

# A COMMITMENT TO HUMAN DIGNITY, DEMOCRACY, AND PEACE

by President Bill Clinton

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*President Bill Clinton reviews the role and value of war tribunals and says democracy is essential to the strengthening of human rights. This article is adapted from a speech the President made last October at the University of Connecticut in connection with the opening of the Dodd Center, dedicated to the late Senator Tom Dodd, who was a prosecutor at the Nuremberg War Crimes trials.*

At Nuremberg, the international community declared that those responsible for crimes against humanity will be held accountable without the usual defenses afforded to people in times of war. The very existence of the Tribunal was a triumph for justice and for humanity and for the proposition that there must be limits even in wartime. Flush with victory, outraged by the evil of the Nazi death camps, the Allies easily could have simply lashed out in revenge. But the terrible struggle of World War II was a struggle for the very soul of humankind. To deny its oppressors the rights they had stripped from their victims would have been to win the war but to lose the larger struggle. The Allies understood that the only answer to inhumanity is justice. And as Senator Dodd said, three of the defendants were actually acquitted, even in that tumultuous, passionate environment.

In the years since Nuremberg, the hope that convicting those guilty of making aggressive war would deter future wars and prevent future crimes against humanity, including genocide, frankly, has gone unfulfilled too often. From 1945 until the present day, wars between and within nations, including practices which were found to be illegal at Nuremberg, have cost more than 20 million lives. The wrongs Justice [Robert] Jackson [a prosecutor at the Nuremberg trials] hoped would end have not been repeated on the scale of Nazi Germany, in the way that they did it, but they have been repeated and repeated on a scale that still staggers the imagination.

Still, Nuremberg was a crucial first step. It rendered a clear verdict on atrocities. It placed human rights on a higher ground. It set a timeless precedent by stripping away convenient excuses for abominable conduct. Now it falls to our generation to make good on its promise: to put into practice the principle that those who violate universal human rights must be called to account for those actions.

This mission demands the abiding commitment of all people. And like many of the other challenges of our time, it requires the power of our Nation's example and the strength of our leadership, first, because America was founded on the proposition that all God's children have the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. These are values that define us as a nation, but they are not unique to our experience. All over the world, from Russia to South Africa, from Poland to Cambodia, people have been willing to fight and to die for them.

Second, we have to do it because, while fascism and communism are dead or discredited, the forces of hatred and intolerance live on as they will for as long as human beings are permitted to exist on this planet Earth. Today, it is ethnic violence, religious strife, terrorism. These threats confront our generation in a way that still would spread darkness over light, disintegration over integration, chaos over community. Our purpose is to fight them, to defeat them, to support and sustain the powerful worldwide aspirations of democracy, dignity, and freedom.

And finally, we must do it because, in the aftermath of the cold war, we are the world's only superpower. We have to do it because while we seek to do everything we possibly can in the world in cooperation with other nations, they find it difficult to proceed in cooperation if we are not there as a partner and very often as a leader.

With our purpose and with our position comes the responsibility to help shine the light of justice on those who would deny to others their most basic human rights. We have an obligation to carry forward the lessons of Nuremberg. That is why we strongly support the United Nations War Crimes Tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and for Rwanda.

The goals of these tribunals are straightforward: to punish those responsible for genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity; to deter future such crimes; and to help nations that were torn apart by violence begin the process of healing and reconciliation.

The tribunal for the former Yugoslavia has made excellent progress. It has collected volumes of evidence of atrocities, including the establishment of death camps, mass executions, and systematic campaigns of rape and terror. This evidence is the basis for the indictments the tribunal already has issued.... These indictments are not negotiable. Those accused of war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide must be brought to justice. They must be tried and, if found guilty, they must be held accountable. Some people are concerned that pursuing peace in Bosnia and prosecuting war criminals are incompatible goals. But I believe they are wrong. There must be peace for justice to prevail, but there must be justice when peace prevails.

