

Preserving, Protecting & Promoting Religious Freedom

"...No people can be truly happy, though under the greatest enjoyment of civil liberties, if abridged of the freedom of their consciences, as to their religious profession and worship..."

-William Penn, Pennsylvania Charter of Privileges (October 28, 1701)



U.S. Senator Rick Santorum, Pennsylvania

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Congressional Working Group on Religious Freedom

United States Senator Rick Santorum

Mission Statement of the Congressional Working Group



(from left) Event co-host Sen. Rick Santorum, the Most Rev. Charles J. Chaput, and Dr. Richard Land participate in a panel discussion sponsored by Freedom House's Center for Religious Freedom on Wednesday. Land describes the religious persecution in North Korea, China and Sri Lanka (Photo: The Christian Post)

The Congressional Working Group on Religious Freedom seeks to uphold and help enforce the meaning of Article 18 of the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states: "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance."

Senator Santorum started the bicameral Congressional Religious Freedom Working Group that meets monthly to discuss religious freedom concerns occurring both domestically and internationally.

The Working Group has allowed more than 90 NGOs to regularly meet with key Senate and House members and staff to stay abreast of domestic and international religious freedom concerns and to work on behalf of peaceful resolutions to religious conflicts.

By working closely with NGOs and the religious community, the Congressional Religious Freedom Working Group ensures that the United States Congress and the U.S. government continue to promote the commitment of the United States and the international community to freedom of religion and protection of minority rights as enshrined in both constitutions and international covenants.

The group meets once a month on Capitol Hill for an hour. These meetings allow for consistent communication and cooperation between NGOs and the U.S. Congress, keeping both informed of international and domestic legislation, religiously motivated persecution, abuses, and responses by religious and political authorities.

"State-sponsored religious persecution of the harshest severity—torture, imprisonment, and even death—occurs today under three types of regimes: the remnant communist regimes, such as China, North Korea, and Vietnam; repressive Islamic states, such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Sudan; and nationalist authoritarian states, such as Burma and Eritrea. These are the states that have been officially designated by the U.S. State Department as 'countries of particular concern' or 'CPC's'." –Floor Statement by Senator Rick Santorum

International Religious Freedom Issues

President Bush has said that religious freedom “is the first freedom of the human soul—the right to speak the words that God places in our mouths. We must stand for that freedom in our country. We must speak for that freedom in the world.” This report on *Preserving, Protecting, and Promoting Religious Freedom* in our nation and the world will highlight three unique themes that challenge religious freedom: the legacy of communism, the threat of radicalized Islam and the growth of Anti-Semitism both domestically and internationally.

Although many of the governments in this report are signatories to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, they blatantly disregard freedom of religion. The state of religious freedom is not only important in its own right, but is important because it is also an indicator of the level of tolerance and stability in the greater society. Former USSR and Communist states pose a challenge specific to their repressive regimes; the violent extremists of radicalized Islam also present one of our generation’s principal adversaries to religious freedoms; and, the growth of Anti-Semitism indicates an incredibly troubling trend in religiously-based persecution throughout the world.

Former USSR and Communist States



North Korea

Religious activities that are not sanctioned by the government in North Korea are met with egregious violations of religious freedom including imprisonment and torture. According to the 2005 State Department’s International Religious Freedom Report, an estimated 6,000 Christians are incarcerated in a prison in the northern part of the country; individuals carrying bibles or distributing religious materials are subject to arrest and imprisonment. North Korean officials have also stratified society on the basis of family background and government-divined loyalty to the regime; religious persons are definitionally relegated to a lower category, consequentially receiving fewer opportunities and privileges than others in areas of education and employment.

These extreme restrictions on religious liberties in North Korea demonstrate that the constitution in North Korea carries little if any moral authority. Despite provisions protecting individual freedoms, the government has clearly formed organizations to restrict religious activities in the country and severely represses public and private religious activities.



Pyongyang, Juche Tower



China

China typifies the unfortunate schizophrenia in many Communist and former Communist states in relation to religious liberties. Although China continues to modernize both economically and culturally, and although China's constitution protects religious freedom, there is very little respect in China for religious freedom. All religious groups and spiritual movements must register with the government; the government even monitors the activities of the official religions (Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Protestantism, and Catholicism). The Chinese government harasses, interrogates, detains, and abuses religious leaders, as well as destroying or seizing unregistered places and objects of worship. Religious controls remain exceptionally tight in Xinjiang and other areas that have seen ethnic unrest. In Xinjiang, the government continues to censor imams' sermons, discourage overt religious attire and religious wedding ceremonies, and restrict the building of mosques. Religious believers are denied the ability to hold public office based upon the fact that most government positions go to Chinese Communist Party (CCP) members, and that CCP membership and religious belief are said to be incompatible.

