REMARKS AT UNA-NCA MEETING

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June 5, 2015

Thank you President Bliss, members of the Board, and all the members of UNA-NCA.

I am deeply moved and honored to receive the Arthur W. Johnson award. Coming from the UNA-NCA, it is especially moving as this chapter has done so much and contributed so greatly to the understanding of the United Nations and to its role in U.S. foreign policy. Arthur Johnson personified this commitment with his tireless service to UNA and his own professional contributions to international cooperation and peace.

I am not sure that even the members of UNA realize how important their work is. I can tell you that for me, as Assistant Secretary for International Organization Affairs, and I am sure Ambassador Moose would agree from when he held that position, and today it holds for Sheba Crocker, your work on behalf of the UN -- with Congress, the public, and with the UN -- makes a tremendous difference in the U.S. government being able to play its role in that organization.

Everyone in this room has experienced the debate over the value and effectiveness of the United Nations. Yet no matter what its shortcomings, and problems, the United Nations time and time again is the institution to which the world turns for some of the most difficult problems. Since the time when I was Assistant Secretary for International Organizations Affairs and the U.S. was balking at paying our dues, the peacekeeping budget has more than tripled and the U.S. contribution has grown accordingly. With all the difficult challenges UN peacekeeping missions have faced, they are still an indispensable part of the world’s conflict resolution response. UN envoys like Lakhdar Brahimi, Mary Robinson, Haile Menkerios, Nicholas Haysom, Nicholas Kay, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed and others have brilliantly and doggedly helped the international community come together to help resolve major conflicts. And when the community has failed to do so, they have boldly made clear what is needed to be done. On climate change, there is no substitute for the Intergovernmental Committee on Climate Change that leads the way in understanding this world-changing phenomenon. In the staggering rise in refugees within Asia, from Africa, and from the Middle East, the UNHCR is the principal agency for bringing relief and for defending the legal framework that define refugees’ rights and the obligations of recipient nations. There are countless other ways in which the UN plays a vital role in advancing peace, justice, and development in the world.

Michael Gerson, writing in the Washington Post this week, spoke of the role the UN peacekeeping mission is playing in South Sudan in the midst of a terrible civil war. “As the atrocities began, the United Nations opened the gates of their bases to fleeing ethnic minorities, mainly Neur. More than 130,000 people have found refuge on UN compounds. The resulting camps are makeshift and have serious problems of their own, but what the
United Nations has done here is unprecedented, at least on this scale – protecting a vulnerable minority in the middle of a chaotic armed conflict. The peacekeepers have saved thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, of lives, and prevented a cycle of hatred and retribution that would have utterly destroyed South Sudan’s future as a nation. This is what the United Nations was meant to be.”

But perhaps one of the most disturbing developments regarding the UN’s role in recent years is that it has lost the cache, the inherent legitimacy, the moral presence that allowed it to act with both authority and to be effective with relatively limited presence in conflict situations. As many of you know the number of UN peacekeepers who have been killed and wounded has been deeply disturbing. Force protection for even small, unarmed UN monitoring missions has itself become a requirement. We have also seen governments challenging the roles and responsibilities of UN missions. In Sudan, the government has steadily eroded UNAMID’s capacity, freedom of personnel choice, and operation room. Just this week, South Sudan’s government sought to expel the deputy Special Representative of the UN peacekeeping mission there. In the DRC the government has sought to limit the size and effectiveness of that mission. Attacks on UN facilities such as happened in Abuja, and so tragically some years ago in Baghdad, robbed us of some of the world’s finest and most dedicated public servants.

We all know of course that the UN is only as strong as the members are prepared to make it. Thus what we do here at UNA and in UN Associations across the world is vital to enabling the UN to be effective, for its writ to be respected, and for it to be able to do its work. Maintaining Americans’ understanding of the UN, the importance of it to the fundamental objectives of U.S. foreign policy and the essentiality of strong U.S. support for the organization is what UNA does.

Americans I believe understand perhaps better today than a few years ago that we cannot achieve our hopes for peace, justice, and development alone or by largely unilateral efforts. The UN is only one of the complex international institutions and informal arrangements with which we must be engaged. But it remains one of the most vital. Indeed I hear much less UN-bashing than in former years. We may not pay all our dues, or yet on time, but we are not as far behind as we once were. Yet in Congress today there are efforts underway to cut back drastically on our support again. It is a good time therefore for enhancing Americans’ knowledge of the UN, its role and its potential.

You have been very kind to present me with this award. I am grateful. But most of all I am grateful for the work of the UNA and especially this most active and influential chapter.