

Remarks by Senator Christopher Coons Accepting the 2018 Charles T. Manatt Democracy Award:

Thank you to Don, for the kind introduction and to the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) for this honor. At the start, I would like to acknowledge the service of President Bill Sweeney. Under Bill's leadership over the last decade, IFES has played a leading role in efforts to fight for democratic rights, promote transparent and accountable governance, and empower marginalized people. Bill, we are grateful for your work.

I also want to recognize Liz Sidell for working with my staff over the years and for being the bridge between Congress and IFES' work to advance democratic principles around the world.

I would also like to thank the sponsors of this evening's event and all the supporters of IFES here tonight, particularly one of my good friends and earliest supporters, Alicia Smith, who is both a co-chair of tonight's event, and a Delawarean.

Thanks also to two of my dear friends for joining me this evening – Administrator Mark Green and Madame President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. I have deep admiration and respect for you both, and it is truly an honor to accept this award alongside you.

As many of us here have learned through our work over the years, democracy is difficult, dangerous, and uncertain. Democracy is not a destination, but rather a constant work in progress – a push and pull that reminds us that progress does not always move in a straight line.

Democracy is facing its most serious test in decades around the world today. On nearly every continent, we are seeing increased polarization, attacks on journalists and the press, rising nativism, disregard for the rule of law, the stifling of dissent, and the erosion of rights and freedoms for marginalized people.

According to Freedom House, 2018 marks the 12th consecutive year of decline in global freedom as countries with democratic backsliding outnumbered those with registered gains. Even in countries once considered promising democratic success stories, authoritarians have risen.

As a global community, our institutions and democratic processes are being tested like never before, but the news isn't all bad.

On the positive side of the ledger, there are a number of bright spots around the world that are worth acknowledging. The people of the Gambia, a country I visited in August 2017, took a positive step forward by electing President Barrow, and a successful regional effort helped pressure long-time dictator Yahyah Jammeh to respect the will of the Gambian people and step down after 22 years. It's not a coincidence that President Sirleaf played an important role in that regional effort.

In February, South Africa made a significant, positive turn with the transition to a new President after the South African people demanded change and rejected President Jacob Zuma, ending nearly nine years of rule marred by corruption scandals and fiscal mismanagement. I just had the honor of meeting President Ramaphosa on Sunday.

Due to a stunning electoral upset in May, for the first time in Malaysia's post-independence history, the opposition is in power. The election of former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad ended the six-decades-long one-party hegemony in Malaysia.

Just this past Sunday, citizens in the Maldives rejected the incumbent president, Abdulla Yameen, in an extraordinary rebuke to a leader who jailed political opponents and judges, and drew his country closer to China during a tumultuous five-year term.

The two award recipients here tonight, who are champions for freedom and democracy, have both contributed significantly to the democratic gains we have made and continue to make around the world.

Administrator Mark Green has dedicated his life to advancing democratic principles and good governance from Tanzania to Myanmar. And his work is guided by his moral clarity and a belief in a strong U.S. role in the world.

Congressman Green is someone who, until last year, I had only known about and admired from afar because we did not serve in Congress at the same time. As a Congressman, Mark crafted one of the most effective development tools in the U.S. government toolbox to encourage political and economic reforms through his work establishing the Millennium Challenge Corporation. His leadership on MCC, PEPEFAR, and his service as Ambassador to Tanzania is well-known and well-regarded by all.

What I have most admired about Mark in my work with him over the last year as we have hammered out legislation and found ways to compromise on our differences, is that he has successfully advanced the Trump Administration's agenda and vision, while remaining willing to listen to input from a little old Democrat like me.

Mark and I may come from different political parties, but we share the same core beliefs about the United States' role and responsibility in the world. Mark was kind enough to speak last year at the U.S. Global Leadership Coalition Summit I host annually in Delaware about his work in Africa, development finance, and humanitarian values. This is a valuable discussion each year about the positive impact global affairs programs have on communities across America, and we are excited to host this year's conference on November 16 in Wilmington. I welcome each of you to participate in this year's discussion.

You all know, and Mark knows, that democracy is not something we can ever take for granted. It is not guaranteed. Today, we must continue the important work of strengthening institutions bit by bit and empowering democratic leaders of the future.

Something Mark said at the Myanmar Civil Society Summit this year really struck me. He said, "Our experience also tells us that one election does not make a democracy. One election by itself is simply a milestone in the journey to vibrant democracy, real democracy."

This is something President Sirleaf knows well.

