

President Nelson R. Mandela of South Africa; and Marc Gonsalves, Thomas Howes, and Keith Stansell, former hostages held by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia

(FARC). The Office of the Press Secretary also released a Spanish language transcript of these remarks.

Statement on the Situation in Cuba January 13, 2009

As much of the world celebrates the dawning of a new year, Cuba marks 50 years of one of the cruelest dictatorships this hemisphere has witnessed.

To those who yearn for liberty, all is not lost. The world has witnessed other instances of dictatorship, but has ultimately seen those regimes fall and formerly enslaved countries embrace their birthright of freedom. One day, the people of Cuba will enjoy this same blessing.

This message of hope is directed especially to those who have made pleas for freedom only to be silenced by tyranny and oppression: individuals like Oscar Elias Biscet, Luis Enrique Ferrer, Ricardo Gonzalez, Jose Luis Garcia Paneque, and many others. It is equally intended for the families of such prisoners, who dearly miss their loved ones and continue to suffer oppression at the hands of the regime. The American people admire the courage of these families and the emerging civil society movement, reflected in the existence of groups like the *Damas de Blanco*, who stand up for the fundamental human rights bestowed by our Creator.

As long as there are people who fight for liberty, the United States will stand with them and speak out for those whose voices have been temporarily silenced. All Cubans

have the right to be treated with dignity, so that they can rise as high as their talents and hard work will take them. This is the standard my administration and past administrations—regardless of political affiliation—have expected from the Cuban Government as the condition for improved relations.

My administration has continually challenged the Cuban Government to bring genuine political and economic changes and improve human rights and has made it clear that the United States stands prepared to respond to any request for assistance from a Cuba that transitions to democracy. The Castro regime's response to our offers has been continued repression of the Cuban people.

Throughout my Presidency, the plight of Cuba has been close to my heart. My sincere wish has been for the proud people of Cuba to take their rightful place in the community of democratic, freedom-loving nations.

Laura and I send our Cuban *hermanos y hermanas* a message of peace and love. May God bless you and continue to give you the faith and courage to fight for the day when the light of liberty will shine on the people of Cuba.

Remarks on Presenting the Presidential Medal of Freedom at the
Department of State
January 15, 2009

Thank you all. I got 5 days left; be seated. [Laughter]

Madam Secretary, thank you very much for your kind introduction, and thank you for these beautiful reminders of how fantastic it's been to work with you.

By the way, these are going to be at Southern Methodist University—[laughter]—proudly displayed at the Presidential Center I will build to remind our country of the timeless values of freedom and liberty. And I am honored to take them back to Texas. I'm honored to take my wife back to Texas too. [Laughter]

The award you gave Laura, Condi, is well deserved in my unobjective opinion. She has been awesome First Lady. And I'm proud to have been here in Washington. And you've been an awesome friend and a great Secretary of State.

You know, people—I tell people all the time, they ask me about Condi, and I say, "She's like my sister." We've been through a lot together. [Laughter] And one of the things about her is that she has never lost her great optimism. She's plenty tough when she needed to be tough; she's plenty charming when she needs to be charming. But during the darkest of days, she always had a sense of optimism and constantly reminded me of what is possible and what will happen if we don't lose confidence in fundamental truths. History will say that Condi Rice was one of the great Secretaries of State our country has ever had.

And I thank my friend John Negroponte. I call him "Ponte"—you better call him—[laughter]—Mr. Secretary. He has done a lot of hard work on behalf of the country, and he has really done it well, a variety of jobs that have required skill and dedication and courage, and each job he's handled with a lot of class, he really has.

I want to thank the Ambassadors who have joined us. Thanks for coming. Appreciate your service to your countries. And I want to thank all those who work here, veterans and rookies alike. [Laughter] This is a fabulous Department and a vital part of making sure this country remains secure in the long run. And it's been a joy to work with you.

Tonight I'm going to give a farewell address to the American people. It's going to be a short one. [Laughter] But it's got a lot of meaning to it, as far as I'm concerned. I'm going to urge our Nation to continue to engage the world with confidence, confidence in the transformative power of freedom and liberty.

These are the ideals that gave birth to our own Nation, these universal ideals gave birth to America. And over the past 8 years, together we have worked to advance these ideals. And every member of this Department can be proud of the results.

In the Middle East, we stood with dissidents and young democracies. Sometimes that was not easy to do, but we stood strong with those young democracies. We outlined a vision of two democratic states, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and security.

In Asia, we deepened our alliances with old friends, Japan and South Korea, and we strengthened ties with China. I'm not so sure if this is historically accurate, but we may be the only administration that has had really good ties with Japan, South Korea, and China all at the same time. And we opened a new historic and strategic partnership with India.

In Europe, we expanded NATO to include new democracies from the Baltics to the Balkans. We work in a multilateral fashion to deal with issues like Iran and North Korea.