

## "Reconstructing Afghanistan: Freedom In Crisis": Mavis Leno Testimony

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COMMISSIONER YOUNG: I'm now delighted to introduce Mavis Leno, who is the chair of the Feminist Majority's Campaign for Afghan Women and Girls, a role she assumed in 1997, just shortly after the worst of the oppression of women was begun by the Taliban. We're delighted to have her with us to help us focus a bit on the issue that was raised in a number of different ways and a number of times this morning.

Thank you.

[Applause.]

MS.

LENO: Well, we've come a long way. There are a lot of faces in this audience that I've been seeing for years now, and we've come a long way from the first time we all met, as far as Afghanistan is concerned, but obviously the job is only halfway completed. And this is actually a critical juncture because there will now be a perception amongst many people that everything is taken care of because the Taliban are gone, as though they had evaporated into thin air.

The Taliban are not gone, we all know that and other people who have a similar view, though they may name themselves differently, and they will continue to try and reinsert themselves into positions of power, and some of them have already succeeded.

So it is extremely critical for women in Afghanistan to have the most legal support for their rights which is possible. Many, many people here have spoken about the fact that some of the limitation that women experience in Afghanistan stems from cultural tradition.

Well, we didn't have a culture where women were allowed to do anything they wanted either. There are hardly any countries on the face of this earth that originally had cultures where women had very much say so on what was going on, but we got it for ourselves. And, believe me, I have known enough Afghan women now to know that if they have a vote and a legal voice in their government, things will move forward at a pace that will just surprise everybody.

It's their job from there because, as an American and as a person who's not a Muslim, I wouldn't have any idea what specific things Afghan women would like to have and how they would like to obtain them. That is entirely the job of these women, and as I say, I know they're well up to it. But what we can help with is encouraging the perpetuation of all of the rights that were given to women in the 1964 Constitution and those new rights and protections that may be necessarily added as the new Constitution is written, but I do think it's significant that women were given equal rights in a Constitution in Afghanistan in 1964, when women in Switzerland could not vote, but women in Afghanistan could. It probably wasn't very heavily implemented at that time, but what people write in the Constitution, as certainly every American in this room dearly loves our Constitution, what we write in a Constitution is our best hopes for our society, and I think it's very significant that all the way back in 1964, when feminism certainly wasn't on the march in this country, that one of the best hopes that the Afghans had for their country was that women would stand shoulder-to-shoulder some day, and, as the Chinese people say, hold up their share of the sky.

Now, before any of that can have any real effect in the actual world, we have to make sure that the government that currently is in Afghanistan survives, we have to make sure that the country has a chance to rebuild itself, we have to make sure that they have enough time to rebuild an Army, a judicial system, a police system of their own, and it's just not possible to do that overnight.

And while this country, and this government, are surrounded with chaotic fringe groups, and as several people mentioned earlier on in the day, with outsiders that want to meddle--I'm not saying the Saudis, but I'm not, not saying the Saudis--

[Laughter.]

MS.

LENO: At any rate, with all of that going on, the United States has got to commit itself very, very heavily to providing defense for the current government and financing for the rebuilding of the country and of course for humanitarian aid, and if anybody knows how to get rain, that would be useful too.

My organization, the Feminist Majority, was heavily involved in the Afghan Freedom Support Act, which has now been signed into law. It's a wonderful act. It covers everything that probably anyone in this room thinks is needed to make everything work out well in Afghanistan, but we've got to get funding for it. We're working very hard on that. The people that were involved in passing this bill are working very hard on that. Anybody in this audience that has any pull anywhere at all should be working hard on that too.

The money has to come from somewhere, and everybody we talk to thinks it's a wonderful idea, and the money should come from somewhere, just not from them. So we have to make sure that that is attended to.

In that act, the Women's Ministry and the Human Rights Commission do receive funding. We want to make sure that that is direct funding to them, not filtered through anybody else, but in the hands of the women that are running these organizations, and we feel that direct funding to Afghan-led institutions is the most effective way to go, and I think it's a place where America is lagging behind.

There's been a lot of talk about, well, it's accountability problems, but my understanding is that the current government has gone very far out of their way to create lots of ways by which they can provide accountability, and I think that this is another thing that anybody here who has the ability to apply pressure on the government should address.

We still asked for explicit inclusion of women's rights and human rights in the Constitution and throughout the judiciary, and we would very much like a strong representation of women in the judiciary and the Parliament. We would also like, the Human Rights Commission has called for the establishment and operation of an independent radio station to increase women's rights and human rights awareness throughout the country. This seems like an imminently doable thing.

I would look long and hard at the people who wouldn't want this to happen because people that don't want other people to have information are worth a second look, and I strongly urge that this be implemented as soon as possible because I don't think it would be very expensive or difficult to do at all.

The other key element, of course, we know that Afghanistan has lost almost all of its infrastructure. We just can't go fast enough to help rebuild that. We have to get funding for this bill, get the goods over there, get going because I know this country has wonderful resources. They have all of the capacity to be totally self-supporting in a very successful way, and they just need some roads and bridges so that they can get where they're going to and bring the goods back again. And we really have to have more peacekeepers on the ground, vastly more peacekeepers--

[Applause.]

MS.  
LENO: --or if there was any other solution that is as good and as comprehensive, but so far a lot of governmental plans, which I take is very well-intentioned, are just insufficient. We understand there's a current proposal for eight mini bases with 60 personnel each. This is not going to take care of the kind of druglords and mad men that have little fiefdoms all over this country, which have thrived probably in part because of the lack of infrastructure. Undoubtedly, as roads are rebuilt and so forth, it will be easier to wiggle these guys out of their little kingdoms and send them on their way. They could go to Saudi Arabia.

[Laughter.]

MS. LENO: I really think that we owe it to this new government to give it the greatest, most overwhelming chance to succeed imaginable. We've passed the bill that would provide these things. All we have to do is fund it, put our money where our mouth is. I will say that the attitude throughout the whole government right now seems to be 100-percent acknowledgement that we have to help the Afghan people make a success of this, that we have to be seen to follow through on what we have initiated or helped to initiate, and we certainly should be seen to be builders, not just dismantlers of situations.

So I feel that everybody is on the same page, as far as what they want. It's just a matter of how much money they will be willing to cough up to make it a reality. So this is what I know from this point, and I will also say, when a society is stable, it becomes very easy for women to utilize the rights that their government grants them. Women cannot come out of their house and go to schools if there are violent and crazy people able to get them off the streets unpunished, if there are violent and crazy people burning down their schools before they can go to them, and this has been happening all over Afghanistan.

So one key ingredient in giving women back their human and civil rights is to give the country back a society in which people can have human and civil rights without being kidnapped, murdered, abused, imprisoned, et cetera, and also that in societies where women participate equally, those societies tend to be both prosperous and stable. Everybody wins when women win.

Thank you.