Remarks at the 2015 Global Diaspora Week Launch Event
"Partnering for Global Impact"

Remarks
John Kerry
Secretary of State
Loy Henderson Auditorium
Washington, DC
October 9, 2015

Thank you very much. Thank you. Thank you very, very much. I apologize for being a little bit late, and if this is indeed the moment you’ve all been waiting for, you’re leading very drab lives. (Laughter.) I’m really happy to be here with all of you. Thank you very much.

Welcome to the launch of the Global Diaspora Week here at the State Department. We’re very proud of this effort and it’s a very important effort in many, many ways. I think that you will all agree that when it comes to elevating the role of public-private partnerships in our diplomacy, the fellow who just introduced me is the gold standard for doing that.

And together with – (applause). Where’d he go? He’s over here somewhere. There he is – Thomas. Thank you very much. And Drew O’Brien has just returned from Azerbaijan. He is our leader of this effort at the Office of Global Partnerships, and he helped to launch, together with Thomas, the Fishackathon, which puts coders to work promoting sustainable fisheries around the world. And he’s also working on creating – they are also working on creating opportunities for young women and girls in Rwanda through our Women in Science Girls STEAM Camp. And he’s been a leader in bringing more veterans into the State Department through our VIP Fellowship. So Thomas, thank you for working with Drew and
providing this very, very important leadership. You have raised everybody’s expectations, and all of us look forward to a lot more important work together.

I also want to recognize our partners at USAID, the International Diaspora Engagement Alliance, and Angélique Kidjo, who is one of the most eloquent and forceful advocates for human rights and the empowerment of girls. Thank you, all of you, for being here and being part of this. (Applause.)

It’s more than appropriate that we’re gathering here in this hall, which is named the Loy Henderson hall, one of our most capable diplomats, a man whose first tour brought him originally to Ireland as vice consul. And I say this because as someone who represented Massachusetts for decades, I hold a very special place for the contributions that Irish Americans have made to both of our countries.

And I will never forget standing with my former Senate colleague, Ted Kennedy, as we looked out his office window at the so-called “Golden Stairs” of the Boston Harbor, where all eight of his great-grandparents first set foot in America. And they traveled from Ireland on boats that were known as “coffin ships” because so many died in the crossing. And Ted was raised on his grandfather’s stories, where those who survived the coffin ships had to then contend with employers who hung signs out in their stores saying the “Irish need not apply” for jobs.

So Ted put to use the lessons that he learned from his grandfather. In fact, they became part of who he was – which was one of the great fighters for social justice and for all those who come to our shores in search of opportunity and liberty, and hope, freedom.

Frankly, it would be nice if that same lesson were fully understood by those who believe that America’s future is now somehow at risk because we reflect such a vast mixture of backgrounds and types. There are some who suggest that no society as culturally diverse as ours can be as efficient or productive as one where most people are of the same religion or the same race. But those who believe that miss the essential point – America is at its best not about groups working for themselves; it’s about free individuals
becoming the best that they can be and, in so doing, making America together all that it is able to be.

Our diversity is a strength, not a weakness. And in today’s interconnected world, let me tell you: It is also a strategic imperative. This era requires much more nimble institutions, more agile foreign policy. And part of that agility comes from engaging diaspora communities. And the reasons why are pretty simple.

First, we live in a world where the number of people living outside their country of origin has nearly tripled to more than 230 million. The United States has the largest number of diaspora members of any country; more than 60 million Americans are first or second-generation immigrants. And at the same time, we’ve gone from an era where power lived almost exclusively in old establishment hierarchies to an era where power lives in networks, and that is evidence in these objects that are pointing at me, recording all that we are doing. (Laughter.) That’s where power is in today’s world – in smartphones, and iPads, and in people’s ability to communicate 24/7 and be in touch.

Second, diaspora communities are often the prime movers in responding to important events, whether we’re talking about a natural disaster or a terror attack, a financial crisis, or even emerging business opportunities. If something big happens in Ukraine or Japan or Mexico or Israel or Nigeria, the diaspora is going to be talking and thinking about it almost before anybody else.

And the 21st century demands a more inclusive foreign policy, and diaspora communities are often the first people to know about an issue and bring it to the attention of people in positions of power. They are often the first to debate an issue or to put out options; they are the first to have an impact on the ground – the most direct and the fastest.