"The persecution of unregistered religious minority groups in China is widespread and impacts many faiths. For example, I am concerned about the South China Church, an evangelical denomination in China... The case of Gong Shengliang is particularly striking. Pastor Gong was sentenced to death in 2001, a sentence that was reduced to life in prison at a later trial... Since his jailing, Gong is reported to have suffered physical abuse... We cannot let this persecution continue. These cases should be brought to President Hu's attention to encourage him to take an important step in liberalizing religious practice in China." -Excerpt from a letter to President George W. Bush from Senator Santorum, November 14, 2005

Practitioners of Falun Gong receive the harshest treatment, often subjecting Falun Gong followers to criminal, administrative, and extrajudicial punishment on the grounds of "endangering state security." Authorities at times also crack down on folk religions, unorthodox religious sects, and movements considered to be cults. The government teaches atheism in schools.



"They hung me up across an iron gate, then they yanked open the gate and my whole body lifted until my chest nearly split in two. I hung like that for four hours."

That is how Peter Xu Yongze, the founder of one of the largest religious movements in China, described his treatment during one of five jail sentences on account of his belief in Christianity. Peter Xu Yongze spent eight years in jail for his beliefs.

Mr Xu, 61, is not the only Chinese Christian to suffer for his faith. Both Catholics and Protestants have long complained of persecution by the Communist authorities, and human rights groups claim the problem is getting worse.

"They say you can believe, but you can't evangelise," Mr Xu said. "But that is a natural act for Christians. The bible commands us to preach the gospel."

According to Mr Xu, who has now left China and lives in the US, it is against regulations to worship in groups. He said that one of his arresting officers even told him he could only avoid breaking the law if he prayed under the covers in bed.

Mr Xu recounts that during his time in prison, "a believer was praying, so a jailer made other prisoners lift him up to the ceiling and drop him to the ground many times until he died".

-Excerpt from *China's Christians Suffer for Their Faith*, by Kate McGeown for BBC, November 9, 2004



Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan imprisons thousands of religious persons every year, denying these individuals due process and subjecting many to torture. Muslim individuals, groups and mosques are most vulnerable to religious persecution. The government strictly controls Islamic worship, including the content of imams' sermons, and is suspicious and intolerant of followers of Muslim organization not sanctioned by the state. The Uzbek government has closed approximately 3,000 of the country's 5,000 mosques, relying heavily on The Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations passed in May 1998, which severely restricts the exercise of religious freedom.

Senator Santorum signed a letter to Islam Karimov, President of Uzbekistan, raising concerns about the treatment of Pastor Nikolai Shevchenko and members of Bethany Protestant Church. The letter asks that the congregation of Bethany Protestant Church be able to meet freely and without harassment.

"Freedom of thought, conscience and religious belief, as Jefferson and the American Founders recognized, is the prerequisite for the exercise of other basic human rights. Free expression, press freedoms, and freedom of association depend on a free conscience. No basic freedom can be secure where religious freedom is denied." - Floor Statement by Senator Rick Santorum



Russia

Freedom of religion is respected unevenly in this predominantly Orthodox Christian country. A 1997 law on religion requires churches to prove that they have existed for at least 15 years before being permitted to register. Regional authorities continue to harass nontraditional groups; Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons are among the frequent targets. The Russian government often denies visas to foreign religious workers returning to Russia. In recent years, several Roman Catholic priests have been deported, barred from entry, or refused visa renewals.



Turkmenistan



Security officials perpetually break up religious meetings in private residences, conduct warrant-less searches, confiscate religious literature, destroy houses of worship, and detain and threaten congregants with criminal prosecution and deportation in this incredibly repressive state. Violations in Turkmenistan are plenary—spanning freedom of thought, conscience and belief. This repressive environment is due, in part, to the President of Turkmenistan’s personality cult and authoritarian style-regime.

A state-controlled version of Islam is a key part of the Turkmen identity, and a 1997 religious law effectively bans all religious groups except the state-controlled Sunni Muslim Board and the Russian Orthodox Church, though religious instruction even for these two communities is severely limited.

A 2003 law effectively banned most religious activities, established criminal penalties for those found guilty of participating in “illegal religious activities”, and required religious groups to coordinate with the Turkmen government any contacts with coreligionists abroad.

