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I'd like to thank the Graduate Institute and for everyone that came today. Before we get started, I think it's important that we remember the senseless lives [sic] that were lost in London. The United States stands strongly with London with these careless acts and we are committed to helping fight terrorism as it continues to go forward.

The first chairman of the United Nations organization dedicated entirely to human rights was a chairwoman. Eleanor Roosevelt was elected to head the Human Rights Commission when it first met in January, 1947. She was a natural choice. Mrs. Roosevelt was already well known for her heartfelt advocacy for universal human rights. She was a woman of deep faith. Her nightly prayer asked God to (quote), "make us sure of the good we cannot see, and [of the] hidden good in the world."¹



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Eleanor Roosevelt was an idealist. But she was no pushover. The first item on the Commission's agenda was drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. During the debate, the United States and the Soviet Union clashed repeatedly in some of the opening skirmishes of the Cold War. The Soviet delegate taunted Mrs. Roosevelt: How could the United States call itself a champion of human rights when African Americans were still discriminated against? To which Mrs. Roosevelt acknowledged that yes, the United States still had problems, and progress was being made.

And then she proposed a deal that quieted the Soviet delegate: She said the Soviets could send a delegation to observe the United States -- if the United States could do the same to the Soviet Union. Of course, the Soviets never did and never would give free reign to a U.S. delegation. She was making a point. She was calling out a fellow commission member for using human rights as a cover for its political agenda.

Mrs. Roosevelt's vision of the Human Rights Commission was bigger than any one country. She saw the Commission as a place for conscience, not politics. She knew that if it was allowed to become a forum for hypocrisy and political point-scoring, it would do more to hurt the cause of human rights than to help it.

My country has a unique beginning, founded on human rights, holding self-evident the truth that all men are created equal with rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Of course America did not invent these rights -- God did. Simply by our birth, human beings are endowed by our Creator with certain inalienable rights. These rights belong to all of us. They are not the gift of any government. They cannot legitimately be taken away by any government. The American idea is that government exists to serve the people, not the other way around. Government should secure our rights, not violate them.

We continue striving to achieve this principle through self-government, using elections and the rule of law to hold our leaders accountable. The inherent dignity of the individual is not secured by words but by actions. This is the standard by which we judge ourselves as a nation -- and by which we invite others to judge us as well.



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It is this commitment to the equal worth of all human beings that leads to the United States -- that leads the United States to support universal human rights. And of course we are not alone. There are many other nations, both on the Council and off, that affirm universal human rights and act to protect and extend them.

When the Human Rights [Council] has acted with clarity and integrity, it has advanced the cause of human rights. It has brought the names of prisoners of conscience to international prominence and given voice to the voiceless.

At times, the Council has placed a spotlight on individual country violators and spurred action, including convening emergency sessions to address the war crimes being committed by the Assad regime in Syria. The Council's Commission of Inquiry on North Korea led to the Security Council action on human rights abuses there. The Council is at its best when it is calling out human rights violators and abuses, and provoking positive action. It changes lives. It pushes back against the tide of cynicism that is building in our world. And it reassures us that it deserves our continued investment of time and treasure.

But there is a truth that must be acknowledged by anyone who cares about human rights: When the Council fails to act properly -- when it fails to act at all -- it undermines its own credibility and the cause of human rights. It leaves the most vulnerable to suffer and die. It fuels the cynical beliefs that countries cannot put aside self-interest and cooperate on behalf of human dignity. It re-enforces our growing suspicion that the Human Rights Council is not a good investment of our time, money, and national prestige.

Tragically, we've been down this road before.

In 2005, then-Secretary-General Kofi Annan disbanded the precursor to the Human Rights Council, the Human Rights Commission. He blamed what he called its "credibility deficit." The description was well-earned. Many of the world's worst human rights offenders were elected to the seats on the Commission. They used those positions, not to advance human rights, but to shield themselves from criticism or to criticize others. In short, the Commission had lost the world's trust. It had stained and setback the cause of human rights.



