Progress and Possibility: Reflecting on 75 Years of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Opening Remarks by Marti Flacks

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Marti Flacks: Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to the Center for Strategic and International Studies and today’s panel discussions on – today’s conference discussions on “Progress and Possibility: 75 Years of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.”

I’m Marti Flacks. I’m director of the Human Rights Initiative and Khosravi chair in principled internationalism. And it’s a pleasure to see you here in person, and welcome to those who are watching today online.

You know, when we wrote that very optimistic-sounding title, “Progress and Possibility,” several months ago, it felt like a very different time. It was a time where it felt like the Ukrainian counteroffensive was maybe making some progress and there may be an end in sight to the devastating war in Ukraine. It was before the largest massacre of Jewish people since one of the events that inspired the UDHR, the Holocaust, and before Israel’s devastating military response in Gaza. It was before it was as clear today as it now is that ethnic cleansing, crimes against humanity, and war crimes are happening in Darfur, as we just heard minutes ago from the State Department. And I could go on and on. The last few months have been tough. It is a difficult moment for human rights around the world.

But I think in that context it’s somehow fitting that the anniversary of the UDHR which happens on Sunday is going to take place in the middle of the holiday of Hanukkah, which starts tomorrow night and lasts for eight nights, which is a holiday at its core that’s all about freedom. When you’re a kid and you learn about Hanukkah, you are taught that the miracle of Hanukkah is that one night of oil lasted for eight nights. When you’re an adult, you come to learn that the real miracle of Hanukkah is that the fact that this small group of people whose government was intent on wiping them out somehow came out on top; that despite all odds, against all odds, they continued to exist. And to me, that message echoes the struggles and the fights for freedom that so many people around the world are facing today, whether they’re fighting for freedom of religion, freedom of expression and association, the right to representative and accountable government and a government that cares about them and protects them, and to democracy itself – and, yes, their right to exist.

So while the situation looks grim, a lot of people like to quote Martin Luther King’s very wise words that remind us that the arc of history is long, “but it bends towards justice.” And while history has its hills and its valleys, when you’re in one of those valleys it’s very hard to see the path forward, that longer arc.
But this story is not entirely dark and there has, in fact, been tremendous progress made over the last 75 years. One of the reasons it’s so hard to see that progress is because the UDHR itself was such an aspirational document. It was so ahead of its time in many of its provisions. It’s easy to forget that the U.N. member states that adopted a document declaring that everyone is entitled to equal rights and freedoms regardless of race, nationality, religion, or sex, that that wasn’t the case in nearly any country on Earth at that time, including those that drafted and adopted the UDHR – and not just on practice, but even on the books.

To give just one example, the UDHR says the people – that people have the right to marry without limitations due to race almost 20 years before that became national law in the United States via Loving versus Virginia, which established those rights for interracial couples in the United States, and many decades before that was true for same-sex couples. Article 1 of the UDHR had to be amended partway through the process thanks to the efforts of the Indian delegate to the Human Rights Commission, Hansa Mehta, from “all men are born free and equal” to “all human beings are born free and equal” because that statement wasn’t obvious to all of the drafters in 1948.

So we’ve come a long way since then in our understanding of what human rights are and who they represent, who are protected by them, and how we apply those norms in our society today. And in today’s discussions, we’ll talk about what this has meant in practice. Our first panel will focus on the role of the United States and how concerns about human rights influence U.S. diplomacy and U.S. foreign policy. Our second panel will focus on what’s changed over the last 75 years, and in particular when it comes to some of the most important actors who influence respect for human rights in our international system and human rights issues that, quite frankly, the drafters of the UDHR could not even have imagined would come to be some of the most potent threats and opportunities facing humanity today.

So, without further ado, I want to introduce the moderator of our first panel, and he will then introduce our panelists for our first conversation on U.S. foreign policy. Most of you know Derek Mitchell, who served as the first U.S. ambassador to Burma in 22 years during a historic period in that country’s political transition. He’s served as principal deputy assistant secretary of defense for Asian and Pacific security affairs at DOD and most recently as president of the National Democratic Institute. You may not know that he worked as a senior fellow at CSIS here in this building for nearly eight years in the early 2000s — I guess not in this building, but at CSIS for a very long time. And we’re really
delighted that he has rejoined us as a nonresident senior advisor in the Office of the President.

So let me invite Derek and our panelists to the stage for our first conversation. Thank you. (Applause.)

(END.)