

SBC cheers Rice's speech on freedom: Envisions America's role in worldwide spread of justice

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In an address received like a campaign stump speech, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice exhorted Southern Baptists at their annual meeting to support the United States in spreading freedom around the globe.

After a standing ovation upon being introduced—during which one man on the convention floor yelled, “You’ve got my vote!”—Rice touched briefly on her faith background as the daughter and granddaughter of Presbyterian ministers.

Rice, seen by some Republicans as a potential presidential nominee, thanked the Southern Baptist Convention for its social work and disaster-relief efforts.

Much of her remarks cast a missionary-like vision of the American role on the world stage—as a liberator and spreader of freedom and justice. “If America does not rally support for people everywhere who desire to worship in peace and freedom, then I ask you, who will?” she said, bringing the audience to its feet in her June 14 speech in Greensboro, North Carolina.

“America’s message cannot be clearer: government simply has no right to stand between the individual and the Almighty,” Rice said.

Many people in the world are denied that dignity regularly by poverty, by the lack of political and religious freedom and by human trafficking and other forms of subjugation, she said. It is in the U.S.’s best interest to ameliorate those situations, she said, because oppression, poverty and suffering produce instability.

“Let us resolve to deal with the world as it is but never to accept that we are powerless to make it better than it is—not perfect, but better,” she went on to say. “America will lead the cause of freedom in our world not because we think ourselves perfect. To the contrary, we cherish democracy and champion its ideals because we

know we are not perfect.”

Rice acknowledged that the U.S. has a history of not living up to its own ideals. “After all, when our Founding Fathers said ‘we the people,’ they didn’t mean me,” she said. “My ancestors in Mr. Jefferson’s Constitution were only three-fifths of a man.”

But times have changed, added Rice, whose predecessors at the State Department were an African-American man and a white woman. “If I serve to the end of my term as secretary, it will be 12 years since a white man was secretary of state,” she quipped, to loud applause.

The historical irony of her appearance before Southern Baptists was augmented by the fact that she was cheered by members of a denomination founded in defense of slaveholders and still opposed to women in leadership roles in the church. However, the longtime Bush administration foreign-policy official enjoys broad admiration from the SBC—one of the few denominations whose leaders publicly supported the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. The day before Rice spoke, the denomination’s resolutions committee quashed a South Carolina delegate’s proposed resolution denouncing the SBC’s “support for the unjust war in Iraq.”

Rice acknowledged that the war has ended up being “far more difficult than many of us expected it would be.” But she said the price is worth it—to fight terrorism and to give Iraqis and Afghans “a chance, not a guarantee,” of freedom with security.

At the end of a final standing ovation, a group of delegates broke into a chorus of “God Bless America,” which quickly spread around the Greensboro Coliseum. – *Associated Baptist Press, Religion News Service*