

Good afternoon.

This is a special moment for me. My family first came to Connecticut in 1680, settling in what is now Fairfield, Easton and Weston. We have lived in Connecticut continuously for 325 years; no honor could mean more to my family and me. Thank you.

I want to talk with you for a few minutes about human rights and about an important issue that I hope will engage you.

Human rights is an appropriate topic for this University because Connecticut has pioneered the theory and practice of protecting individual freedom.

In 1639, the Fundamental Orders of Connecticut were adopted affirming that the “foundation of authority is the free consent of the people.” Two years before the Declaration of Independence, the town of Mansfield, along with others across the state, asserted the “natural rights” of Connecticut’s citizens in defiance of the British Crown.

As early as 1774, Connecticut began to restrict the trade of slaves. In 1840, a number of Connecticut citizens worked to shelter and free slaves seized here on the *Amistad*.

In 1866, Connecticut was the first state to ratify the 14th amendment guaranteeing equal protection under the law. In 1869, the Connecticut Women’s Suffrage Association was born, and in 1943, the General Assembly established the Inter-Racial Commission, the nation’s first civil rights agency.

Through this University, Connecticut continues to issue a call and a challenge for our nation to live up to the high aspiration for human rights articulated in our country’s charter documents.

I am enormously impressed with the depth and breath of the University’s commitment to human rights: The Human Rights Institute, the Dodd Research Center, the Gladstein and UNESCO chairs in human rights, an undergraduate minor, an active outreach program to public schools, a robust research agenda, and conferences drawing world leaders.

I am pleased to see that human rights study runs across schools, departments, and disciplines; that it embraces both civil and political as well as economic and social rights; that it puts U.S. rights issues in comparative perspective; and that it examines fundamental and structural dimensions of human rights abuses.

The University of Connecticut stands tall among universities around the world as a beacon for scholarship, teaching, and principled action in the human rights field.

Fired by the honorable tradition of this State and the inspiration of this University, we must join together to fulfill our obligation for leadership in protecting human security, individual dignity, and opportunity for all.

It is natural at this joyous moment to be thinking about the professional challenges ahead, opened and expanded by your studies here and the degrees you are receiving today. But you may also be reflecting on how to fashion a balanced life – career, family, personal avocations, and civic engagement.

I can bear witness to the importance of volunteer service and engagement in issues advocacy. I feel blessed to have had interesting and challenging jobs, but my deepest satisfaction has come from my 20-year involvement with Human Rights Watch.

HRW works in 70 countries around the world bringing to light human rights abuses from Rwanda and Sierra Leone to Iraq and Egypt; from North Korea and China to Columbia and Cuba. It also attends to America's own shortcomings: appalling prison conditions; indefinite detentions and abusive practices at U.S.-run facilities in Guantanamo Bay and Iraq; the "extraordinary rendition" of terrorism suspects to countries where torture is common.

Human Rights Watch is emblematic of civil society's growing importance over the past fifty years. By "civil society," I mean non-governmental groups that do careful research and monitoring to expose problems, propose specific remedies rooted in law and reality, and pioneer models of direct service.

Amnesty International, Physicians for Human Rights, CARE, Doctors Without Borders, Save the Children – the honor role is wide and deep. These global groups support and draw strength from a burgeoning number of local civil society organizations the Moscow Helsinki Group, Mexico's Sin Fronteras, Nigeria's Access to Justice.

All over the world, people like you and me are joining together to influence governments and confront problems, from the environment to AIDS to human rights violations, directly through the power of civil society.

These groups play an indispensable role in the policy process and at the same time advance the prospects of creating and sustaining healthy democracies around the world. They give voice to ordinary citizens, check governmental excesses, fill in service gaps, and prod international agencies to establish norms that express humankind's highest aspirations for justice and fairness.

And so here is my bottom-line message to you: Get involved – you can make a difference. Financial contributions are important and absolutely essential, but they are only the beginning. Time, expertise, emotional commitment: that's where the real action is. Opportunities abound whether you live in Fairfield or Chicago, New Dehli or Nairobi, in Moscow or Madrid, in Cairo or Caracas.

What we do as volunteers matters, but so does the exercise of our political influence. In my concluding minutes, I want to talk about one issue that needs your attention: the new International Criminal Court that came into existence in 2002.

The architecture for the worldwide protection of human rights is pretty much in place: agreements like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the Convention Against Torture give a basis for robust action.

The challenge ahead is enforcement of these rights and punishment for those who violate them. A vibrant system of international justice is emerging, with the new International Criminal Court at its center.

The Court has jurisdiction over the worst human rights abuses: genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity -- acts like torture, enslavement, or forced disappearances committed on a massive scale causing great suffering. The attacks of September 11 -- the deliberate murder of large numbers of civilians -- would have made Osama bin Laden subject to international criminal prosecution had the Court come into existence a year earlier.

2005 is a crucial year in the Court's early history. The ICC is currently investigating its first three cases: the atrocities in Northern Uganda committed by the Lord's Resistance Army, and systematic acts of murder and mutilation by warring groups in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Just last month, the U. N. Security Council asked this new Court to investigate 51 individuals suspected of committing crimes against humanity in the Darfur region of Sudan, crimes that Secretary of State Powell called "genocide." Although no indictments have been made in those three cases, the ICC's investigations have already brought greater pressure to end these conflicts and have focused international attention on the abuses.

It may surprise you that the United States has not ratified the Treaty of Rome, which created the International Criminal Court, and that it is not part of the ICC. It opposes the Court for fear that United States citizens would be brought to trial under it -- an unlikely possibility because the Treaty states that the Court will assume jurisdiction only when a country is unable or unwilling to conduct an investigation of its own.

But America's refusal to join its allies like Britain, Canada, France, and Germany, and ninety-four other nations, will not stop the Court from going forward. This is the most important new international institution since the founding of the United Nations, not only because it may well deter future Pol Pots or Pinochets, but because it is causing nations around the world to reform their own laws and bring them into compliance with international standards.

Because the United States has a functioning criminal justice system capable of addressing allegations of genocide, war crimes, or crimes against humanity, U.S. citizens, military personnel, and government officials have nothing to fear from the

International Criminal Court. Dictators, corrupt armies, and armed groups in failing states do.

The United States should not undermine the ICC, which can bring justice to hundreds of thousands of victims and families who do not have the privilege of such recourse in their home countries.

A recent national poll by the Chicago Council on Foreign Affairs reports that 69% of Americans support the ICC – a strong majority. Why then is our government out of step with public opinion? It may be that we as citizens have not raised the issue forcefully enough or made it a priority among other important issues we care about.

I urge you to educate yourself about the Court and to speak up in favor of American ratification of the Treaty of Rome. The United States government should get in step with the American people, who understand that our failure to join the Court puts us on the wrong side of history.

You can tell that I feel passionately about human rights. But there are other issues worthy of your attention, so I conclude with this simple observation.

Being engaged in community organizations, issue advocacy groups, as well as religious and service institutions, will add value to your lives and contribute to our search for a more just and humane world at peace. And as you feel the difference you are making, you will take heart that the deadly forces of apathy, fatalism, and despair can be turned back by the power of individuals coming together directly, unmediated by governments.

That is the way of the future in our race against global warming; against the ravages of AIDS; against the growth of terrorist networks; and against the potential of social explosion, as rising expectations clash with the stubborn persistence of poverty.

The most powerful force for good in our time is the worldwide mobilization of citizens to act directly: sometimes to supplement government action, sometimes to resist it; most often to bring compassion and competence, hope and determination, when formal mechanisms fail.

I hope that you will all join in.