

December 17, 2003: Commissioner inaccurately quoted in The Weekly Standard

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WASHINGTON - The Weekly Standard published an article in its December 22 edition in which U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Commissioner Nina Shea was quoted as having made a statement regarding Islam and democracy. This quote is inaccurate, according to Commissioner Shea. Moreover, Shea's interview does not reflect the views of the Commission, which is on record in reports, op-eds, and press releases as repeatedly stressing the compatibility of Islam and democracy and human rights. "We greatly value the contribution Commissioner Shea is making to the work of the Commission and look forward to her contribution in the future. She has published extensively on issues of freedom of religion and belief, and her support of this principle, so critical to the work of the Commission, is unquestioned," said USCIRF Chair Michael K. Young. Below is the text of her letter to The Weekly Standard: Letters To the Editor: "The Muddle of the Moderate Muslim," December 22, 2003, abridged my quotation about Islamic systems of government and democracy, which changed its meaning. I said that Islam and democracy are not easily compatible. This is undoubtedly as much for political as doctrinal reasons. The documentation compiled by Freedom House's Center for Religious Freedom demonstrates that in the major Islamic law (sharia) states of contemporary times - Iran, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Afghanistan - individual rights to freedom of religion and expression, and the legal equality of women and religious minorities are not recognized. As one of the consequences, in all these states Muslim political dissidents have been arrested for the capital crimes of blasphemy and apostasy for having proposed liberal reforms or criticized the government. Furthermore, when Islamic constitutions provide that no law can be repugnant to Islam, as the Iranian and the proposed Afghanistan constitutions do, legislative power risks being undermined by unelected sharia jurists and clerics. Prof. Abou El Fadl is one of the few who possess the scholarship in both legal traditions needed to identify and develop the democratic potential in the Koran. He believes that "For Muslims, a democratic commitment cannot be made in a doctrinal vacuum, but will require that it reconcile with their religious convictions." He has undertaken efforts in this direction, making arguments that individual human rights are moral, "divine law must be distinguished from fallible human interpretations" and the "state should not pretend to embody divine sovereignty and majesty." This work may be more than a motive for some in the Egyptian press to discredit him. Nina Shea Director, Center for Religious Freedom Freedom House

Dean Michael K. Young, Chair

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