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Remarks by Elizabeth Cheney

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Thank you very much, Mary, for that kind introduction. I want to say thank you also to Gonzalo [de Las Heras] my dinner partner. You are a terrific chairman of the board.

It really is a very special honor for me to be here and to be the recipient of the Foreign Policy Medal. It really is a very special honor to share this medal with two really wonderful women -- Jeanette Wagner and Anne-Marie Slaughter -- both of whom are role-models for little girls around the world. Anne-Marie Slaughter is a personal role-model for me. She was one of my professors at the University of Chicago, and I must say that I was not nervous tonight until I walked in and realized she might remember the grade she gave me.

But it really is a special honor. The goals and mission of Foreign Policy Association for the last 87 years are ones that I think all Americans can appreciate, and your efforts to educate not just New Yorkers but students all across the United States on foreign policy issues facing us, really make a big difference and we are all very grateful for the work you are doing.

I actually come from a family with a little foreign policy experience, and I mentioned to my dad that I was coming tonight and I was hoping to get some fatherly advice or some wise words of wisdom, but what he offered up was this: He said, Liz, the FPA is an important and influential group, so do not screw it up.

So I'll do my best, and I'm sure he will get a report.

We are living through historic times, so I'm really pleased to be here tonight to talk about the issue of the spread of democracy, particularly in the Middle East. But we are seeing democracy spread across the globe from Ukraine to Afghanistan to Georgia to Lebanon

to Iraq, and we really are privileged to be living in this moment which is characterized by images of brave people fighting for their freedom and fighting for their future.

I think we have known since September 11th that we have to support these forces of freedom; that it has become really the calling and the duty of our generation and the generations that will come after. As President Bush said in his second inaugural address, “For as long as whole regions simmer in resentment and tyranny, prone to ideologies that feed hatred and excuse murder, violence will gather and multiply in destructive power, and cross the most defended borders and raise a mortal threat. There is only one force of history that can break the rein of hatred and resentment and expose the pretensions of tyrants, and renew hopes of the descent and tolerate, and that is the force of human freedom.”

For 60 years before September 11th, we believed that we had to choose either freedom or stability, either democracy or security. We believed, especially in the case of the Arab world that we could either uphold our principles or achieve our policies. We know now that we were wrong. By purchasing stability at the price of liberty we achieved neither. We now know that the survival of liberty in our own land depends upon the spread of freedom across the globe. This means that our vital interests and our deepest beliefs are now one. It is our policy to seek and support democratic movements in every culture and every nation.

These movements are gaining ground. Last December, millions of Afghans, both men and women who had been oppressed by the Taliban, walked for miles, forded streams, stood in the snow just to cast a ballot, their first vote as a free people.

In December, the Palestinian people also elected a new president and now have a new chance for peace and freedom and to live side by side with Israel in security.

In January, of course, millions of Iraqis defied terrorist threats and delivered a clarion call for freedom. Individual Iraqis risked their lives to protect the rights of others; one policeman threw his body on a suicide bomber, so his fellow citizens could vote. And in Basra, a 90-year-old man emerged from the polling place leaning on the arm of his grandson, and he said that he proclaimed that today was the day of his birth and a new Iraq.

In February, Lebanon’s former Prime Minister, Rafik Hariri, was assassinated, and the Lebanese people rose up to offer an end to Syria’s murderous occupation of their country. They are now in the midst of their first true free elections in decades.

This year Saudi Arabia conducted its first municipal elections in more than 40 years, which was an important and historic step. Equally important was the assurance the Saudi foreign minister has given that women should be able to vote in the next Saudi elections, and let’s hope that when they go to the polls to cast those ballots, they will be allowed to drive themselves there.

Last month witnessed a historic announcement by President Mubarak that the Egyptian constitution should be amended to allow multi-party presidential elections. And as the Egyptian government works to implement that promise, the United States has called on them to allow international observers to protect the freedom of assembly and freedom of speech, and to guarantee opposition candidates access to the media, and to guard against a repeat of the violent incidents that marked the May 25th constitutional referendum.

The images of democratic progress, and some of its setbacks, now careen across the globe in seconds. We all watched the Ukrainians gather night after night demanding an end to election abuses and the right to choose their own leader. We have all been inspired by the images streamed out of Afghanistan and Iraq and Lebanon.