“According to an October 2004 Forum 18 report, Jehovah’s Witness Kurban Zakirov was reportedly subjected to injections of psychotropic substances during his three-year detention. The report cites the Jehovah’s Witnesses as reporting that “His arms are covered all over by injection marks and his behavior has become odd.” They added that “his mental and emotional well being has been ruined and his personality distorted.” Baptist Shagildy Atakov was also reportedly subjected to this form of torture during his three-year arbitrary incarceration.” *–Excerpt from Human Rights Watch Report*

International Religious Freedom Issues The Challenge of Radical Islam



Iran

Religious liberty in Iran has wholly deteriorated; the government of Iran engages in systematic, arrant violations of religious freedom, including prolonged detention, torture, and executions based primarily or entirely upon the religion of the accused. Baha’is, Evangelical Christians, and Muslim dissidents all face intensified harassment, detention, arrests and imprisonment. The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran proclaims Shia Islam as the official religion of the country, stipulating that all laws and regulation be based upon the Shia Islam criteria. While Iran is largely Shia Muslim, a small Sunni Muslim minority exists as well, and prominent Muslim activists and dissidents advocating reform from both Muslim communities have been sentenced to lengthy prison terms by the Revolutionary Court for alleged blasphemy.



Iranian Sunnis report particularly egregious abuses and restrictions, including the detention and torture of Sunni clerics, bans on Sunni teachings in schools and Sunni religious literature, even in predominantly Sunni areas. Some 300,000 Baha'is, Iran's largest non-Muslim minority, enjoy virtually no rights under the law and are banned from practicing their faith. Hundreds of Baha'is have been executed since 1979.



Brian K. Diggs/AMERICAN-STATESMAN
Austinite and member of the Bahai Faith Farzad Kasiri, with a Bahai

Face down on the ground outside a police station in southeastern Iran, blindfolded and with ankles bound, Farzad Kasiri raised his voice in an absurdly sincere attempt to reason with his tormentors.

"Why?" he bellowed. "Why are you doing this?"

The men, he says, stuffed a dirty rag in his mouth and continued to flog his bare feet. The answer is as clear to Kasiri now as it was 22 years ago in that police station parking lot. The Islamic revolutionaries who came to power in the late 1970s after deposing the Iranian monarch targeted thousands of people, he says, because they followed the Bahai faith, a religion that emerged in the 19th century with the belief that the world's major faiths are

"They had a plan to kill us all," says Kasiri, 54, who is now an Austin shoe salesman.

A national spokeswoman for Bahais in the United States says the persecution has continued since the revolution.

"It is the policy of the Iranian government to do whatever it has to do . . . to eliminate the Bahai community," said Kit Bigelow, director of external relations for the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States. Iranian Bahai refugees are praying that conditions will not worsen for family members they left behind.

They have reason to worry, Bigelow said. In recent months, the situation has deteriorated for the country's estimated 350,000 Bahais, Iran's largest non-Muslim minority, with the destruction of holy sites and cemeteries and an increase in arrests of Bahais.

Since the 1978 overthrow of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and the establishment of a Shiite Muslim theocracy under Ayatollah Khomeini, Bigelow said, the government has executed more than 200 Bahais and forbidden Bahais from openly practicing their faith, attending college and receiving equal legal treatment.

Although the Iranian constitution recognizes Zoroastrianism, Judaism and Christianity, all of which predate Islam, the government regards the Bahai Faith as heresy and does not officially acknowledge the religion, said Reza Afshari, professor of history and human rights at Pace University in New York.

"No one has suffered as much as the Bahais in the last 25 years," he said.

-Excerpt from American Statesman, Years after Fleeing Persecution in Iran, Bahais Still Know Fear, July 8, 2005



Pakistan

The discriminatory legislation of this Muslim state has fostered an atmosphere of religious intolerance, has eroded the social and legal status of members of religious minorities, and has placed numerous restrictions on religious freedom.



Section 295-C of the penal code mandates the death sentence for defiling the name of the prophet Muhammad and life imprisonment for whoever willfully defiles, damages, or desecrates a copy of the holy Koran. Government officials provide only limited protection from societal violence to non-Muslims, and Human rights groups say that instances of Muslims bribing low-ranking police officials to file false blasphemy charges against Ahmadis, Christians, Hindus, and occasionally other Muslims have been increasing in recent years. According to the U.S. State Department's Report on International Religious Freedom, as of mid-2004 there were more than 100 blasphemy cases pending in the courts. Suspects are generally forced to spend lengthy periods in prison.

