

**The International Republican Institute
2006 Freedom Dinner and Award Ceremony
Honoring First Lady Laura Bush and President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf
Thursday, September 21, 2006
Remarks by Lorne Craner, President of IRI**

Good evening. I'm Lorne Craner, I am President of the International Republican Institute, and I want to welcome all of you to IRI's 2006 Freedom Dinner.

We are honored this evening to be joined by the First Lady of the United States and the President of Liberia. By action and example, both are encouraging democracy around the world. We at IRI are deeply grateful for their hard work to advance liberty, particularly liberty for women.

As Mrs. Bush has stated, "no society can prosper if half its population is not allowed to contribute to its progress. Educated and empowered women are vital to democracy."

Well over the last two years, IRI, with Executive Vice President Judy Van Rest as the driving force, has undertaken a focused effort to advance the role of women in building their countries' democracies.

Now I could tell you about IRI's Women's Democracy Network. However, I think you'll best understand what we're trying to achieve if I introduce you to four of those involved in our Women's Democracy Network.

Of all nations, the most stark difference for women over the last six years has been in Afghanistan, a country liberated by this administration in 2001. But as President Bush noted at IRI's last dinner, the hard work of building democracy comes after freedom begins. In Afghanistan, women like Saima Kogiani now have the task of building democracy. Forced by civil war to flee Kabul University in 1993, Saima began teaching at a school for girls in her native province of Ningarhar. When the Taliban banned education for girls, Saima courageously continued teaching them in her own house. After the 2001 liberation, she attended the Loya Jirga that restarted Afghanistan's democratic institutions, worked with the new human rights commission and assisted President Karzai's presidential campaign.

In 2005, she ran for parliament as an independent, which was when IRI first crossed path with her. As a member of parliament, she often expresses her strong optimism in her country's future, while saying that "women will have to continue to struggle until they become equal." IRI continues to work with Saima through our assistance to a coalition of independent parliamentarians. They and Saima are proving to be a force for a forward looking Afghanistan. Saima, thank you for bringing democracy to Afghanistan.

Maria Elena Cruz Urrutia was the only woman on Guatemala's city council when she was elected in 2001. Now a leader in her political party, she began attending IRI seminars and training sessions in 2000, and credits IRI with encouraging her to run for office. She currently serves as the liaison between Guatemala's city council and the country's federal government, and

is the founder and president of Guatemala's association for women in municipal government. She also finds time to train fellow Guatemalans in IRI programs. Maria Elena, thank you for bringing democracy to Guatemala.

Banzragch Delgermaa and IRI first worked together in 1986, when she ran for and won a seat in Mongolia's parliament. An attorney, she chaired her parliament's human rights committee and was General Secretary of Mongolia's Democratic Party. She remains active in the party, but now chairs the multi-partisan Partnership of Women in Politics and Governance, which promotes the candidacies of women and their leadership in civil society. Delgermaa, thank you for bringing democracy to Mongolia.

Ran al-Hajaia is one of Jordan's most prominent women leaders. From 2003 until earlier this year, she was the appointed mayor of al-Hassa in southern Jordan, where she solved a number of longstanding environmental problems. She has been instrumental in encouraging other Jordanian women to become more politically active. She plans to seek elected office and credits IRI with helping her make the decision to run. Rana, thank you for bringing democracy to Jordan.

I'm sometimes asked why I think America can export democracy. When you meet people like Saima, Maria Elena, Delgermaa, Rana and President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, you realize we don't need to export democracy. The desire for freedom is universal. All we need to do is to assist brave women – and men -- as they build their democracies. IRI is able to assist because of the generosity of everyone here tonight. Our most innovative programs are paid for with private funds. As you heard earlier from Peter, this evening is the most successful fundraiser in IRI's history. Your generosity ensures that IRI can continue our cutting edge efforts to help brave women and men build their own democracies.

In all these endeavors, we are led by Senator John McCain. Whether flying off Cuba during the missile crisis, keeping faith with his fellow aviators in Hanoi, or standing up for what's right in the U.S. senate, John McCain's life story is about freedom. Ladies and gentlemen, Senator John McCain.