

Remarks on Receiving the Louis B. Sohn Human Rights Award
United Nations Association—National Capitol Area
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Thank you so much for that kind introduction, Claudio [Grossman]. You are a dear friend and a role model for all of us. I am honored to follow in your footsteps.

Thanks to you all, and especially the UNA-NCA for this recognition. I am so grateful to all my dear friends in this room who have traveled here tonight, and who have helped me along my human rights journey. Just to single out my nearest and dearest: my dear friends Ron and Amy Vender, my big brother and sister-in-law Howard and Claudia, and my children, who I love more than life itself: my son William who lives in San Francisco, but who has donated to this event as a “Human Rights Sponsor” and his big sister Emily, who just moved here to Washington this week to begin her own time in the U.S. government. As with everything in my life, my greatest love goes to Christy, who I met here more than 40 years ago and who has fought for human rights as a public interest lawyer every day that I’ve known her. You have been through everything with me and whenever I’ve felt low or afraid or overwhelmed—and there have been those days—you are the ones who got me through. No one does human rights work alone, and any honor that comes to me belongs to you.

Receiving an award named after Louis B. Sohn has special meaning to me, because Professor Sohn was my father’s teacher and doctoral advisor in international law at Harvard. So Louis Sohn was almost literally, my grandfather-in-international law. Much like today, the world he lived in was one of great hope and turmoil. He witnessed cataclysmic wars, economic crises, and devastating human rights abuse. He responded by becoming an international architect of a new world order that saw human rights and international law as our best hope for avoiding the aggression and depression that nearly destroyed us in the 20th Century.

During the Cold War realism that followed, people liked to call Louis an idealist, as if he were foolish or naive. I remember attending a lecture where Professor Sohn spoke passionately about the U.N., when some openly snickered at his idealism. But because the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights were created less than a decade before I was born, as I was growing up, human rights, the UN system, and international law were ideas that framed my life. When I was five, my late father Kwang Lim Koh was asked to be the Korea’s Permanent Representative to the United Nations, which had saved Korea during the Korean War. At the time, Korea was only a UN observer and the United States was its most important ally, so my father chose instead to lead Korea’s Embassy here in the National Capital Area. We attended a public school here in Tacoma Park, Maryland that was desegregated by law but segregated in practice, so we saw with our own eyes the gap between human rights in theory and practice.

But my parents were also idealists: they taught me and my siblings that as imperfect as it is, the United Nations is still our best hope for achieving a better world. And so we visited the UN in New York, trick or treated for UNICEF, and participated as high school students in Model United Nations. Decades later, my brother Howard and I were both privileged to represent our country at U.N. meetings. At one of them, the Ambassador from a South Asian country said to me “Last night, I googled you. So your father was ambassador to the United States; now, you are ambassador *from* the United States. America is the only country in the world where that could happen, and that is why you are the greatest nation in the world.” At another meeting in Beijing, which I attended with my beloved friend, the late Secretary Madeleine Albright, when I was working at the State Department’s human rights bureau, alongside David Yang and Paige Chabora, who are here tonight, a Chinese official told us, “Unlike you Westerners, we Asians don’t believe in universal human rights.” We just pointed at my face and told them they were wrong.

Since then, I have been privileged to represent brave Haitians, Cubans, Bosnians, Kosovars, Chileans—along with Claudio and Nienke Grossman—and with Marney Cheek, David Zions, Mac Mackie and Paul Strauch—Ukrainians in courts around the world. During four administrations I have traveled to dozens of countries, meeting with international lawyers and human rights defenders. Those journeys have taught me three things.

First, around the world, the vision of human rights defended by the United Nations is under attack. The human rights system is being assaulted by cynics from the both the left and the right. Populist authoritarians have sought to undermine democracy in Brazil, France, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Turkey, the United Kingdom, Russia, China, and right here in the United States, where just one year ago and one thousand yards from here, a violent mob attacked this Capitol trying to stop a peaceful and lawful transition of power. I’ve learned that human rights and democracy are fragile and if we don’t fight for them, they could easily crumble.

But second, we must respond to these attacks by reaffirming that the fight for human rights is always worthwhile. If you have any doubt, look at the women of Iran, who are courageously standing up to an oppressive regime; to Iran’s national soccer team, who refused to sing their national anthem at the World Cup; at ingenious dissenters in China, who are standing with blank sheets of A4 paper, to tell their leaders we are not powerless: you can’t control our minds; you cannot crush our spirit. Look to the people of Russia, protesting Putin, and the courageous citizens of Ukraine, who refuse to let a weaponized winter crush their spirit. Look at NATO, which Putin expected to fold, but which has instead stuck together and expanded to meet his aggression and atrocity. And look at the International Criminal Court, which is working hard to achieve Putin’s accountability.

Finally, look here in the United States of America, where in November, and Georgia this Tuesday, ordinary citizens waited in long lines to go to send a message to those who would deny them gender equality, who would tell them who to love, what identity to have, and what kind of family they must live in. *What all this reminds us is that the idea of human rights is not just universal, it is the idea that makes us Americans.* Because unlike other countries, we share

no common religion, no common ethnicity. What we share is our common belief in the simple radical idea that all persons are created equal and are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among them life liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Ours is a country built on human rights, so fighting for human rights must always be a defining feature of our national identity. Of course, we can never be perfect, but we must always fight for a more perfect union: so that with each day's work, we call the leaders of our nation and others to follow their better angels, to try to bend the arc of history closer toward justice.

The third thing I've learned is that the struggle for human rights is both a lineage and a calling. It helps give our life meaning and purpose, that we can pass on to future generations: a purpose that I pass to you, just as my parents and Professor Sohn passed it to me. So we give these awards not to honor the past, but to challenge the future: to remind our future selves that our talk is meaningless without action, that we have to live up to our high-minded principles, to reaffirm that we cannot just spend our time on this planet accepting the injustices that are, but instead fighting for the justice that should be. To use our energy and talents to stand up for what's right, whether or not it pleases those who happen in that moment to hold power.

So that is what I believe. Human rights are fragile and under attack, but they are worth fighting for, and nights like this renew our commitment to it as a calling.

People will call me an idealist. I hope they do. Because what I've learned from Louis Sohn, my family, from all of you, is that having ideals means caring more about principles than about power, more about human rights than about what job you have or how close you are to those who rule. Your kindness tonight gives me new resolve, as long as I am able, to stay an idealist: to keep fighting for these ideals that I hold dear for myself, my family, for this country we love, and for our embattled world.

On this very special Human Rights Day, thank you so much for helping me renew this commitment.