"Last May, the unspeakable happened. As seven-year-old Sharee, a Christian girl in Pakistan, played outside the hut she shared with her mother, she was lured away and brutally raped and tortured by a Muslim man—simply because she was from a Christian family. Found several hours later near a graveyard under a railway bridge on the Qurban line, she was hysterical, badly bruised, and covered in blood. "I thought she was dead," recalled her mother. "The man tried to kill her by strangling her, and she was badly beaten around the head."

It would be comforting to think that Sharee's case was an exception, but it's one of many. According to Bhatti, the APMA cares for at least 40 girls who have been sexually assaulted, and there are likely many others whose cases go unreported. "We want justice against this cruelty... If a Muslim girl is raped, all Muslims come to help. But because we are Christians, no one has helped except APMA," her mother said."

-Excerpt from Crisis Magazine, Under the Gun, by Ben Rogers, October, 2004.

"While Pakistan has provided valuable support to the United States in the Global War on Terror, we should not look the other way when faced with instances of persecution of Christians and other religious minorities. I am thankful that Pakistan, under the leadership of President Musharraf, has taken some steps in recent years to combat human rights and religious freedom abuses... However, more remains to be done for Pakistan to be fully respectful of religious diversity and the rights of minorities." -Excerpt from a letter to President George W. Bush, from Senator Rick Santorum, February 27, 2006

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia

The most egregious violations of religious liberty in Saudi Arabia occur at the hands of the mutawaa (religious police). The mutawaa conduct raids on religious services and private homes; they harass, detain, whip and beat individuals believed to have strayed from "appropriate dress", such as wearing unsanctioned religious symbols. The government tightly controls even the limited religious activity it espouses to permit. The government has arrested and detained prominent Shi's clerics and religious scholars for their religious views, even beating and torturing religious leaders who step beyond the bounds of prescribed religious activities. Violations include: torture and cruel and degrading treatment; prolonged detention without charges; and blatant denials of the rights to liberty and security of the person, including coercive measures aimed at women.

Senator Santorum hosted a briefing on the extremism of Saudi Arabian television presented by the Middle East Media Research Institute in 2005. This was an opportunity for all Senators to see the anti-Americanism and anti-Semitism first-hand that is spread by the Saudi television networks.

"A Catholic citizen of India, Brian Savio O'Connor, has been imprisoned for the past six months by the Saudi religious police. During this time, he reportedly has been whipped and tortured with electric wires and threatened with death to force him to convert to Islam. His brothers, Raymond and James, confirmed to the Vatican newspaper L'Osservatore Romano that Brian has been "tortured with the intention of obliging him to abjure his faith." He is now being held in the Olaya prison in Riyadh. According to L'Osservatore Romano, the Saudi religious police or Mutawaa have accused O'Connor of drug peddling and preaching Christianity - both accusations carry the risk of the death penalty... In addition, the Center for Religious Freedom has learned from the Washington-based Saudi Institute of the arrest on March 15 of 11 Saudi citizens, all Muslims, who were active as voices for tolerance and human rights. Four of them were released two days later, but seven others remain in the General Intelligence prison in Riyadh." - Excerpt from a Freedom House Press Release, "Freedom House Condemns Saudi Persecution" June 7, 2004



"We urge you to utilize Saudi Arabia's designation as a violator of religious freedom to respond decisively to Saudi support for extremist religious ideologies. Last year, Congress expressed its desire for the President to negotiate a binding agreement with the government of Saudi Arabia to cease any programs that contribute to severe violations of religious freedom. We support the implementation of several measures... which could be implemented in response to Saudi Arabia's CPC designation."

-Excerpt from a letter from Senator Santorum & Colleagues to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, March 11, 2005



Syria

Although the constitution requires that the president be a Muslim, there is no official state religion in Syria, and freedom of worship is generally respected. The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government by and large respects this right in practice; however, in response to the eruption of an Islamist rebellion in the late 1970s, it began monitoring mosques and controlling the appointment of Muslim clergy.

All religions and orders must register with the Syrian government, which monitors fundraising and requires permits for all religious and nonreligious group meetings, except for worship. The registration process can be complicated and lengthy, but the Government usually allows groups to operate informally while awaiting the Government's response. For the most part, religious groups tend to avoid any involvement in internal political affairs. The Government, in turn, generally refrains from becoming involved in strictly religious issues.

The Government continued to hold an unknown number of members of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamists as political prisoners, motivated primarily by the Government's view of militant Islamists as potential threats to regime stability. Human rights groups estimate the number of those still in custody to be at least several hundred.

"Syria holds in its jails today thousands of prisoners of conscience. In speaking with Syrian pro-democracy organizations, four prisoners have been identified... these individuals have been imprisoned because they speak in opposition to the al-Assad regime and for highlighting the regime's deplorable record on human rights."