In recent weeks, the combination of American leadership, NATO's resolve, the international community's diplomatic determination: these elements have brought us closer to a settlement in Bosnia than at any time since the war began there 4 years ago. So let me repeat again what I have said consistently for over 2 years: If and when the parties do make peace, the United States, through NATO, must help to secure it.

Only NATO can strongly and effectively implement a settlement. And the United States, as NATO's leader, must do its part and join our troops to those of our allies in such an operation. If you...accept the fact that not only our values but our position as the world's only superpower impose upon us an obligation to carry through, then the conclusion is inevitable: We must help to secure a peace if a peace can be reached in Bosnia. We will not send our troops into combat. We will not ask them to keep a peace that cannot be maintained. But we must use our power to secure a peace and to implement the agreement.

We have an opportunity and a responsibility to help resolve this, the most difficult security challenge in the heart of Europe since World War II. When His Holiness the Pope was here just a few days ago, we spent a little over a half an hour alone, and we talked of many things. But in

the end, he said, "Mr. President, I am not a young man. I have a long memory. This century began with a war in Sarajevo. We must not let this century end with a war in Sarajevo."

No peace will endure for long without justice. For only justice can break finally the cycle of violence and retribution that fuels war and crimes against humanity. Only justice can lift the burden of collective guilt. It weighs upon a society where unspeakable acts of destruction have occurred. Only justice can assign responsibility to the guilty and allow everyone else to get on with the hard work of rebuilding and reconciliation. So as the United States leads the international effort to forge a lasting peace in Bosnia, the War Crimes Tribunal must carry on its work to find justice.

The United States is contributing more than \$16 million in funds and services to that tribunal and to the one regarding Rwanda. We have 20 prosecutors, investigators, and other personnel on the staffs. And at the United Nations, we have led the effort to secure adequate funding for these tribunals. And we continue to press others to make voluntary contributions. We do this because we believe doing it is part of acting on the lessons that Senator Dodd and others taught us at Nuremberg.

By successfully prosecuting war criminals in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, we can send a strong signal to those who would use the cover of war to commit terrible atrocities that they cannot escape the consequences of such actions. And a signal will come across even more loudly and clearly if nations all around the world who value freedom and tolerance establish a permanent international court to prosecute, with the support of the United Nations Security Council, serious violations of humanitarian law. This, it seems to me, would be the ultimate tribute to the people who did such important work at Nuremberg, a permanent international court to prosecute such violations. And we are working today at the United Nations to see whether it can be done.

But my fellow Americans and my fellow citizens of the world, let me also say that our commitment to punish these crimes against humanity must be matched by our commitment to prevent them in the first place. As we work to support these tribunals, let's not forget what our ultimate goal is. Our ultimate goal must be to render them completely obsolete because such things no longer occur.

Accountability is a powerful deterrent, but it isn't enough. It doesn't get to the root cause of such atrocities. Only a profound change in the nature of societies can begin to reach the heart of the matter. And I believe the basis of that profound change is democracy.

Democracy is the best guarantor of human rights -- not a perfect one, to be sure; you can see that in the history of the United States -- but it is still the system that demands respect for the individual, and it requires responsibility from the individual to thrive. Democracy cannot eliminate all violations of human rights or outlaw human frailty, nor does promoting democracy relieve us of the obligation to press others who do not operate democracies to respect human rights. But more than any other system of government we know, democracy protects those rights, defends the victims of their abuse, punishes the perpetrators, and prevents a downward spiral of revenge.

So promoting democracy does more than advance our ideals. It reinforces our interests. Where the rule of law prevails, where governments are held accountable, where ideas and information flow freely, economic development and political stability are more likely to take hold and human rights are more likely to thrive. History teaches us that democracies are less likely to go to war, less likely to traffic in terrorism and more likely to stand against the forces of hatred and destruction, more likely to become good partners in diplomacy and trade. So promoting democracy and defending human rights is good for the world and good for America.

