

“Evangelicals and International Engagement”

Remarks before the Council of Foreign Relations

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Beginning in the mid 1990s a new faith-based movement burst unexpectedly onto the international stage -- a movement devoted to advancing human rights through the machinery of American foreign policy.

That movement has pressed a series of legislative initiatives, to wit:

- 1) The International Religious Freedom Act, passed in 1998, which is the most sweeping human rights statute on the books and an example of effective American soft power
- 2) The Trafficking Victims Protection Act, passed in 2000, which pledges US leadership to end the brutal trafficking of persons into various forms of servitude.
- 3) The Sudan Peace Act, passed in 2002, which led to the signing of an historic peace pact that may end the most devastating civil war of the past two decades.

Central to this movement are American evangelicals, heretofore associated with

domestic skirmishes in the *culture wars*, but now increasingly engaged in international humanitarian and human rights causes. Evangelicals provided the grassroots muscle behind the unlikely alliances that advanced the above laws. To capture this phenomenon we can imagine the following news headlines:

- Evangelicals and Jews team up for landmark religious freedom legislation
- Conservative churches and the Congressional Black Caucus campaign against Sudanese atrocities
- Born-again leaders join feminists to curb global sex trafficking
- To these we can add strong evangelical backing for initiatives on Third World debt relief and AIDS funding for Africa.

What accounts for this international activism by evangelicals?

The answer can be traced to two developments that were moving in parallel fashion, like tributaries of a river, until they finally converged.

The first development is the tectonic shift of the globe's Christian population to the developing world. At least 60%, and perhaps 70%, of all evangelical believers live in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Many pentecostal and evangelical congregations, therefore, are nested amidst poverty, violence, exploitation, and persecution.

Through global communications, travel, and international development networks, American evangelicals increasingly hear about, and identify with, these fellow Christians.

Indeed, in evangelical circles one routinely hears of “the suffering church” abroad, of 200 million Christians persecuted for their faith. These suffering Christians, and especially their indigenous leaders, are viewed as role models of Christian fidelity. Not surprisingly, some 70% of evangelical elites say that combating religious persecution should be a priority of American foreign policy. Beyond fellow believers, however, American religionists are awakening *more generally* to the afflictions visited on the world’s vulnerable, fostering sympathy for their plight. A recent national poll found lay evangelicals as a group more likely than the general public to say that the U.S. should do more to protect human rights abroad.

The second development enables evangelicals to act politically on these concerns. Animated by distress over the drift of American culture, evangelicals have built a booming network of alternative schools, colleges, national associations, publishing houses, direct-mail groups, para-church organizations, and broadcast ministries. As Robert Putnam observed, American evangelicals have built the “largest, best-organized grassroots” social networks of the last quarter century.

As these two developments connect, the social networks of the evangelical world, born initially of domestic conservative impulses, are increasingly put in service of human rights and justice concerns normally associated with progressive politics – a striking

development indeed.

Our two evangelical guests here today, and the organizations they represent, exemplify this trend. Richard Land has been a major player on all of the initiatives mentioned here, and the 15 million member SBC has put its networks behind him, in one case sending packets on religious persecution to all 40,000 member congregations and in another passing a resolution condemning the regime in Khartoum on the eve of the House vote for the Sudan Peace Act. Gary Haugen, in turn, through his organization's daring investigations and interventions, built a vital field record that provided the compelling case for trafficking legislation.

My argument, therefore, is that the new faith-based movement is filling a void in human rights advocacy, raising issues previously slighted -- or insufficiently pressed -- by secular groups, the prestige press, and the foreign policy establishment.

What do I mean by this? Let's look at the major cases presented here.

Prior to 1998 religious freedom was the step child of human rights. Human Rights groups slighted or sometimes even dismissed reports of persecution, especially against Christians. In addition, American diplomats were often ignorant of key religious communities in their countries. That has changed through the scaffolding built by the

new law, which makes promotion of religious freedom a basic aim of American foreign policy. Because our foreign service must investigate and report on the status of religious freedom in every country, we now have better information about religious developments on the ground that involve opportunities or perils to policy makers.

Second, the interfaith movement plucked the tragedy of Sudan from the backwaters of international concern. Long before the tragedy in Darfur, Christian solidarity activists and their Jewish allies were warning about the nature of the Khartoum regime, whose racial and religious ideology led to a war on an African civilization, with 2 million dead and five million displaced over the past two decades. On Darfur, the Bush Administration is doing far more than the UN, with aggressive efforts by USAID to get relief supplies to those displaced. Part of this response stems from the mobilization of evangelicals on Sudan, including a vigorous alliance in Bush's hometown of Midland, Texas.

Finally, the trafficking of women and children into grotesque sexual exploitation and forced labor metastasized in the freewheeling globalization of the 1990s. Because of the new law, and its tough enforcement by the Trafficking in Persons Office at the State Department, countries around the world are changing laws and practices, crime syndicates have been broken up, and emerging norms are taking shape. Women and

children are literally being set free.

These are no mean accomplishments. The lesson is that freeing God's children, at least to many religious activists, increasingly *mandates* their participation as citizens of the globe's indispensable nation.