-Excerpt from a letter to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice from Sen. Santorum,

July 22, 2005



Tajikistan

The government of Tajikistan generally respects the freedom of religion, however, the government monitors religious activity to prevent religious groups from becoming overtly political. The primary religious concern in the area involves radicalized Islamic groups. Beginning in 2002, the Government required all mosques to register with local authorities; approximately 750 mosques were closed for failing to comply with this requirement, although many remained open as public facilities where observant Muslims could talk and pray.

Missionaries of registered religious groups are not restricted by law, but many missionaries are not welcomed by some local communities and experience harassment in response to their evangelical activities. Recently, religious tensions have been rising; in February, 2006, the only active Jewish synagogue was destroyed so the government of Tajikistan could build a palace for its President.

International Religious Freedom Issues

Other Countries of Concern



India

Violence against religious minorities pose one of the greatest challenges in India today, and persecution of those involved in such attacks continues to be inadequate. Attacks on Christian targets, including the murder and rape of clergy and the destruction of property, dramatically increased after the Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) came to power in 1998.

While the constitution bars discrimination based on caste, members of the lower castes, as well as religious and ethnic minorities, continue to routinely face unofficial discrimination and violence. The worst abuse is experienced by the 160 million dalits, who are often denied access to land or other public amenities, abused by landlords and police, and forced to work in miserable conditions.

“Within the context of this cooperation, we ask that you protect the rights of people of all faiths among the Dalits. Religious restrictions on government benefits violate the spirit of equality that our nations work so hard to protect. We strongly believe that one of the most fundamental rights of all humans is the freedom to peacefully practice one’s religious faith free from the fear of persecution and oppression. Having learned from our own history, we understand the value and importance of equal treatment of all citizens and work to promote this throughout the world.”

-Excerpt from a letter to the Prime Minister of India, signed by Senator Santorum.



Senator Santorum wrote a letter to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, asking that Chief Minister of Gujarat, India, Narendra Modi be denied a visa to the United States due to his involvement in religious riots and persecution.



France



In March 2004, on the recommendation of an inter-ministerial commission established by the president to study secularism, integration, and the place of religion in the country, the Government passed a law prohibiting the wearing of "conspicuous" religious symbols--including Muslim headscarves, Jewish skullcaps, and large crosses--by employees and students in public schools. And while the European Commission on Human Rights ruled that the law did not violate the freedom of religion; some Christian, Jewish, Muslim and Sikh leaders, human rights groups, and foreign governments have voiced concern about the law's potential to restrict religious freedom.

By school year's end in June 2005, the Ministry of Education reports that 44 Muslim girls and 3 Sikh boys had been expelled from public school for violating this law; one Muslim group indicates that the law has adversely affected 806 Muslim girls by causing them to remove their head coverings or seek alternative educational systems.

Senator Santorum wrote a letter to French National Assembly President Jean-Louis Debre expressing concern over a new French law that would ban religious dress and articles from schools. These laws would force children to decide between being faithful to their traditions and getting an education.



Sri Lanka

Religious freedom is respected and members of all faiths are generally allowed to worship freely, although the constitution gives special status to Buddhism and there is some discrimination and occasional violence against religious minorities. The government discriminates against Muslims in the areas under its control and has attacked Buddhist sites in the past. Christian missionaries are occasionally harassed by Buddhist clergy. Tensions between the island's Buddhist majority and the Christian minority – and in particular, evangelical Christian groups – appear to be worsening, according to a report released in August by the U.S.-based Jubilee Campaign, with a sharp increase in attacks against churches and individuals noted at the end of 2003 and the introduction of draft anti-conversion legislation in May and June 2004.

Senator Santorum signed a letter to the President of Sri Lanka, expressing concern regarding anti-conversion laws and their effect on religious freedom. Voluntary practice of one's religion is a fundamental right in all countries in the world.

Burma



Since 1962, this country has been ruled by highly authoritarian military regimes; the current military government, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), has governed without a constitution or legislature since 1988. There is no official state religion; however, in practice the Government continued to show a preference for Theravada Buddhism. Since independence, successive governments, civilian and military, have supported and associated themselves conspicuously with Buddhism. The Ministry of Religious Affairs includes a powerful Department for the Promotion and Propagation of Sasana (Buddhist teaching).

All unspecified religious organizations must register with the government; only registered organizations can buy or sell property or open bank accounts. Buddhist doctrine remains part of the state-mandated curriculum in all elementary schools, although students can opt out of some instruction in Buddhism. Almost all students are required to recite a Buddhist prayer daily. In general, the Government has not allowed permanent foreign religious missions to operate in the country since the mid-1960s, when it expelled nearly all foreign missionaries and nationalized all private schools and hospitals. Prior to the confiscations, these institutions were affiliated primarily with Christian organizations. Christian groups continued to experience difficulties in obtaining permission to buy land or build new churches in most regions.