The day before the Iraqi people voted, if you had been watching TV that afternoon, you would have seen the Iraqi Election Commissioner hold a press conference. He held up two ballots. The first he showed had two boxes, --one said "Yes" and one said "No" -- and "Yes" had already been checked. He said this was the ballot Saddam Hussein used to use. The second ballot he held up had over 100 names on it. He said, "This is the ballot we use in a free Iraq."

This simple act, I believe, fundamentally changed the playing field for every other Arab leader contemplating elections. The world is watching and will no longer look the other way as governments hold sham elections or offer their people false choices. These images have many things in common, but one of the most important is that they speak to the lifting of fear. A few months ago the citizens of Beirut would lower their voices to a whisper if they were going to talk about Syrian intelligence forces at all. The assassination of Rafik Hariri has stirred this brave and proud people to rise up in peaceful revolt. The Lebanese want their liberty; they have a memory of a rich parliamentary life, and a decent balance of power that gave all the communities of this creative land a stake in their country.

In the face of this storm, the Syrian occupiers and their soldiers and secret service officers have had no choice but to begin to dismantle their apparatus of terror. Lebanon is no longer a satellite country, and Syria should now complete its obligations under UN resolution 1559 and withdraw all of its intelligence forces from Lebanon.

In Syria itself, people are also conquering their fear. They are attempting to reclaim the political life of their country and to revitalize it. Writers and human rights activists, Arabs and Kurds have stepped forth to assert their right to a life free of terror's reach, free of arbitrary arrest and detention. Syrians who have long lived in the grip of tyranny can see the world around them. To their east a new Iraq is being born, free of tyranny and one man rule. To their west, a valiant Lebanese people are braving police rule to secure liberty. There is no iron law that can consign a population as enlightened and as steeped in currents of the world as Syria's to authoritarian rule.

We are truly living through a dramatic shift in the political landscape of the Middle East. But this moment of transformation is fragile. And freedom has many enemies, including

the government of Iran, which is the world's leading sponsor of terror. But even the unelected leaders in Iran must see that the world around them is changing. They must know that the energy of reform is building, and that one day it will inspire their people to stand up and demand their liberty and rights, and America will stand with the Iranian people.

Freedom's enemies are also fighting today in places in like Iraq and Lebanon, and they are fighting with everything they have, because they know that the triumph of democracy and freedom will signal their end. And at every turn, their terrorist acts are met with brave resistance. On June 2nd in Beirut, a young and talented and courageous journalist named Samir Kasir was murdered when he turned on the ignition to his car. It was a reminder of tyranny's reach and terror's ways, and Beirut and the whole world grieved for him. His colleagues paid a special tribute to him. They silently raised their pens in the air, in a defiant assertion that they will never be silenced by terror.

As these brave men and women struggle for a better future for their countries, America is standing with them. Through our diplomacy we are urging leaders to head their people's call for reform, and we are making clear that the quality and nature of our relationships will be affected by the extent to which leaders respect the rights and freedoms of their citizens.

In addition to our traditional assistance programs underway in many countries across the region, we have provided close to 300 million dollars through the Middle East Partnership Initiative, which supports economic, political, and educational reform and the empowerment of women. These funds are supporting over 140 programs in 14 countries, and our projects include things like training Lebanese election observers and polling organizations, teaching Yemeni and Moroccan women to read, training new political parties in Egypt, empowering women by providing campaign skills training and business internships, providing over 2 million children's books translated into Arabic to fourth and fifth graders in Jordan, Lebanon, and Bahrain.

We funded Freedom House's first ever study of the status of women's freedom in the Arab world, which was just published last week, and I highly commend it; it is really a remarkable piece of work by Freedom House. They did focus groups for the first time ever in many of the countries across the region. We are training journalists and new media outlets in the Palestinian territories and Lebanon and Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia, and we are training members of parliament across the region.

In addition to these bilateral efforts, we are also working with our G-8 partners and with partners in the region to create the Forum for the Future, which in an unprecedented international venue to amplify and support the voices of reform that are redefining the region. This is a small sample of the new and innovative projects that America is supporting across the broader Middle East.

Some have, many have actually I think, begun to draw comparisons between the lifting of fear and the spread of freedom in the Arab world and what happened in the spring time of

freedom in Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall. There are many similarities and there are more than a few differences. But, I want to talk for just a few moments this evening about what I think is the direct parallel between these two moments.

