuting child predators in South Carolina. Such federal, state and local cooperation is a model for success that we must build on because, sadly, across our nation crimes against our children continue to rise. This is an abomination, and I am firmly resolved to fighting these crimes with all the means at our country's disposal.

As President, I will move to clear obstacles to cooperation between federal agencies and their state and local counterparts to ensure maximum cooperation in the pursuit and prosecution of child predators. At the same time, I will elevate the importance of international cooperation in our relations with other countries to ensure that criminals who traffic in images of child abuse find no haven or quarter in other countries.

Today, because of the anonymity and global reach the Internet provides users, we must adapt our law enforcement efforts accordingly. For example, companies that provide Internet access and forums for content and communications also have responsibilities as corporate citizens. Consequently, I believe we must expand the range of companies required to report the existence of child pornography when they become aware of its existence -- and impose higher fines and criminal penalties on companies that do not report child pornography. Furthermore, I believe those convicted of preying upon our children should not be allowed to hide behind the anonymity of the Internet, which is why I am pleased to hear the Justice Department, consistent with legislation I have been pushing, will soon require convicted sex offenders to register their e-mail and instant message addresses with the Department's national registry.

This approach has been endorsed by several social networking websites which will to use the registry information to "scrub" their sites for convicted sex offenders, making their sites safer for children. This registry information can be used by parents to check e-mails and other information to ensure that persons interacting with their children are not convicted sex offenders preying on them.

Our nation, whose founders sacrificed for the belief that we would be an example to the world, has long appreciated that our freedom confers responsibilities on us all, and among them, is our respect for the freedom of others. Ours is not a perfect history. But it is a history distinguished by our pursuit of this ideal. We have always been a country of hope and of ideals, even of audacity in our belief that all good things are possible here and wherever the Rights of Man are respected. As we pursue greater individual freedom and economic opportunity, as we take advantage of new technologies and explore a world more accessible to more people than ever before, we must be diligent in our support of those rights, and in our active opposition to the enemies of human dignity in our own society and in all the dark corners of the world. We must remember that our freedoms are not only defended by our diplomacy and military power but, very importantly, by the decency and respect with which we treat one another, and by our belief that as we our dignity is entitled to respect so are we obliged to respect and defend the dignity of others. Ours is a nation with a conscience, and thank God we are. As William Wilberforce said so many years ago, "When we think of eternity, and of the future consequences of all human conduct, what is there in this life that should make any man contradict the dictates of his conscience, the principles of justice, the laws of religion, and of God?"

Thank you.

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