Kayan sisters in a Karenni refugee camp in Thailand. Up to a million people have fled their homes in eastern Burma in a crisis the world has largely ignored.
photo: Dean Chapman/ Panos Pictures

"I come from deep inside Burma. Christmas is a joyful season, but some people in areas of Burma have no chance to celebrate Christmas, which makes me very sad. As an ethnic group in Burma, people look down on us. I lived by the river in the black zone. Burma Army special forces came into the area, and they were very cruel. They came to the village and asked the parents to give the soldiers their daughters. If they refused, the soldiers captured the girls, raped them, and killed them and their parents. My cousin was taken because a soldier wanted to marry her, and they killed her father. As a result of this I joined the KNLA (Karen National Liberation Army). I had a very hard time, because if the SPDC knew I was in the KNLA, they would make trouble for my parents."

-Excerpt from Christian Solidarity Worldwide and Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust, Joint Visit to Thai-Burmese Border, November 28-December 10, 2004.

Domestic Religious Freedom Issues



Santorum Introduces the Workplace Religious Freedom Act of 2005

Senator Santorum discusses the importance of the Workplace Religious Freedom Act (WRFA) of 2005 at a press conference announcing the legislation.



The Workplace Religious Freedom Act

Senator Santorum introduced the Workplace Religious Freedom Act (S.677) in the 107th, 108th, and 109th Congresses, which provides a balanced approach to reconcile the needs of people of faith in the workplace with the needs of employers to have a reliable and productive workplace. This measure Amends the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to modify the definition of "religion" for the purposes of coverage under the WRFA by requiring employers to make affirmative and bona fide efforts to reasonably accommodate the religious practices of employees. WRFA restores the original intent of Congress that required employers to "reasonably accommodate" the religious practices of employees insofar as doing so does not impose an "undue hardship" upon the employer. Under WRFA, undue hardship is defined as requiring "significant difficulty or expense". The bill establishes the several criteria for

determining what constitutes a significant difficulty or expense, including the costs of providing such an accommodation, the size of the employer, and the geographic separateness or administrative or fiscal relationship of an employer's multiple facilities.

WRFA requires the employer to make a good faith effort to accommodate the concerns of his or her employee. WRFA also states that an employee cannot receive an accommodation that interferes with the performance of a job's "essential functions".

WRFA has the support of a broad coalition of groups including the Seventh Day Adventist Church, the Family Research Council, the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations, the American Jewish Committee, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Southern Baptist Convention, the National Council of Churches, and the Anti-Defamation League.



Churches and Tax-Exempt Status

Senator Santorum wrote IRS Commissioner Mark Everson a letter urging the organization to take great care in pursuing investigations as to whether churches violated their tax-exempt status through sermons. Sen. Santorum stated that the IRS needed to be certain to not infringe on promoting undue restrictions on speech.

CARE Act

S. 1780: The Charity, Aid, Recovery and Empowerment (CARE) Act of 2005

The Charity, Aid, Recovery, and Empowerment (CARE) Act would provide 83 million Americans who do not itemize the opportunity to deduct a portion of their charitable contributions- representing more than two-thirds of American taxpayers. The CARE Act also provides incentives for individuals to give tax-free contributions from their Individual Retirement Accounts for charitable purposes, which will help a wide range of charities including educational institutions. This provision not only spurs charitable giving but also is likely to provide billions of dollars that could make higher education more accessible and affordable. The CARE Act also provides incentives for an estimated \$2 billion worth of food donations from farmers, restaurants, and corporations to help those in need. America's Second Harvest estimates that this is the equivalent of 878 million meals for hungry Americans over 10 years. This incentive is strongly supported by food banks, farm bureaus, and hunger advocacy groups around the country. The CARE Act also provides \$150 million for a Compassion Capital Fund to assist small community and faith-based organizations with technical assistance and expand their capacity to serve.

Fighting Anti-Semitism



Anti-Semitism Resolution

Anti-Semitism in the U.N.

Senator Santorum introduced S.Res. 184, which calls on the United Nations and its members states to stop the manifestations of anti-Semitism that continue to occur. The resolution notes the poor treatment of Israel at the UN, UN member states and UN officials anti-Semitic rhetoric, and need eliminate this racism from the world community. S. Res. 184 was reintroduced as S. Res. 240 and was passed with strong, bi-partisan support by the unanimous consent of the Senate.