Third, quite simply, in today’s world, partnerships matter. No country – not even the United States – can go it alone. So we depend on our international allies and our partners for a lot, and our diaspora communities can help make those partnerships work. The big reason for that is the
leaders of these communities are some of the best cultural ambassadors that we could ask for.

But you don’t need to take my word for it. Just look at the headlines this week: New York Times: “Approval of the TPP is Vital for Continued U.S. Power in Asia.” From The Telegraph: “Hurricane Joaquin brings flooding to south east USA.” From The Washington Post: “The refugee crisis is here to stay.”

When you look down the list of challenges that we face – the headlines every single day, from natural disasters to promoting economic growth to the humanitarian crisis in the Middle East – one thing is absolutely clear: Diaspora communities are helping to meet each and every one of those challenges.

After Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines, leaders from the Asia Pacific diaspora worked together to support the relief efforts. The U.S.-Philippines Society helped organize a concert to raise funds for relief, and the Vietnamese American community gave generously to the cause.

After the devastating earthquake in Nepal just this spring, Nepali American leaders in business and philanthropy launched campaigns on social media and raised tens of thousands of dollars for clothing, medical equipment, food, tents, and other emergency supplies.

After the outbreak of Ebola, the Sierra Leone, Liberian, and Guinean diaspora community immediately rallied to turn the tide against the disease by sending urgently needed medical supplies, food, and money, and often by communicating to people directly to institute best practices and avoid spreading the disease.

Diaspora communities are also helping to build shared prosperity and empower women entrepreneurs. The U.S.-Pakistan Women’s Council helps to promote small business development in Pakistan. And the Calvert Foundation, together with USAID and the State Department, just launched an initiative that will make it easier for the Indian American diaspora to invest in small and medium-sized businesses back home.
Meanwhile, the State Department is working with our partners to support investment, small businesses, and education in Latin America through the Raices Initiative, which means roots, and it is appropriate because it is precisely from that kind of effort, from the seeds that are planted by that effort, that prosperity ultimately grows.

We are all connected all the time now. It’s part of what’s made the world smaller and it presses in on people to some degree. But for most people, I think they see the opportunity and they see the benefit of being in touch and staying in touch and communicating the right messages.

We see this entrepreneurial spirit in the response of Syrian Americans to the horrific crisis in the Middle East. Doctors from the Syrian American Medical Society have lent their time and talent to support clinics in the Za’atari camp in Jordan, which I visited during my first year as Secretary. And they are providing counseling and social services for women and children wherever possible in Syria. And they are finding ways to reach people who would suffer or die without their help. And that is the very definition of courage and citizenship under fire.

Last month, I announced that the United States would raise its refugee admissions to 100,000 in 2017 in response to the Syrian migration crisis. It is rightly a point of pride that the American people have a history of welcoming those who are in urgent need of a safe haven. That’s part of who we are. It’s the American DNA. It’s how most of this country came to be here. But we need the help of the diaspora communities today, and everyone in this room, we need your help to integrate refugees not only from Syria, but from all the other regions of conflict, from all those – for all those people who are fortunate enough to be able to find their way, through our policies, through our welcome, to come to the United States and share in this opportunity.

So in closing, let me be pretty direct: Immigrants built America. And immigrants continue to make America what it is today. (Applause.) And it is an irony that many people just don’t seem to understand that or be willing to pay respect to our own history. It is precisely the right to be different – in background, race, culture, and tongue – that brings the American people
together and makes us one. I repeat: It is the right to be different that defines the United States of America.

And this event, this celebration of diaspora communities and of our diversity is a beautiful and meaningful reflection of that truth.

We should never forget that what makes America different from almost every other nation is not a common bloodline, or a common religion, or a common sectarian identity, or a common ideology, or a common heritage. What makes us different is that we are united by an uncommon idea, that we are all created equal and all endowed with inalienable rights. (Applause.) That’s different and that is special.

To paraphrase Walt Whitman, each of us has a right to take his or her place in the American procession; each has the right to fulfill his or her potential, no matter who they are or how long they’ve been in the country or how much money they have. This is the principle that defines and, most importantly, elevates America, and I am proud that our diaspora communities haven’t just heeded that call – they are leading the charge and living it every single day.

Thank you very much. (Applause.)