In January of this year, Liberia experienced its first transfer of power from one democratically elected president to another in over seven decades when President Sirleaf respected Liberia's Constitution, the rule of law, and the will of the Liberian people in her decision to step down after two terms as Liberia's president.

Under President Sirleaf's leadership, Liberia emerged from war to become a champion of democracy and peace in West Africa. The day President Sirleaf became president there was not only no electricity in the country, but there was no electricity in her Presidential offices, period. Liberia was in tatters. But when I met President Sirleaf seven years ago, I was struck by her passion for her people and commitment to reuniting and rebuilding her nation.

I was in Liberia on the occasion of her second inauguration. Liberia had just held free and fair national elections. President Sirleaf said, "the second election is the true test of will of the people, and the institutions they have worked together to create. If the second election works, it establishes a pattern, a tradition, a routine of democracy that subsequent elections can follow."

In the audience before President Sirleaf that day were many opposition leaders who only days before had been resisting the results of the election and who had fought as leaders of factions of the civil war. What President Sirleaf did that day, I will never forget. She spoke of the importance of democracy, of unity, of healing and reconciliation and then stepped forward and made it real.

She called up the opposition leaders to step forward. By embracing her, they would demonstrate to the people of Liberia that democracy had worked, the election was over, and the nation would move forward. There was tension and silence as she stood there with her arms open. Slowly, the opposition leaders, challenged by the courage of her stance, came forward and embraced her.

When others might have celebrated their own electoral triumph, or tried to relegate their opponents to the sidelines, she elevated them. She knew the job she was elected to do could not be done alone and that building a Liberia that is for all Liberians that is united, free, and equal would take the dedication of many, including her most recent opponents.

Last October, when the people of Liberia chose her successor, Liberia built upon the democratic tradition that President Sirleaf demonstrated at her inauguration. President Sirleaf didn't just talk the talk, she walked it, and she lived it. As a result, she was awarded the 2017 Ibrahim Prize for Achievement in African Leadership.

While elections are not enough to guarantee democracy, without free and fair elections, democracy does not exist. In the absence of a vehicle for the people to express their will, and to hold the elected officials accountable, there's no hope of achieving the freedom promised by democracy.

And that's why the work you do at IFES is so vital. For over thirty years in 145 countries around the world, IFES has worked to empower millions of people to exercise their fundamental democratic right to decide how they are governed through free and fair elections.

But as President Sirleaf's example demonstrates, the fight for democracy does not end at the polls. Just because a country executes a vote, with all the machinery, does not mean it is a democracy. Elections are just a prerequisite.

An engaged citizenry, a robust civil society, a capable and independent judiciary, a functional opposition, a vibrant free press, and a society grounded in the rule of law and fundamental freedoms are critical ingredients to a healthy democracy. These things don't happen overnight. Cultivating true democracy requires smart and sustained investments.

This also applies here at home. Senator James Lankford and I, on a bipartisan basis, worked hard to secure funding for state and local election machinery in March to ensure we are better prepared and equipped to defend against a repeated attack on our own elections. Senator Lankford and Senator Amy Klobuchar also introduced a bipartisan bill, the Secure Elections Act, that would strengthen America's election cybersecurity and protect against the possibility of future foreign interference.

As we fight to advance democracy around the world, we can't forget that the way the United States responds to attacks on our own democracy matters. I will never forget a Ukrainian government official who approached me at the Halifax International Security Forum in early 2017. I was there with my dear friend and colleague John McCain. The Ukrainian official said, "Your election was attacked by the Russians. If you won't defend your own democracy, how can we ever count on you to defend ours?"

At this particular moment in history, it is critical that the United States does not relinquish our historic role in promoting our values of freedom, human rights, democracy, and prosperity both around the world and here at home. John McCain reminded me of that all the time. We have to make a choice – will we show the world that we will keep our promises? Will we live up to our ideals?

This summer, we celebrated what would have been Nelson Mandela's 100th birthday on July 18th. Together, as we continue the dangerous, difficult, and uncertain work of sustaining democracy and preserving the progress of humanity, and as we weather these challenges together as an international community, let us find inspiration in Nelson Mandela's life and legacy. Let us remember that on his long walk to freedom and justice, Nelson Mandela taught the need to study not only those who we agree with, but also those who we disagree with, and to be willing to compromise and find common ground.

I still believe in Nelson Mandela's vision for the world: a world governed by democracy, equality, justice, and peace, and cooperation for the common good. We still have a lot of work to do together, as a global community, to get there.

Tonight, I accept this award for all of you, and all those who are engaged in this important work daily, and who have sacrificed everything in the march toward democracy. Thank you.