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Sen. John McCain: “Why Freedom Still Matters”

Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies
1740 Massachusetts Ave NW, Washington, DC
1:00 – 2:00 pm, November 9, 2009

Johns Hopkins University’s School of Advanced International Studies hosted a speech by **Sen. John McCain** (R-Ariz.) to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. McCain spoke on the role of human rights in U.S. foreign policy.

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 was a turning point, McCain said, marking the largest expansion of freedom in history. But **President Reagan**’s call to “tear down this wall” was not accepted without objection in its time. Some Americans thought the U.S. should not preach its values to the rest of the world or take sides in the domestic politics of other countries. Others thought the U.S. should only pursue its narrow interests in foreign policy. McCain rejected those views. The Bush administration may have spoken a lot about freedom, McCain said, but this does not make it a dirty word.

The U.S. has a special responsibility to champion human rights, McCain argued, for the simple reason that it is the right thing to do. There is also a more self-interested reason, however. The idea that a state’s conduct in the world is not related to how it treats its citizens is false. McCain pointed to Russia as an example of a state whose repressive character is reflected in the way it deals with other nations. The U.S. can encourage human rights by speaking out against abuses as Reagan did. When dissidents abroad ask the U.S. to stay silent, that request should be respected, but when they ask for our support, we can provide strength just by speaking up. Our authoritarian allies will not enjoy these conversations, but McCain argued this is “the truest path to lasting stability and success.”

Sometimes, as with the Bush administration and during the Cold War, the U.S. will do harm as it seeks to promote freedom, but our fallibility is not a sign of the weakness of our values. Not trying to promote freedom is an abdication of moral responsibility, McCain said.

None of this is to say that the U.S. should not deal with governments it does not like. Pursuing our own interests often means engaging oppressive regimes, but we can pursue our “moral interest” in human rights at the same time. Reagan negotiated with the Soviet Union, but at the same time he named it the “evil empire” and told **Secretary General Gorbachev** to tear down the wall.

Though the U.S. should work to strengthen civil society and democratic institutions, the form these democracies take is not up to us. American democracy is idiosyncratic as a result of our unique history, and other countries will have different systems.

McCain said he acknowledged that some would say his real goal is not addressing human rights issues under repressive regimes, but doing away with those regimes themselves. McCain does not disagree. We should not be satisfied with tolerating tyrannical regimes, he said. However, he is optimistic about

the prospects for our world, because he believes a younger generation of Americans is not willing to accept tyranny abroad as inevitable.

Asked what the U.S. should do to assist democrats in Iran, McCain cited students' signs in English and chants of "Obama, Obama, are you with us or with them?" as evidence that Iranian dissidents want our support. It seems to him that the leaders of the reform movement are not the fundamental driver of the protests that defy "horrible reprisals." The U.S. can help provide access to the Internet to the anti-regime protestors — an option he likened to the U.S. providing Polish Solidarity leader **Lech Walesa** with a printing press during the Cold War. The U.S. can also increase funding and capability for Radio Farsi — as it did for Radio Free Europe. McCain said he does not support providing arms to the dissidents nor taking military action. Powerful voices of support are what matter most to the people of Iran.