On this very day one year ago, an American-led multinational force returned the duly elected President of Haiti, Jean Bertrand Aristide, to his country. The anniversary we celebrate today was the culmination of a 3-year effort by the United States and the international community to remove the dictators and restore democracy. Because we backed diplomacy with the force of our military, the dictators finally did step down. And Haiti's democrats stepped back into their rightful place.

Our actions ended a reign of terror that did violence not only to innocent Haitians but to the values and the principles of the civilized world. We renewed hope in Haiti's future where once there was only despair. We upheld the reliability of our own commitments and the commitments that others make to us. We sent a powerful message to the would-be despots in the region: Democracy in the Americas cannot be overthrown with impunity.

We have seen extraordinary progress in this year. The democratic government has been restored. Human rights are its purpose, not its disgrace. Violence has subsided, though not ended altogether. Peaceful elections have occurred. Reform is underway. A new civilian police force has already more than 1,000 officers on the street. A growing private sector is beginning to generate jobs and opportunity. After so much blood and terror, the people of Haiti have resumed their long journey to security and prosperity with dignity.

There is a lot of work to do. Haiti is still the poorest nation in our hemisphere, and that is a breeding ground for the things we all come here to condemn today. Its democratic institutions are fragile, and all those years of vicious oppression have left scars and some still thirsting for revenge.

For reform to take root and to endure, trust must be fully established not only between the Government and the people but among the people of Haiti themselves. President Aristide understands that when he says no to violence, yes to justice; no to vengeance, yes to reconciliation.

This is very important. Assigning individual responsibilities for crimes of the past is also important there. Haiti now has a national commission for truth and justice, launching investigations of past human rights abuses. And with our support, Haiti is improving the effectiveness, accessibility, and accountability of its own justice system, again, to prevent future violations as well as to punish those which occur.

The people of Haiti know it's up to them to safeguard their freedom. But we know, as President Kennedy said, that democracy is never a final achievement. And just as the American people, after 200 years, are continually struggling to perfect our own democracy, we must and we will stand with the people of Haiti as they struggle to build their own.

And let me say one final thing about this. I thank Senator Dodd and Ambassador Dodd for their concern with freedom, democracy, and getting rid of the horrible human rights abuses that have occurred in the past throughout the Americas. The First Lady is in South America today -- or she would be here with me -- partly because of the path that has been blazed by the Dodd family in this generation to stand up for democracy, so that every single country of the Americas, save one, now has a democratically elected leader. And human rights abuses and the kinds of crimes that Senator Thomas Dodd stood up against at Nuremberg are dramatically, dramatically reduced because of that process and this family's leadership.

In closing, let me say that, for all of the work we might do through tribunals to bring the guilty to account, it is our daily commitment to the ideals of human dignity, democracy, and peace that has been and will continue to be the source of our strength in the world and our capacity to work with others to prevent such terrible things from occurring in the first place.

We will continue to defend the values we believe make life worth living. We will continue to defend the proposition that all people, without regard to their nationality, their race, their ethnic group, their religion, their gender, should have the chance to live free, should have the chance to make the most of their God-given potential. For too long, all across the globe, women and their children, in particular, were denied these human rights. Those were the rights for which the First Lady spoke so forcefully in China at the Women's Conference and for which the United States will work hard in the years ahead....

If we have an obligation to stand up for what is right, to advance what is right, to lift up human potential, we must be able to fulfill that obligation.

If there is one last lesson of this day, I believe it should be that prosperity for the United States is not the most important thing and not an end in itself. We should seek it only, only, as a means to enhance the human spirit, to enhance human dignity, to enhance the ability of every person in our country and those whom we have the means to help around the world to become the people God meant for them to be. If we can remember that, then we can be faithful to the generation that won World War II, to the outstanding leaders who established the important precedents at Nuremberg, and to the mission and the spirit of the Dodd Center.

Thank you, and God bless you all.