

**Remarks by Ambassador Power at the  
UN Foundation Global Leadership Dinner, October 19, 2016**

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***Remarks by Ambassador Samantha Power, U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations, at the UN Foundation Global Leadership Dinner, October 19, 2016***

Thank you so much. It is a profound honor to have been asked by President Obama to accept this award on his behalf. He asked me to convey his deep gratitude for this recognition and for the critically important work of the UN Foundation, as well as his sincere regrets that he could not be here with you tonight. I cannot vouch for what he will be doing at 9 p.m. (Laughter.)

As some of you know, back in 2005, I went to work for then-Senator Obama as a foreign policy advisor – taking what, at the time, I thought would be a brief leave of absence from my job as an academic. A lot of our earliest conversations focused on the question of how America could lead differently in the world – not only through our national actions and policies, but also in the way that we engaged multilateral actors, and especially, the United Nations. Then-Senator Obama believed adamantly – to his core – that, to tackle the great challenges of our time, we have to be willing to exercise our unparalleled national capabilities, while simultaneously being able to build global coalitions to complement these efforts, to multiply the impact of our national capabilities.

And even as someone who has had the privilege of serving in President Obama's Administration since day one – in watching tonight's video tribute, I was struck by how consistently he has put that theory into practice over the last eight years. Whether that is by rallying the international community to stop the spread of a deadly virus like Ebola, or to defeat a deadly terrorist group like ISIL; whether that is by pressing countries to do their share in responding to the greatest refugee crisis since the Second World War, or by persuading governments to contribute more to the UN peacekeeping missions that can help curb the violence driving so much of this displacement; whether that is by leading by example in our commitments to cut greenhouse gas emissions – which will preserve our planet for our grandchildren, and our grandchildren's grandchildren – or by paying our dues, in full and on time, to the UN, which depends on our contributions to carry out its life-saving work; whether that is by putting his political capital on the line to seek a diplomatic solution to Iran's illicit nuclear weapons program, or by reforming our failed embargo policy on Cuba. Put simply, the President has walked the walk on international engagement.

I could go on at length about why I think the President's approach has not only been good for the United States, but also good for the world. I hope you could as well. But instead I want to focus the remainder of my remarks tonight on an issue that is at the forefront of many of our minds. We meet, as Kathy said earlier, at a very unique moment. For the first time in the seven-decade history of the UN, a new UN Secretary-General and a new American President will take office at roughly the same time.

And as with all transitions of this magnitude, there is a great deal of uncertainty – as well as a sense of new possibility. While I cannot speak about the U.S. election, at this celebration of the UN Foundation and all of its wonderful and generous supporters, I thought I would share some reflections on the transition coming at the United Nations.

Many of us, including – I presume – some of you here tonight, had high hopes that the UN would select the first-ever woman Secretary-General. (Applause.) A few high hopes. Having had the privilege of serving as the U.S. Ambassador to the UN for the last three and a half years, I certainly understand

why so many people wanted to see this happen. Just consider the numbers at the UN in 2016. Of the 193 UN Member States in the UN, only 37 have women as their permanent representatives. That is less than one in five. Or consider the fact that of the five countries that hold a permanent seat on the UN Security Council – China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States – only one of those five countries, the U.S., has ever appointed a woman permanent representative.

Now, these numbers matter. Because what people see when they look at who is sitting in the Security Council, or in the UN General Assembly, or behind the placard that says UN Secretary-General – helps set their expectations for what's possible. What people see matters. But the flipside is also true. When young women and girls drop by the Security Council today on their UN tours, they see a circle of men with a single outlier, who happens to be me, for now. And they start – potentially, anyway – to internalize that as normal. We don't want girls – or boys, for that matter – to see it as normal for women to not have a seat at that table, or any other table. (Applause.) We want them to see that horseshoe and any similar table for what it is: an imbalance that must be corrected. We want them to see it like the group of kids I played soccer with not that long ago in Mexico City – kids who were taking part in a program that builds the confidence and self-esteem of girls from neighborhoods ravaged by violence and domestic abuse. I asked those girls to guess how many of the 193 ambassadors at the UN were women. A hundred, one said. Eighty, another guessed. When I told them that there were just 37 women, they gasped collectively. One girl exclaimed, "That's crazy!" (Laughter.) She's right. That's crazy! We need more people to recognize that – and to change it. And this will come in national cultures and national systems, and then it will take form at the United Nations, which is a pretty decent reflection of where things stand around the world.

Of course, it's not just numbers that are the problem. It's also the hidden and, at times, overt discrimination. I want to just give you one example. The former Permanent Representative of Jordan to the UN, a dear friend of mine, Dina Kawar, recalled not that long ago that when she would discuss the Secretary-General race with her colleagues, they would say – many of them – that they really hoped to see a woman Secretary-General. But then they would add the caveat, almost inevitably, "but just make sure that she is competent." "As long as she is competent," they added. Now, what this is implicitly suggesting is that one has to be extra careful of all the incompetent women diplomats out there who had coasted to positions of authority without skills or know-how, and who somehow might slip through the cracks and become UN Secretary-General. (Laughter.) What are the odds of that? We wondered, Dina and I and a few others, why our colleagues never felt the need to add this qualifier when talking about the male candidates in the race.