The spark of freedom in countries under Soviet domination was in many ways lit and nurtured by Poland's Solidarity Movement, a movement of courageous freedom fighters who were willing to risk everything to confront a totalitarian regime, so they could control their own destiny and live in freedom.

In the broader Middle East today, I believe it is women who are playing this role. Democracy is spreading across the region, and the single most important factor in this drive for liberty is the courage and activism of women. In Morocco last year women's groups called for and won changes to the centuries-old family code or Mudawana. Morocco's family code, like many in the Arab world, denied equal protections to women in areas like citizenship, child custody, marriage and divorce. The women of Morocco mobilized more than a million of their fellow citizens to petition for changes to the code. The new family code is now in place, and it demonstrates to the world that Islamic values and human rights go hand in hand.

In Iraq, 87 women have been elected to the new parliament. This is 32 percent, which I'm guessing is among the highest of any national legislature in the world. Iraqi women like Raja al-Khuzai and Zena [inaudible] have fought and successfully defeated attempts, like resolution 137, to impose Sharia as the only source of law in the new Iraq.

In Jordan, where a woman was recently named minister of planning, brave women including Queen Rania are fighting the horrific practice of honor killings, and they are working to ensure that laws impose criminal penalties for murder in cases where male relatives kills their sisters or daughters.

In Egypt, a country which has led the region on many issues of emancipation, women are now in the forefront of today's call for democracy. On May 25th, the day of the constitutional referendum, a number of women opposition members were targeted, beaten up and humiliated by thugs who broke up opposition rallies. One woman, a lawyer, showed tremendous bravery and personal courage and stunned her attackers, by picking herself back up and marching into the mob of attackers to identify her assailant to the police.

In Kuwait, a brave leader named Roula al-Dashti, has led the movement to secure the right of Kuwait's women to vote. Roula spoke out to the men leading her country, reminded them that women are Kuwaiti too, and she met with the leaders at Kuwait University and asked them to support her cause. The young men leading the student union agreed. They brought hundreds of their members to the women's rallies. They joined the women sitting in the gallery of the Kuwaiti parliament on the day of the historic vote. On the morning after the vote, having tasted the power of democracy, they called Roula to say, that was great! What's next?

The slogan of the Kuwaiti women is one leaders of every country in the Arab world and every country across the globe should remember -- half a democracy is not a democracy. Women are on the frontlines of the battle of ideas and they are also the battlefield itself. It is over the issues of women's emancipation, women's equality, women's role in society that the fight has been joined. Women have the most to gain from the defeat of extremist ideology, and the most to lose by its domination. Their strength, courage, and sense of purpose should give inspiration to us all.

I am, as Mary said, the mother of three daughters and one baby boy. Like all parents everywhere I want my children to grow up knowing they can be anything they want to be if they work hard enough. It would never occur to any of my daughters as they run around a soccer field or round third base when they were playing softball, or compete with the boys in their classroom in any number of ways, that they are anything less than equal. Knowing my daughters, they probably feel somewhat superior actually.

But I think that we all wish that every little boy or girl around the world could grow up with this sense of limitless opportunity. Our enemies are offering a vision of the world, where women are no more than slaves or chattel, where fathers or brothers can murder their female relatives for violating the family honor, in which little girls can't go to school and can be forced to marry at the age of 9, or 10, or 11.

But the women of the Middle East are not standing for this. They are fighting to turn their nation's faces towards the future, and America is proud and honored to stand with them.

Finally, let me say a word about the notion that democracy can't take hold in the Arab world, the argument that this is the imposition of America's values. The idea that the Arab world is not ready for democracy is racist, and we must reject it. Democracy and science and the emancipation of women are mankind's inheritance. Any person, anywhere, when given the choice to awakened in the middle of the night by a knock on the door from the secret police, or raising their children in freedom, will chose freedom, every time.

And yes, America is fighting for these values, and we are doing it with every tool we have. Through our armed forces, through our diplomacy, through assistance programs and we are paying dearly, the highest price any nation can pay, in the lives of their brave service men and women. Their sacrifice has brought liberation to over 50 million people in the last three years. We pay this price because the survival of our freedom depends upon it. Free nations do not harbor terrorists who slaughter innocent people in the name of evil. At the end of the day, we all, every one of us, want to live in freedom. Not because we are American or Egyptian or Iraqi or Afghan or Saudi or Lebanese or Kuwaiti. We want to live in freedom because we are human beings and it is our birthright.

Thank you very much.