

CONGRESSIONAL RECORD

United States
of America

PROCEEDINGS AND DEBATES OF THE *114th* CONGRESS, SECOND SESSION

Vol. 162

Washington, Thursday, May 26, 2016

No. 84

Senate

40TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE U.S. HELSINKI COMMISSION

Mr. CARDIN. Mr. President, on June 3, 1976, U.S. President Gerald Ford signed into law a bill establishing the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, more commonly known as the U.S. Helsinki Commission.

I bring this 40th anniversary next week to my colleagues' attention today because the commission has played a particularly significant role in U.S. foreign policy.

First, the commission provided the U.S. Congress with a direct role in the policymaking process. Members and staff of the commission have been integrated into official U.S. delegations to meetings and conferences of what is historically known as the Helsinki Process. The Helsinki Process started as an ongoing multilateral conference on security and cooperation in Europe that is manifested today in the 57-country, Vienna-based Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, or OSCE.

As elected officials, our ideas reflecting the interests of concerned American citizens are better represented in U.S. diplomacy as a result of the commission. There is no other country that has a comparable body, reflecting the singular role of our legislature as a separate branch of government in the conduct of foreign policy. The commission's long-term commitment to this effort has resulted in a valuable institutional memory and expertise in European policy possessed by few others in the U.S. foreign affairs community.

Second, the commission was part of a larger effort since the late 1970s to enhance

consideration of human rights as an element in U.S. foreign policy decision-making. Representatives Millicent Fenwick of New Jersey and Dante Fascell of Florida created the commission as a vehicle to ensure that human rights violations raised by dissident groups in the Soviet Union and the Communist countries of Eastern Europe were no longer ignored in U.S. policy.

In keeping with the Helsinki Final Act's comprehensive definition of security—which includes respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms as a principle guiding relations between states—we have reviewed the records of all participating countries, including our own and those of our friends and allies.

From its Cold War origins, the Helsinki Commission adapted well to changing circumstances, new challenges, and new opportunities. It has done much to ensure U.S. support for democratic development in East-Central Europe and continues to push for greater respect for human rights in Russia and the countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia.

The Commission has participated in the debates of the 1990s on how the United States should respond to conflicts in the Balkans, particularly Bosnia and Kosovo and elsewhere, and does the same today in regard to Russia's aggression towards Ukraine. It has pushed U.S. policy to take action to combat trafficking in persons, anti-Semitism and racism, and intolerance and corruption, as well as other problems which are not confined to one country's borders.

The Helsinki Commission has succeeded in large part due to its leadership. From the House, the commission has been chaired by Representatives Dante Fascell of Florida, my good friend STENY HOYER of Maryland, the current chairman, CHRISTOPHER SMITH of New Jersey, and ALCEE HASTINGS of Florida. From this Chamber, we have had Senators Alfonse D'Amato of New York, Dennis DeConcini of Arizona, Ben Nighthorse Campbell of Colorado, Sam Brownback of Kansas and today's cochairman, ROGER WICKER of Mississippi.

I had the honor, myself, to chair the Helsinki Commission from 2007 to 2015. That time, and all my service on the commission, from 1993 to the present, has been enormously rewarding. I think it is important to mention that the hard work we do on the Helsinki Commission is not a job requirement for a Member of Congress.

Rather than being a responsibility, it is something many of us choose to do because it is rewarding to secure the release of a longtime political prisoner, to reunify a family, to observe elections in a country eager to learn the meaning of democracy for the first time, to enable individuals to worship in accordance with their faiths, to know that policies we advocated have meant increased freedom for millions of individuals in numerous countries, and to present the United States as a force for positive change in this world.

Several of us have gone beyond our responsibilities on the commission to participate in the leadership of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly. Representative HASTINGS served for 2 years as assembly president, while Representative HOYER, Representative ROBERT ADERHOLT of Alabama, and I have served as vice presidents. Senator WICKER currently serves as chairman of the assembly's security committee.

Representative Hilda Solis of California had served as a committee chair and special representative on the critical issue of migration. Today, Representative SMITH serves as a special representative on the similarly critical issue of human trafficking, while I serve as special representative on anti-Semitism, racism, and intolerance.

Our engagement in this activity as elected Members of Congress reflects the deep, genuine commitment of our country to security and cooperation in Europe, and this rebounds to the enormous benefit of our country. Our friends and allies appreciate our engagement, and those with whom we have a more adversarial relationship are kept in check by our engagement. I hope my colleagues would consider this point today, especially during a time when foreign travel is not strongly encouraged and sometimes actively discouraged.

Finally, let me say a few words about the Helsinki Commission staff, both past and present. The staff represents an enormous pool of talent. They have a combination of diplomatic skills, regional expertise, and foreign language capacity that has allowed the Members of Congress serving on the commission to be so successful. Many of them deserve mention here, but I must mention Spencer Oliver, the first chief of staff, who set the commission's precedents from the very start. Spencer went on to create almost an equivalent of the commission at the international level with the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly.

One of his early hires and an eventual successor was Sam Wise, whom I would consider to be one of the diplomatic heroes of the Cold War period for his contributions and leadership in the Helsinki Process.

In closing, I again want to express my hope that my colleagues will consider the value of the Helsinki Commission's work over the years, enhancing the congressional role in U.S. foreign policy and advocating for human rights as part of that policy.

Indeed, the commission, like the Helsinki Process, has been considered a model that could be duplicated to handle challenges in other regions of the world. I also hope to see my colleagues increase their participation on Helsinki Commission delegations to the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, as well as at Helsinki Commission hearings. For as much as the commission has accomplished in its four decades, there continues to be work to be done in its fifth, and the challenges ahead are no less than those of the past.