

Press Releases: Remarks at the 13th Annual Values Voter Summit

Remarks

Michael R. Pompeo

Secretary of State

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SECRETARY POMPEO: Good afternoon. That is an unbelievably warm welcome. It is wonderful to see so many patriots here who carry the torch of freedom forward. Thank you all for being here.

It was great, I heard Tony say too – I was glad, it sounded like there were a few more Marines than Army guys here. (Laughter.) But I am so privileged to have the opportunity to be here. There were some folks who didn't want me to come here today. I don't know if any of you read about that. But it seems to me only natural that an American Secretary of State would come to talk to you about America's values and interests. And I know that religious freedom is important to each of you, and it's important for me to be here today to talk

to you.

Thanks, Tony, for your kind introduction and for the opportunity to speak here today. I've known Tony as a fierce, courageous defender of America's essential freedoms, the thing that I do now each and every day as a Secretary of State. And I didn't know that Tony had a connection to the State Department until I was preparing for this. A few years ago, he was part of our Anti-Terrorism Assistance Program. And someone said that the dark was scared of him; I hope the terrorists were scared of him, too. (Laughter.) Thank you, Tony, for your important work.

This State Department under President Trump is fighting to make sure that American citizens and American interests come first in our foreign policy. (Applause.)

At the very heart of our mission is the preservation of human dignity. And this administration understands an eternal truth – that each person has an essential worth simply because he or she is human and having been created by God. And our Declaration of Independence enshrines that self-evident truth – we all know this – that each of us is endowed by our Creator with inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Whenever I say that, I am always reminded when I taught fifth-grade Sunday school with my wife, Susan, we were teaching them about faith, but we were talking about religious freedom in America and how we were so blessed to be able to go to that church and worship. And I talked to them, and I read that phrase to them, and one of the little fifth-grade boys raised his hand and said, "I especially like that pursuit of happiness part." (Laughter.)

These ideas come from our unwavering belief in the inalienable rights. It's what makes America so exceptional, so free, so prosperous – the greatest nation in the history of the world. Our calling as Americans is to preserve that, to protect it, to keep that ancient spark of wisdom in the laws of our own republic, and to do so as best we can all around the world.

President Trump, in a remarkable speech he gave in Warsaw, Poland, said that, "Above all, we value the dignity of every human life, we protect the rights of every person, and we share the hope of every soul to live in freedom."

For Americans, that's our birthright – freedom. But for many around the world, it's an aspiration. And each of us can do many things to help fulfill that aspiration. I think that sometimes here in America we take it for granted. Those of us who are believers don't see that in so many places in the world that simple thing, that belief that we have, is challenged. And I urge each of you never to hide it under a bushel, to understand – to understand how important it is that we speak about this, we speak about faith and freedom in a way that is candid and clear, and the best of what America has to offer.

When I came to the State Department, I talked about "swagger" and the State Department getting its swagger back. It's been mocked a little bit – indeed, by Kanye West. He had a song or something. I'm pretty unfamiliar with that

terrain. (Laughter.) But what I meant by that was what I just said. We have this incredible privilege to be citizens of the United States of America, to have the religious freedom and to build relationships around the world. It allows us to protect human dignity of our own people and advance it when that freedom is under assault.

I want our diplomats, those diplomats who are tasked with representing you all around the world, I want them to comfortably, unapologetically, and respectfully advance American ideals and interests in every corner of the world. (Applause.) And you should know that because we believe these principles are worth living by, we proudly raise our banner of self-government, freedom, and human dignity all across the world. We'll never accept a diminished role for America on the global stage. We're going to lead from the front. (Applause.)

Now, it's a little different from when I was a soldier. I am now a diplomat. I think you can see the change already. (Laughter.) Yes, you laughed just exactly right there. (Laughter.) My team, my diplomatic team, has responsibility on a couple of fronts. I want to talk to you about them. First is we need to make sure that America prospers here at home, so the work that we do abroad should be designed to support President Trump's efforts to make sure that America's economy is strong.

We all know that human dignity depends on work, and the opportunity to work is something that the State Department has a role in to bring people to America, to invest, to help create and grow this remarkable economy that is ours here in the United States. The Trump administration fights for jobs at home because we know that the ability of every man and woman to put their hand to labor is not just a matter for their pocket books. It's about human dignity and pride.

We also know – and this is what I want to focus on today – that we are ensuring human dignity by advancing one of our most cherished and indispensable liberties. It's enshrined in the First Amendment. It is our religious freedom. Since the earliest days of his presidency, President Trump has directed all of us in his administration to advance and defend religious freedom at home and abroad, because religious freedom is a universal, a God-given right, to which all people – all people – are entitled. (Applause.)

It is – religious freedom is also an essential building block for all free societies, and our founders knew this. It's a freedom that I care personally about, and I know you do as well. It's the one that drew me to serve my country in the United States Armed Forces. But sadly, today more than 80 percent of the global population lives in countries that place significant limitations on religious freedom. And I know it brings many of us heavy hearts to watch the ongoing persecution of Christians and other minorities in countries like the Islamic Republic of Iran. We are fighting for human dignity of the Iranian people by speaking the truth about the oppressive and corrupt regime that controls those people. Religious minorities in Iran are routinely imprisoned, stripped of their rights, kicked out of their jobs, and subject to many other abuses.

Earlier this year – I’m sure some of you saw this – there was a moving news segment on 20 Iranian Christians who made a dangerous journey outside of Iran to an undisclosed location. After years of gathering in secret, all they wanted was to spend a few days in a place, in a place where they could conduct a baptism ceremony without fear of reprisal. And so 20 of them secretly flew to a foreign country and rented a hotel swimming pool for some baptisms. One man said he had waited 10 years since his conversion for this very moment. This is the level of secrecy needed to be a Christian inside of Iran.

