

Remarks by Her Excellency Ellen Johnson Sirleaf

President of the Republic of Liberia

On the Occasion of a joint program sponsored by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), with the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the International Republican Institute (IRI), the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), hosted by Senator Chris Coons (D-DE) with the participation of Representative Ed Royce (R-CA) Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs

Committee

Monday, 25 September at 4:30 PM

U.S. Capitol

Congressional Visitor Center Auditorium

Washington, DC

Vice President William Taylor,

Ambassador Johnnie Carson,

Liberia's champion, **Senator Chris Coons,**

Chairman Ed Royce, maybe no one in the US Congress fought harder to secure Liberia's peace, than you. A grateful nation is in your debt,

US Ambassador to Liberia, Christine Elder,

My long-time colleagues, and event sponsors, the **United States Institute of Peace, the National Democratic Institute, the International Republican Institute, the National Endowment for Democracy, The International Foundation for Electoral Systems;** thank you for hosting this program.

It is your organizations that have helped to build our democratic character and institutions, and I hope that many of you will be with us next month to witness our historic political transition.

Honorable Members of Congress, members of the Trump administration, distinguished diplomats, friends of Africa, friends of Liberia, ladies and gentlemen;

On the 15th of March, 2006, at 2 o'clock, I stood before a Joint Meeting of Congress. It was barely two months after my inauguration as president of the Republic of Liberia, and the first democratically elected female head of state on the African continent.

I came here, to Capitol Hill, to the Peoples' House of the United States, to say **Thank You** for helping us to secure Liberia's peace and democracy after nearly 30 years of sustained conflict.

Today, the 25th of September 2017, I return to the Peoples' House, as I close out my two terms of elected office. In fifteen days, the Liberian people will go to the polls to elect a new president, and 73 members of the Liberian legislature.

It will be the first time since 1944 that political power will be transferred peacefully and democratically from one president to another.

The election will signal the irreversible course that Liberia has embarked upon to sustain its peace and consolidate its young democracy. Indeed, the march of democracy is unstoppable, in Liberia and on the African continent.

As I said in my speech last week at the UN General Assembly, Liberia's transformation was powered by a world community that made a shared commitment to deliver peace to a country and a sub-region beset by civil conflict and cross border destabilization. The UN and its partner nations were of one mind, and from that global unity, a new Liberian democratic state was born.

But it was the United States of America, through the leadership of the United States Congress, bipartisan, and bicameral, and with the support of successive US administrations, that guided the international effort.

If I could, I would walk door-to-door, to all 535 Congressional offices, to say thank you. But I cannot. I have run out of time, and I am mindful of my age. So this speech, kindly my dear friends, will have to do.

Ladies and gentlemen,

When I took office on 26 January 2006, Liberia was a failed state. Our citizens suffered under the total collapse of services and physical infrastructure. The streetlights and the water pipes in Monrovia were stripped bare, robbed for their raw materials, and our roads were impassable.

From the ashes of war, we rebuilt.

We brought Liberia back into the community of nations, reactivated relationships with the Bretton Woods' institutions, and renegotiated relief from a \$ 4.7 billion debt burden. We returned fiscal discipline to government, rationalized our bureaucracy, and put in place new laws and regulations that helped open the economy to foreign direct investment.

We returned our children to school, started to re-build our healthcare infrastructure, focusing on maternal and child health and welfare. We established mechanisms to coordinate the generous assistance from NGOs and private donors. We reformed our civil service, improving a system that was overburdened and under resourced, and invested in the next generation of leaders. We innovated in education, capacity building, public-private partnerships, and regional integration.

Then, in 2014, Liberia was struck by a terrifying virus, an unseen enemy more fearsome than war. Over four thousand Liberians lost their lives. Thousands of children were orphaned. Livelihoods were destroyed. Our healthcare infrastructure collapsed. Concurrently, global

commodity prices declined sharply. These twin shocks knocked us off our feet. Our growth rate, which had reached 8.7% in 2013, plummeted to zero.

But Liberians are a strong and resilient people.

And today, our recovery is on course. The economic growth rate is now at 3% and climbing.