Vandals leave a grave marked with a swastika at a Jewish Cemetery in France. CNN.com

Simon Wiesenthal Resolution

Senator Santorum co-sponsored S. Res. 245, a resolution to recognize the life and accomplishments of Simon Wiesenthal, a Holocaust survivor who dedicated his life to bringing Nazi war criminals to justice and opposing anti-Semitism.

Numerous reports of growing anti-Semitism have also been brought before our Working Group—in Iran where the president has notoriously denied the Holocaust and threatened the existence of Israel, in the streets of Russia, in the capitals of Europe, and shockingly even on the campuses of great American universities. The Protocols of the Elders of Zion... the precise work used by Hitler to indoctrinate Nazi youths, is resurfacing. We must take this threat seriously.”- Floor Statement by Sen. Rick Santorum

Anti-Semitism in France

In late 2003, the Ministry of Education created a national commission to combat anti-Semitism in schools and the Government continued efforts to promote tolerance and combat racism and anti-Semitism throughout the reporting period. In August 2004, the Mayor of Paris sent letters to all Paris-area principals calling for "debates on anti-Semitism, racism and discrimination" when classes resumed in September. France is home to Europe's largest Jewish and Muslim communities, estimated at 600,000 and 5 million respectively. In a March 2005 annual report to the Prime Minister, the National Consultative Commission on Human Rights (NCCHR) indicated that there were 1,565 racist and anti-Semitic incidents in 2004, nearly double the 833 recorded in 2003. The number of anti-Semitic incidents—including physical assaults, attacks against property, cemetery desecrations, threats, and reported insults—increased from 601 in 2003 to 970 in 2004.



“The brutal abduction and murder in Paris of a young Jewish man by a gang of African immigrants called the Barbarians has shocked the whole of France, which once again has been obliged to face its anti-Semitic past. The murder of a 23-year-old cell-phone salesman, Ilan Halimi, took place over three weeks, during which he was tortured while his captors tried to extract a ransom from his family.

Halimi was lured to his death by a woman he had met in his telephone store. They met up late on the night of January 20 in one of Paris's southern suburbs, Bagneux, on what he thought was a date. The next day, his parents received an e-mail telling them their son had been abducted and would be released on payment of about \$540,000... On February 11, four days after the abductors stopped communicating with the family, Halimi was found, still alive, not far from a railway line at Sainte-Genevieve-des-Bois, about 15 kilometers south of Bagneux.

He was naked, handcuffed, and bleeding profusely. He was incapable of speaking. His entire body - or "80% of it," according to police - had been butchered. He died of his wounds on the way to the hospital, just a few minutes after he was discovered.

The Jewish community in Paris was outraged. More than 1,000 attended his funeral at the Jewish cemetery at Pantin, in Paris's eastern suburbs, and last weekend they marched to protest at the futility of the murder.” *Excerpt from The New York Sun, February 22, 2006, Tale of Torture and Murder Horrifies the Whole of France, by Michel Gurfinkiel.*



Anti-Semitism in Germany

A degree of traditional anti-Semitism based on religious doctrines and anti-Jewish prejudices continue to exist in Germany. According to the 2005 report by the Office for the Protection of the Constitution, the total number of registered anti-Semitic crimes rose slightly from 1,199 in 2003 to 1,316 in 2004. Among these, the number of violent crimes increased from 35 to 37, although the number of desecrations of Jewish cemeteries, synagogues, and memorials declined from 113 to 101. Desecration of Jewish cemeteries or other monuments was the most widespread anti-Semitic act. In December 2004, billboards advertising the campaign against forgetting the Holocaust were defaced with anti-Semitic graffiti and slogans supporting a neo-Nazi organization. However, there were reports of personal violence, as in Frankfurt in August 2004, when a member of the Orthodox community was attacked and knocked to the ground by four men shouting, "They forgot to send your parents to the gas chamber."

While most anti-Semitic acts are attributed to neo-Nazi or other extremist groups or persons, recent anti-Semitic incidents indicate that Arab youths are increasingly behind attacks on and harassment of the Jews. Authorities strongly condemned all anti-Semitic acts and devoted significant resources to investigating incidents and prosecuting perpetrators. Authorities run a variety of tolerance-education programs, many focusing on anti-Semitism and xenophobia. The programs receive input and assistance from Jewish nongovernmental organizations. The state also provides 24-hour police protection at synagogues and many other Jewish institutions.



