

"Reconstructing Afghanistan: Freedom In Crisis": John V. Hanford III Testimony

January 29, 2003 AMBASSADOR HANFORD: Good morning and welcome. Please pardon my voice. I'm going to try not to sneeze on the first two rows down here. Though we are only at the beginning of our labors today, I find the very fact that this forum is being convened, a fact which would have been inconceivable just two years ago, to be a sign of tremendous encouragement. My staff and I over at the State Department greatly appreciate the good work and sound thinking that the Commission and the George Washington University Law School have put into today's forum. I especially want to commend the Commission staff, which has shown great dedication in designing and organizing the events today. This is just the sort of creative labor that independent bodies like the Commission so often excel at, and by its fruits, we are all enriched. As mentioned a moment ago, while I serve as an ex-officio member of the Commission, my day job at the Commission is that of representing our government's commitment to religious freedom as a core element of U.S. foreign policy. We do this because the American people revere religious liberty, but we also do it because we view religious freedom as the birthright of every human being and as the cornerstone of human dignity. This is why we advocate for every person, without respect to ethnicity, nationality or religion, and this is also why so many international covenants and instruments guarantee religious freedom. America's Presidents, from our first, to our current leader, have also affirmed this as a principle of our people and as a policy of our government. Over 200 years ago, President George Washington, for whom this university is named, said, "I beg you will be persuaded that no one would be more zealous than myself to establish effectual barriers against the horrors of spiritual tyranny and every species of religious persecution." And in the words of President Bush, "Religious freedom is the first freedom of the human soul, the right to speak the words that God places in our mouths. We must stand for that freedom in our country. We must speak for that freedom in the world." Perhaps even more to the point of today's conference, we promote religious freedom because it is the cornerstone of democracy and of social stability. It is our view that no country, Afghanistan included, can move successfully toward a stable democracy without a firm commitment to religious freedom. Indeed, a government that denies this fundamental right has rejected the very premise of democracy; that is, that governments are constituted to serve people, not the other way around. It is no surprise that religion-based terrorism flourishes where religious intolerance is widespread. By the same token, where governments protect and citizens value religious freedom, extremism finds no warrant. I know that many of us here are tremendously heartened at the prospects of Afghanistan today. Last year, the State Department listed seven regimes as the most severe violators of religious liberty around the world. Afghanistan, arguably, led that unfortunate list. This year, Afghanistan moves off that list and, instead, our hope is that we will see now Afghanistan moving rapidly toward a new noble list, one comprising those nations of the world that protect freedom and promote justice. Just as the presence of severe violations of religious freedom anticipated the Taliban's many other depredations in the late 1990s, I know many of us hope that a new serious respect for religious freedom will anticipate many other blessings in the new Afghanistan. Just as the eyes of the world looked with pain on Afghanistan under the Taliban, I believe the eyes of the world now look with hope toward Afghanistan and toward the ongoing work of many of you in this room today. Finally, let me say that, while it took just a short walk for me to be a part of this meeting this morning, I want to acknowledge and pay tribute to those of you who took a much more arduous journey to be here today, not just in thousands of miles, but in pain, sacrifice, perseverance against great opposition and through great trial. I want to honor those of you who work on the front lines for Afghanistan's future, though I know the greater honor will come to you from the millions of Afghan citizens who come to know a better life through your labors. It's a privilege for us to be with you and working with you today, and please be assured of our encouragement, our support and our prayers as you undertake this noble task. Thank you.