Some 1.5 million children are in school, and new programs have been put in place to accelerate quality education. The lights are coming back on. Electricity has reached several communities in the capital city, and is being expanded to rural areas. A record 872 kilometers of roads have been paved, improving farmers' access to markets. Our healthcare system is being rebuilt, focusing on training community healthcare workers. Young people, powered by new technology, are embracing a culture of entrepreneurship.

We left our mark. We have maintained the peace. We have built a foundation for democracy, economic development, and the rule of law. We have given a voice and hope to the market women, the girl child, and to civil society. The next president will inherit an empowered people. Africa now knows what a women president can do.

Liberia's transformation was achieved in partnership with the United States, under the leadership of four remarkable US Ambassadors, Don Booth, Linda Thomas Greenfield, Deborah Malac and Christine Elder. And also, under the stewardship of the United States Agency for International

Development (USAID). I would like to recognize the presence of Acting Administrator Cheryl Anderson and, Administrator Mark Green, who will join us later.

The US supported the rebuilding of the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL), the training of police, of immigration and coast guard. You provided technical assistance to strengthen our rule of law, and the integrity institutions to fight corruption. You supported education and capacity building, and invested in healthcare delivery and sustainable agriculture practices. You helped us to rebuild our infrastructure. And you returned the US Peace Corps to Liberia.

On October 5th, 2015, Liberia achieved its most proud moment in the bilateral relationship, as we signed a compact with the US Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC).

Barely a decade away from conflict, we transitioned to a partner in development. It is through the MCC, in collaboration with other development partners, that the Mt. Coffee Hydro-Electric Power Plant came alive, a facility that was dormant for over a decade.

It was the US Congress, with your “power of the purse,” which singled Liberia out to be one of the largest recipients per capita of foreign assistance on the African continent.

Dear Friends,

I salute your presidents who provided exceptional leadership and showed bravery when Liberia needed it most.

It was President George W. Bush who in August 2003, told the world, “Enough is enough” and demanded that war lord Charles Taylor leave Liberia, so peace could be reclaimed. He sent in the

United States Marines to support an African peacekeeping force to stop the killing. He enabled the peace and created the space for democracy. It was in this opening which permitted my candidacy and, ultimately, my presidency.

This was achieved in no small part through the leadership in the Congress of Chairman Ed Royce and his senior staff, Tom Sheehy.

It was President Barack Obama, who, at the height of our health emergency in September 2014 took the bold decision, in the face of fierce domestic opposition, to deploy the men and women of the United States military to build a logistical bridge which helped Liberia to fight and contain the disease.

With the support of the international community, brave healthcare workers, and resilient Liberian communities our global health security was protected.

Today, we are a country and a West African sub-region, benefiting from a renewed commitment to building capacity for health emergency response.

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has embraced democracy as integral to development. Last year, when The Gambian president refused to cede to the demands of his people after losing an election, it was ECOWAS, under Liberia's chairmanship, which assured the peaceful departure of an entrenched leader, and the return to constitutional democracy.

In June, I relinquished my position as Chair of ECOWAS, and in a few weeks, I will preside over the election of a new Liberian leader. I have served faithfully my two terms. I respect our constitution, and am making way for a new leadership.

All of that, made possible by you, My Friends.

Liberia's "love of liberty" was inherited from the United States of America, from your values of democratic governance, respect for human rights, for the rule of law, and for equal opportunity for all, regardless of race, creed or religion. You are the beacon of light from across the Atlantic. Even in our darkest days, our people held onto hope, believing that America would be there for them, and that if they worked hard enough, the American dream would take root in Liberia.

America's leadership is needed today, more than ever as the world faces new challenges, including transnational threats, rogue nations equipped with the most sophisticated weapons, millions of stateless families fleeing their homelands in search of security and economic opportunity, and our planet screaming for us to protect it.

My friends, do not let the leadership void in our changing world be filled by the disrupters. The dream of America is alive in the hearts of all people who strive for freedom and for a better life for their families. Continue to be its champions.

And never forget what is possible – what we have done together as a united world community with a US policy grounded in bi-partisan cooperation. And remember, the Liberian people who were willing to risk it all for democracy, for peace, and the chance to see their children live proud, productive and dignified lives.

Thank you!