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These problems were supposed to have been fixed when the new Council was formed. Sadly, the case against the Human Rights Council today looks an awful like -- awful lot like the case against the discredited Human Rights Commission over a decade ago.

Once again, over half the current member countries failed to meet basic human rights standards as measured by Freedom House. Countries like Venezuela, Cuba, China, Burundi, and Saudi Arabia occupy positions that obligate them to, in the words of the resolution that created the Human Rights Council, "uphold the highest standards" of human rights. They clearly do not uphold these -- those highest standards. And once again, as with the disgraced and disbanded Human Rights Commission, the victims of the world's most egregious human rights violations are too often ignored by the very organization that is supposed to protect them.

In Venezuela, the government has systematically destroyed civil society through arbitrary detention, torture, and blatant violations of freedom of the press and freedom of expression. Children are starving to death. Mothers dig through trash cans to feed their families. This is a crisis that has been 18 years in the making. The Venezuelan people have been robbed of their human rights. And yet, not once has the Human Rights Council seen fit to condemn Venezuela. Quite the contrary -- the Council chose to showcase Venezuela's work while protestors were being beaten in the streets. Just two years ago, President Maduro was invited to address the Council, just weeks after Venezuela was re-elected as a member.

In Cuba, the government continues to arrest and detain critics and human rights advocates. The government strictly controls the media and severely restricts the Cuban people's access to the internet. Political prisoners by the thousands continue to sit in Cuban jails. Yet Cuba has never been condemned by the Human Rights Council. It, too, is a member country. In fact, Cuba uses its membership in the Council as proof that it is a supporter of human rights, instead of a violator that it is. The Cuban deputy foreign minister called Cuba's 2016 re-election to the Human Rights Council (quote), "irrefutable evidence of Cuba's historic prestige 'in the promotion and protection of all human rights for [all] Cubans.'"² This is a reversal of the truth that would make George Orwell blush.

The list goes on.



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In 2014, Russia invaded Ukraine and took over Crimea. This illegal occupation resulted in thousands of civilian deaths and injuries as well as arbitrary detentions. No special meeting of the Human Rights Council was called, and the abuses continue to mount.

Robert Mugabe continues his decades-long campaign of repression in Zimbabwe. Nothing from Geneva. Instead, human rights violators Iran, Venezuela, and North Korea, took advantage of a Council review to commend Mugabe's so-called "promotion and protection of human rights."

The Human Rights Council has given a great -- has been given a great responsibility. It has been charged with -- with using the moral power of universal human rights to be the world's advocate for the most vulnerable among us. Judged by this basic standard, the Human Rights Council has failed. In case after case, it has been a forum for politics, hypocrisy, and evasion - - not the forum for conscience that its founders envisioned. It has become a place for political manipulation, rather than the promotion of universal values. Those who cannot defend themselves turn to this Council for hope but are too often disappointed by inaction. Once again, the world's foremost human rights body has tarnished the cause of human rights.

The United Nations must now act to reclaim the legitimacy of universal human dignity. For all of us, this is an urgent ask. Human rights are central to the mission of the United Nations; not only are they the right thing to do, they're the smart thing to do.

I dedicated the U.S. presidency of the Security Council in April to making the connection between human rights and peace and security. This is a cause that is bigger than any one organization. If the Human Rights Council is going to be an organization we entrust to protect and promote human rights, it must change. If it fails to change, then we must pursue the advancement of human rights outside of the Council.

America does not seek to leave the Human Rights Council.³ We seek to reestablish the Council's legitimacy. There are a couple of critically necessary changes.

First, the UN must act to keep the worst human rights abusers from obtaining seats on the Council. As it stands, elections for membership to the Council are over before the voting even begins. Regional blocs nominate slates of pre-determined candidates that never face any competition for votes. No competition means no scrutiny of candidates' human rights records.



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We must change the elections so countries are forced to make the case for membership based on their records, not on their promises. Selection of members must occur out in the open for all to see. The secret ballot must be replaced with open voting. Countries that are willing to support human rights violators to serve on the Human Rights Council must be willing to show their faces. They know who they are. It's time for the world to know who they are.

