

**The International Republican Institute
2006 Freedom Dinner and Award Ceremony
Honoring First Lady Laura Bush and President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf
Thursday, September 21, 2006
Award Presentations, by Senator McCain**

(Presentation to First Lady Laura Bush)

Thank you, Ed, for that kind introduction. On behalf of IRI, I'd like to express our profound thanks to Ed Whitacre for AT&T's leadership on this year's IRI Freedom Dinner. This is IRI's most successful fundraising dinner ever, and a great deal of the credit for this success goes to Ed and his team. I'd like to express thanks also to those who have chaired the past dinners and who continue to support IRI so generously, including FedEx, the New York Stock Exchange, and Mike Armstrong, who is with us tonight. Thank you to Peter Madigan, as always, and welcome to all of our guests, including those who have joined us from Afghanistan, Guatemala, Jordan and Mongolia. And welcome, of course, to our two Freedom Award honorees, First Lady Laura Bush and President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf.

Laura Bush's tenure as First Lady has become synonymous with issues of global concern, from education to health care, from women's rights to democracy. Mrs. Bush has become the face of America's commitment to the developing world, highlighting our country's efforts to end pandemic diseases like malaria and HIV/AIDS. In fact, just yesterday, she announced a public-private partnership between the U.S. government and several foundations and corporations to bring clean water to 10 million Africans by 2010.

And in her extensive travels, Mrs. Bush has seen first hand the struggles of brave women around the world to build democracies in lands where it is lacking. In Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, Central and South America, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East, Mrs. Bush has met with women leaders and spoken about the need to empower women.

The First Lady has spoken frequently about what she calls the "pillars of democracy," including free press and free speech, and she has urged democracy activities to press for these values. Mrs. Bush has stressed education and women's participation in the economic and political life of their countries as keys to fostering civic participation in new democracies. And she has noted that the future of young democracies depends on literate, educated, and healthy children, the true leaders of tomorrow.

To further the positive linkage between education and democracy, Mrs. Bush earlier this week hosted the White House Conference on Global Literacy in New York. While there she also hosted a discussion aimed at building support for a Security Council resolution that would address the terrible situation ongoing in Burma. It is fitting that Laura Bush, an individual so committed to freedom and democracy, would take on the cause of a country where the situation is so bleak. Aung San Suu Kyi herself received IRI's Freedom Award, in 1999.

That is not the First Lady's only connection to the International Republican Institute. Earlier this year, she led the U.S. delegation to the presidential inauguration of our other honoree tonight, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, and last year she hosted a meeting of women activists from around the world at the State Department. This meeting provided the inspiration for IRI's Women's Democracy Network, which aims to provide female activists with opportunities to share their experiences, exchange ideas, and engage in leadership training.

Laura Bush is perhaps America's greatest ambassador: an envoy to the world and a champion of global democracy. It is with deep pleasure and distinct honor that I present Mrs. Laura Bush, our First Lady, with the 2006 IRI Freedom Award.

(Presentation to President Johnson-Sirleaf)

Thank you, Lorne, for that introduction. To present the second of our 2006 IRI Freedom Awards to President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf is a singular honor for me. My admiration for this great leader knows no bounds, and I know that my regard is shared by all in this room. She is truly an inspiration to every individual around the world who aspires to live in freedom.

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf told a recent Joint Session of our Congress that when she was a small girl growing up in the countryside, swimming and fishing with twine made from palm trees, no one would have picked her out as the future President of her country. That may be true, but few have worked harder over a longer period for the freedom of their country. President Johnson Sirleaf has returned to Liberia not once but four times in what has become a lifelong effort to build a better homeland.

Educated in Monrovia, Ms. Johnson Sirleaf went to college in Wisconsin before returning home to work for then-President William Tubman. Tubman had ruled as a dictator for twenty five years when, in 1969, Ms. Johnson Sirleaf publicly labeled her country a "kleptocracy." A friend wisely suggested that she resume her studies outside the country.

She studied economics in Colorado and earned a Masters in Public Administration from Harvard before returning to Liberia for a second time, rising to become Minister of Finance. After Samuel Doe launched his successful coup in 1980, she was forced into exile. But she was not to be denied in her efforts to return.

Ms. Johnson Sirleaf went back to Liberia in 1985 in order to launch her candidacy for the national Senate. Upon arrival she was arrested, and was freed only when the United States Congress threatened to cut off assistance to Liberia. While on the campaign trail she criticized Samuel Doe's rule, and her outspokenness landed her jail again. She later described these as the worst moments of her life and said that, "Through the Grace of Almighty God and the mercy of others, I escaped, and found refuge" in the United States.

As war raged in her homeland over the next twelve years, Ms. Johnson Sirleaf worked as an economist and for a time headed the United Nations Development Program's Africa Bureau. While she initially supported Charles Taylor's rebellion against the Samuel Doe regime, Ms. Johnson Sirleaf quickly became disillusioned by his corrupt and brutal rule. In 1997, she returned home for the fourth time in order to challenge Taylor in the presidential elections. She lost that election, but remained in Liberia to work on governance and reform issues.

Last year, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf ran for President for the second time. With an unforgettable campaign slogan - "All the men have failed Liberia; let's try a woman" - she became Africa's first elected female leader. Now known as Africa's "Iron Woman," President Johnson Sirleaf has reduced corruption, increased government revenue, restored relations with international lenders, and launched a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. After so many years of sorrow and tragedy, the people of Liberia have a leader in whom they can take great pride.

President Johnson Sirleaf, you inspire women and girls around the world with your lifelong quest to bring democracy to your country. You move all Americans to greater courage and commitment to the cause of democracy. You have our deep gratitude for all you have done, and admiration for all you are. It is my great honor to present you with the International Republican Institute's 2006 Freedom Award.