I could give you many more examples, examples of how Iranian people have been mistreated by a repressive, corrupt, and hypocritical regime for 40 years. As part of a larger persecution of the Sunni minority last year, one court sentenced four Sunnis to five years imprisonment for the crime of jogging, of all things. A Sufi Muslim man was hanged in June after a sham judicial process.

After President Trump withdrew from the flawed deal, he implemented a new strategy to force a change in the Iranian regime’s behavior. And part of this strategy is to make sure that the voices inside Iran crying out for accountability, justice, and religious freedom know that the United States stands with them. We stand with the Christians, the Jews, the Sufis, the Muslims, the Zoroastrians, the Baha’i, and all other faith groups in Iran who have had their human dignity violated by this regime. We know the importance of God-given right of all people to worship according to their conscience.

Another example is in China. Hundreds of thousands, and possibly millions, of Uighurs are held against their will in so-called re-education camps, where they’re forced to endure severe political indoctrination and other awful abuses. Their religious beliefs are decimated. And we’re concerned too about the intense new government crackdown on Christians in China, which includes heinous actions like closing churches, burning bibles, and ordering followers to sign papers renouncing their faith.

One of the most important things I think I can do in my role as Secretary of State is to speak to these issues. Tony referred to the first-ever Religious Freedom Ministerial that we held at the State Department.

Now, if you’re like me, you don’t know what a ministerial is. (Laughter.) Two years ago, I probably could not have told you. Let me try it this way. When I was a deacon at my church back home, if we were trying to confront a problem, we held a meeting. That’s what – it’s just a meeting. (Laughter.) But it was an important meeting. It was a meeting where representatives from over 80 countries attended a unique event to stand with the United States in our cause of defending the rights of all individuals to worship how they choose and believe what and how they want.

We let the world know that religious freedom mattered and that it is a fundamental human right, and the United States would expect them to honor that.

I must say, when the meeting kicked off, I didn’t know exactly what to

expect, but the response – the pent-up demand for this opportunity – was so overwhelming that we’re going to do it again next year. (Applause.) It – I hope it will become a tradition that is honored by decades of happening, and I hope to attend the 30th, 40th, and 50th ministerial. (Applause.)

We truly do. We envision this becoming – we envision this becoming a landmark gathering for the world. We didn’t just talk; we came up with plans, we helped countries that were challenged to set up institutions where religious freedom would be talked about and discussed, and if they were a little further along, to help them continue to develop that inside their own country. And most of all, we wanted to do this to set an example. It’s what the State Department can do best in representing each of you all around the world, making this nation the continued beacon – the beacon that says one’s right to worship their god is a fundamental freedom that every human being has and that America values this and will demand it.

We’re confident that our progress will continue because the State Department has been a lifelong champion for religious liberty. We’re blessed now to be quarterbacked by a good friend of mine – two Kansans now – Senator Sam Brownback, leading our religious freedom efforts. (Applause.)

As I close today, a couple thoughts. I want to tell you a final quick story about how we’re ensuring human dignity – by working to bring home Americans that have been unjustly held captive by other nations.

Far and away the greatest highlight to date of my job as Secretary of State was bringing home three Americans from captivity in North Korea. (Applause.) Thank you. Thank you.

It – it’s emotional still to speak about it. When Kim Dong-chul, Kim Hak-song, and Tony Kim got off our plane at about 2:30 a.m. at Andrews Air Force Base, their faces were bursting with tears of joy. They hugged and they wept with their families. And President Trump was on the tarmac to meet them. (Applause.)

I remember – I remember the trip well. I remember our – my hope and my prayers that we would be able to deliver these people home, and when they arrived at the airport, I was already aboard the plane and I saw them get out of the vehicle and they could walk and they appeared to be in reasonably good health. I wasn’t emotionally prepared for the moment, and even now as I speak out it – speak about it, it reminds me of the greatness of our nation.

On that flight, they scribbled out a note and you can see it if you go back and look at the video. One of them – one of the men handed me a little note card and I put it in my vest pocket as they were climbing down the stairway. As I got home that night with Susan, I pulled it out and on it – on that index card was Psalm 126, and it read as follows:

“When the Lord brought back the captives to Zion, we were like men who dreamed. Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy. Then it was said among the nations, ‘The Lord has done great things for them.’ The Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy.”

(Applause.)

Even as we sit here today in this beautiful hall, there are thousands of Christians and people of other faiths in North Korea and around the world like Kim Dong-chul who are praying for deliverance from captivity and from fear of persecution.

His deliverance gives us hope and energizes our prayers that all those mistreated for their faith around the world will endure and one day be free.

His story fuels the Trump administration's commitment to protect human dignity by ensuring that all those with the fire of faith in their hearts to be able to exercise their God-given rights.

There's another man you've likely heard of, Pastor Brunson. Let me say right now here we are sparing no effort to return Pastor Brunson home to the United States. The work is important. (Applause.) He – the work is important. He has been wrongly held, and his proper place is to be able to return here to once again practice his faith in our great nation. (Applause.)

Know that – know this: President Trump will never forget about our own, and that is one of the greatest American values of all.

On the day Pastor Brunson returns, just like the men I spoke of a bit ago, they also will be able to say that “the Lord has done great things for us,” and again our hearts will be filled with joy.

Thank you. May God bless you all. (Applause.)

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