The UN is a thoroughly fascinating place to work – in part because, as I stressed, it often reflects the injustices and inequalities out in the real world – a world in which it is still acceptable in some places for parents to take their daughters out of middle school, and force them to marry men three or four times her age; a world where some countries continue to have laws that prevent women and girls from inheriting land or other property; and a world where women are almost always paid less than men for doing the same work.

Against this backdrop – a relatively bleak backdrop that I've offered – it is not hard to understand why some people feel let down that a woman was not chosen as the next UN Secretary-General.

Nevertheless, I think all of us need to step back and look at what has just taken place at the creaky institution of the United Nations. Some have been actually quick to conclude that the wrong choice to lead the UN was made – simply because among António Guterres' many extraordinary qualities, one of them is not that he is a woman. (Laughter.) Others have claimed that members of the UN Security Council made a cynical choice rooted in discrimination against the women candidates who were in the race.

The problem with these assumptions is that they risk replicating a similar bias to the ones that we are working very hard to eliminate – we cannot judge the suitability of a candidate based on his or her gender. (Applause.)

An important goal for us – and I know many of you out there – in this race was to do everything in our power to create for the first time in the long history of the UN a level playing field, where men and women could compete on equal footing – based on the qualities that are critical to being an effective Secretary-General operating in an increasingly complex, violent, and unstable world – qualities like impartiality, experience, judgment, management, skills, independence. And I think we made important strides this year in that direction. Seven of the 13 candidates for Secretary-General were women – that is more than double the number of women who had ever been considered for the position of Secretary-General in the previous 70 years put together. The selection process was more inclusive and more transparent than any that has come before, though there certainly remains significant room for improvement. And for the very first time, interestingly, the male candidates in the race – all candidates – felt compelled to set out concrete proposals for how they would promote women's rights and equality if they were elected.

Now – let's be real here – were some countries' votes influenced by gender bias? Almost certainly, yes. Would some of the candidates who were not chosen – including some of the women candidates – have made an excellent Secretary-General? Absolutely.

After all, the person chosen to become the world's next Secretary-General, though, brings a remarkable record. He is the first person ever chosen to have served as both a head of state and to have run a UN agency, which he did for 10 years. He is very unusual, António Guterres, in being equally comfortable hauling heads of state, summoning them to their better angels, and sitting on the dirt floor of a tent in a refugee camp. I think the scorecard the Secretary-General-elect uses for himself is also refreshingly simple. If you hear him talk, he asks now about his past performance – and he will ask, I know, about his performance as Secretary-General – simply, have I used my position to improve the lives of real people, particularly the most vulnerable among us? That's a very important question.

And we know the Secretary-General is taking the helm at a time of virtually unprecedented challenge; whether it's the 65 million people displaced from their homes; monstrous terrorist groups like Boko Haram and ISIL spreading their hateful ideologies, targeting civilians; the rise in inequality. And, as we know here today in New York after the hottest September on record – we had the highest temperature in our city today, 83 degrees on October 19. And it just keeps happening.

We cannot solve the problems that I've just described, or any of the others that are on your mind, without empowering women – because, as President Obama has repeatedly pointed out, "You cannot leave half of your population behind and expect that you are going to succeed." This seems almost too obvious to point out, but we must keep repeating it. We must keep insisting on policies that reflect it, because in too many places women and girls are still being left behind. We know countries that do a better job of educating girls are, on average, wealthier, healthier, more democratic, and more stable. And yet more than 62 million girls are still out of school worldwide. We know when women are given opportunities to pursue careers and earn equal pay for equal work, entire societies are lifted up. And yet the UN's most recent Africa Development Report estimates that Sub-Saharan Africa continues to lose around \$95 billion per year due to gender inequality. We know that when women are empowered to take place in peace processes, efforts to reach compromise and find solutions to deadly conflicts are more likely to succeed and the agreements reached are more likely to last. And yet show me a Syrian or a South Sudanese woman who is being given a real seat at the table in resolving her country's horrific civil war today. These are not problems that any Secretary-General – woman or man – can

solve alone.

Let me conclude. In 1945, some 50 nations sent delegations to San Francisco to negotiate the drafting of the UN Charter. Only six countries of the 50 sent women delegates who – according to the United States’ sole female representative – were mostly relegated to what were dubbed “suitably feminine fields,” such as social and cultural rights. When two women delegates arrived in San Francisco from the United Kingdom, they were greeted by reporters who asked them how it felt to be women delegates. “We are not ‘women delegates,’” one of them responded. “We are delegates of our country and ministers of our government.”

Those women were among the delegates in San Francisco who drafted and adopted a UN Charter that, in its very second paragraph, affirms “the equal rights of men and women.” Yet what is striking, for all the progress made since that time, is just how unequal many playing fields continue to be. We saw that in the Secretary-General’s race, in which women candidates were asked similar questions as those British women delegates back in 1945; and we see it in the profound injustices, biases, and abuses that too many women and girls continue to endure simply because of their gender.

President Obama has made this cause his own. As the son of a remarkable single mother and the father of two amazing daughters, he speaks about this cause, this issue, in truly deep, personal terms. He said recently, “The idea that my daughters wouldn’t have the same opportunities as somebody’s sons – well, that’s unacceptable. That is not acceptable,” he said. He knows – we all know – how much work we have left to do. And as I close tonight, let me convey his deep and personal thanks to you all for all you have done and all you will continue to do to carry this essential cause forward.

I thank you.