Second, the Council's Agenda Item Seven must be removed.⁴ This, of course, is the scandalous provision that singles out Israel for automatic criticism. There is no legitimate human rights reason for this agenda item to exist. It is the central flaw that turns the Human Rights Council from an organization that can be a force for universal good, into an organization that is overwhelmed by political agenda. Since its creation, the Council has passed more than 70 resolutions targeting Israel. It has passed just seven on Iran. This relentless, pathological campaign against a country that actually has a strong human rights record makes a mockery not of Israel, but of the Council itself.

The Council's effort to create a database designed to shame companies for doing business in Israeli controlled areas is just the latest in this long line of shameful actions. Blacklisting companies without even looking at their employment practices or their contributions to local empowerment, but rather based entirely on their location in areas of conflict is contrary to the laws of international trade and to any reasonable definition of human rights. It is an attempt to provide an international stamp of approval to the anti-Semitic BDS movement. It must be rejected.

Getting rid of Agenda Item Seven would not give Israel preferential treatment. Claims against Israel could still be brought under Agenda Item Four,⁵ just as claims can be brought there against any other country. Rather, removal of Item Seven would put all countries on equal footing.

The Council is no more justified in having a separate agenda item on Israel than it is on having one for the United States, or Canada, or France, or the United Kingdom. More appropriate would be to have an agenda item on North Korea, Iran, and Syria, the world's leading violators of human rights.

These changes are the minimum necessary to resuscitate the Council as a respected advocate of universal human rights.



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For our part, the United States will not sit quietly while this body, supposedly dedicated to human rights, continues to damage the cause of human rights.

In the end, no speech and no structural reforms will save the members of the Human Rights Council from themselves. If they continue to put politics ahead of human rights, they will continue to damage the cause that they supposedly serve.

All those years ago, Mrs. Roosevelt understood this. She was engaged in building an institution to bring the nations of the world together to protect the most vulnerable. But she knew the good she was seeking would not come from that institution, but from the hearts of men and women who would work -- who would work in it. Every night, she prayed: "Save us from ourselves and show us a vision of a world made new."

I believe that vision is still achievable. I believe we can come together. I know there are many who share the belief. The status quo is not acceptable. It is not a place for countries who champion human rights. I call on all likeminded countries to join [in] making the Human Rights Council reach its intended purpose. Let the world be on notice: We will never give up the cause of universal human rights. Whether it's here, or in other venues, we will continue this fight.

Thank you.

¹The Entire Prayer: "Our Father, who hast set a restlessness in our hearts, and made us all seekers after that which we can never fully find; forbid us to be satisfied with what we make of life. Draw us from base content, and set our eyes on far-off goals. Keep us at tasks too hard for us, that we may be driven to Thee for strength. Deliver us from fretfulness and self-pity; make us sure of the goal we cannot see, and of the hidden good in the world. Open our eyes to simple beauty all around us, and our hearts to the loveliness men hide from us because we do not try enough to understand them. Save us from ourselves, and show us a vision of a world made new. May Thy spirit of peace and illumination so enlighten our minds that all life shall glow with new meaning and new purpose; through Jesus Christ Our Lord." [Source: https://www2.gwu.edu/~erpapers/myday/displaydoc.cfm?_y=1940&_f=md055520]

² Two primary sources for this quotation offer different delimitations (hence the use of double and single quotations. See [here](#) and [here](#) for quotation sources.

³ See Freedom House's [letter](#) to Ambassador Haley for added context to this statement.

⁴ UN Human Rights Council Agenda Item 7: "**Human rights situation in Palestine and other occupied Arab territories**" [Source: <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/10session/ProvAgenda10session.pdf>.] For example of a UN Human Rights Council resolution adopted pursuant to Agenda Item 7, see 2017 pdf report [here](#).

⁵ UN Human Rights Council Agenda Item 4: "**Human rights situations that require that Council's attention**" [Source: <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/10session/ProvAgenda10session.pdf>.]