

**Trainor Award Remarks**  
**Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield**  
U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations  
March 14, 2023

Thank you so much Frank, Ambassador Bodine, Dean Hellman, and to the Trainor Trust, and the entire Georgetown community.

It is such an honor to receive the “Jit” Trainor Award. His example of service is one we all aspire to.

The last recipient of this award, my friend Ambassador Burns, said it well: this award not only honors me but also our country’s rich tradition of diplomacy and public service.

And in that tradition, I feel the need to take full advantage of this opportunity, and this esteemed assemblage of the foreign policy community, to talk about an issue that has been at the forefront of my mind: the struggle for universal human rights.

After all, there is a direct connection between public service and human rights, between personal sacrifice and preserving fundamental freedoms.

75 years ago, Eleanor Roosevelt stood in a room with diplomats from more than 50 other countries.

They were preparing to vote on an unprecedented document.

A document so sweeping, so powerful, and so dramatic that it would impact every single person on earth.

At 3 o’clock in the morning, after two years of intense negotiations, they adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

For the first time, world leaders came together and declared for all: human rights are universal.

Everyone is entitled to inalienable freedoms and protections.

But Eleanor made the point that it isn’t enough to put our noble ideals on paper.

They must actually exist in the world, at the level of the individual person.

They must exist, to use her phrase, in the small places close to home.

As she said, and I quote, “Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere.”

And this is what I mean by the connection between diplomacy and this declaration, between public service and fundamental freedoms.

Those of us in public service are the ones who must make rights real.

We are the ones who must translate our documents into deeds, our ideals into actualities.

In the lead up to the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, President Roosevelt urged Eleanor to give a speech outlining what this document would mean for the world -- especially because not every country was respecting these rights.

She entitled it the "Struggle for Human Rights," and I believe that struggle is just as apt today.

Because right now, human rights are under assault, all around the world.

Given that this is women's history month, the plight of women is particularly at the forefront of my mind.

In Afghanistan, the Taliban have barred women and girls from getting an education and effectively banned them from public life.

Last month, I met a young Afghan refugee whose family has settled in Virginia.

She told me how grateful she is to continue her education in the United States, but how painful it is to know that girls in Afghanistan -- including her cousins -- are denied that same opportunity.

I promised her the United States will continue to push back against these archaic attacks on universal human rights.

In Iran, we have watched the Iranian people -- led by courageous women -- take to the streets under the banner of "woman, life, and freedom."

For our part, we heeded the calls of activists and worked to kick Iran out of the Commission on the Status of Women.

Iran's presence on the commission was a stain, and we removed it.

In the aftermath of the protests, I saw a video of young students in Karaj taking off their hijabs and shouting "If we don't unite, they will kill us one by one."

If we don't unite, they will kill us one by one.

All around the world women and girls are taking this lesson to heart.

Of course, many other groups and peoples are facing undue persecution. For example, for years, Rohingya and other ethnic minorities have faced human rights abuses in Burma.

Now, the military is targeting anyone it sees as opposing or undermining its repressive rule.

Meanwhile, the regimes in Syria and in North Korea continue to commit untold human rights abuses against their own people.

Nicaragua, Venezuela...the list of countries of concern goes on and on.

But I am particularly concerned by a false and pernicious claim we are seeing pushed forward at the UN and on the Human Rights Council.

Some of the planet's most powerful countries are arguing that human rights are not universal.

That instead, they ought to be applied based on the local context.

It is no coincidence that these same governments are some of the world's worst abusers of human rights.

China has committed genocide and crimes against humanity against the Uyghurs and other ethnic and religious minority groups in Xinjiang.

Russian forces have committed war crimes and crimes against humanity in Ukraine -- and Putin's government currently has more than 500 political prisoners behind bars.

I call out these two countries, among so many human rights abusers, because both are permanent members of the Security Council along with us.

Their influence on the UN system is outsized. And their horrific human rights abuses not only degrade the Council but also allow other countries to get away with flouting human rights too.

One of the promises of the UN's 2030 Agenda is to "leave no one behind."

But if we let the 'universal' of 'universal human rights' slip, then we do just that.

Fortunately, we have some advantages on our side. And the greatest one is simple: they are wrong.

"All human beings," reads the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, "are born free and equal in dignity and rights."

This profound statement is not an opinion. It's a fact.

Our human rights are inalienable and indivisible. They are interdependent and interrelated. And they are universal.

They do not change from country to country.

Dictators abuse human rights. We know all too well how States violate them.

But no one -- no one -- can take them away.

So, we must stand with human rights defenders, defend them ourselves, and speak out wherever and whenever human rights are being violated or abused.

And by the way, that includes here in the United States. We are not above criticism.

I was born in the segregated South. I have known the ugly face of institutional racism.

I know all too well that the United States is imperfect when it comes to human rights.

But the difference is that we are a democracy.

We strive for equality, for transparency. When we make mistakes, we have a system for correction and improvement.

And I have seen that system work in my lifetime.

That's why, in 2021, President Biden issued a formal, standing invitation to all UN experts who report and advise on thematic human rights issues.

Since then, we have welcomed the Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues and the Independent Expert on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity to the United States.

We issued these invitations because transparency and openness are not threats to our sovereignty.

Rather, our ability to accept critical feedback, and to address enduring injustices and inequities, makes us stronger.

It's the very best of our system. And it gives us a model to hold up for the world.

That's why we rejoined the Human Rights Council -- because even though it is chock full of some of the world's worst abusers, we can counter them and advance human rights with our seat at the table.

It's why we are the only country in the world that has made a voluntary contribution to support the vital work of the Permanent Forum on People of African Descent in countering anti-Black discrimination.

It's why we invest more than any other country on earth in helping our fellow UN Member States to provide health care and food security for their populations.

It's why we call out human rights abuses wherever we see them.

At home and abroad. With our adversaries as well as our allies.

That is what universality demands.

In her speech, Eleanor Roosevelt said that, and I quote, "in each generation and in each country, there must be a continuation of the struggle."

She argued that human rights were, and I quote, “a field in which to stand still is to retreat.”

To the students in the room, that’s what I want you to take away from today: in each generation, the struggle continues.

Soon, it will be your turn.

And standing still is not an option.

Instead, as potential public servants, allow me to enlist you in the struggle.

We must subject ourselves, our friends, our foes, and everyone in between to scrutiny.

And where we see abuses and violations, we must push, and prod, and fight for justice.

Let us do everything in our power to make our universal rights real, for everyone, all around the world.

And let us ensure they are alive and well, even in the small places close to home.

Thank you.