Anti-Semitism in the United States

Anti-Semitic incidents including physical and verbal assaults, harassments, property defacement, vandalism or other expressions of anti-Jewish sentiment have reached their highest level in the past nine years, totaling 1,821 incidents in 2004, according to a newly released statistics from the Anti-Defamations League (ADL). These acts included swastikas, "Death to Jews" and other graffiti written on a Houston synagogue; windows of a Jewish day school in North Miami being coated with feces, and the dissemination of anti-Semitic and racist leaflets "celebrating" Hitler's birthday.

A high number of anti-Semitic acts have also been reported at middle and high schools. Some examples include swastikas and "(expletive) the Jews" scrawled on the walls of middle school bathrooms in North Brunswick, NJ; an eight-grade student in South-River, New Jersey, placed a note in a Jewish teacher's school mailbox reading, "Hitler should have killed all you (expletive) Jews a long time ago; and an account of a middle school student telling a fellow Jewish student that the Anne Frank story was a lie and telling that student to go back to their concentration camp. Campus incidents have also increased marginally in the United States.

The Washington Times

Christian persecution growing

By Julia Duin

Published December 15, 2005

An array of activists yesterday offered a grim assessment of religious freedom around the world, saying that 2005 years after Jesus' birth, many of His followers are severely repressed.

The chief villains in a "Christmas Under Siege Around the World" panel at the Capitol were Indonesia, China, Uzbekistan, Iran and North Korea.

"Anti-Christian persecution and discrimination around the world ... is ugly, it's growing, and third, the mass media seem to generally ignore or downplay its gravity," Catholic Archbishop of Denver Charles Chaput said.

The press has been particularly remiss, he said, in covering Indonesia, where three teenage Christian girls recently were beheaded by Muslim militants.

"News reports tend to describe Indonesia's violence as generically 'sectarian,' as if Muslim and Christian extremists were mutually responsible," the archbishop said. "This is troubling and flatly false. The bloodshed is overwhelmingly provoked and carried out by Islamic militants against the Christian minority."

The archbishop was one of eight panelists who painted disturbing portraits of life for the average Christian in about a dozen countries.

The setting -- a small chamber off the Senate galleries with hot chocolate and cookies as refreshments and brightly colored buttons offering Christmas greetings in Chinese, Korean and Arabic -- was incongruous with large photos of a tortured or imprisoned Pakistani and Laotian Hmong Christians.

Jeff King, a panelist representing International Christian Concern, offered attendees a chance to view photos of the beheaded girls. There were no takers.

Indonesia, he said, had made it "practically impossible" for a Christian congregation to get a building permit. The government is drafting new laws about church buildings, "but the bottom line is, the cure is worse than the cold."

Notwithstanding the photos about the room of the second Bush inauguration, the Bush administration came in for criticism by Lawrence Uzzell, president of the International Religious Freedom Watch.

"We've known for the last decade that most of the State Department bureaucracy needs constant pressure to give these issues the attention they deserve," he said. "We now know that the White House also needs pressure, no matter which party is in power, sometimes especially with an administration that's tempted to think that it can take its religious supporters for granted."

Mr. Uzzell's chief complaint was with Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, describing both as "remote desert dictatorships" that are "the most vicious persecutors of religious faith" among the former Soviet republics.

Muslims of all stripes get the brunt of bad treatment in Uzbekistan, he said, and the country's reputation as "among the leading torturers of all Eurasia" is a result of its horrendous treatment of even the most moderate Muslim.

"The fact that Washington has not named Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan as 'countries of particular concern' under the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act ought to be a major scandal," he said.

Uzbekistan is "one of the places where renditions are said to happen," he said, referring to the U.S. practice of sending foreign captives to Third World countries for imprisonment and torture.

"Some of our leaders have now become so obsessed with the war on terrorism ... that they are willing to overlook the most horrible violations of freedom and of basic morality by dictators who claim to be our allies in that war," he said.

The panelists, who were assembled by Sen. Rick Santorum, Pennsylvania Republican, included members of the Congressional Working Group on Religious Freedom and the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

Richard Land, who is a member of the latter, as well as president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, portrayed North Korea as a country in which children are brainwashed from birth to worship the late Kim Il-Sung, and his son, President Kim Jon-Il.

"Religion [is portrayed as] evil in the country's education system and media and at the reported 450,000 'Kim Il-sung Revolutionary Research Centers,' at which North Koreans are required to attend at least weekly sessions for instruction, inspiration and self-criticism," he said.

In Sri Lanka, Buddhist militants have attacked religious minorities -- mainly Christians -- 200 times in the past two years, he said, but its government has done nothing to stop it. Indeed, the Sri Lankan government's "toleration of violence" has encouraged Buddhist radicals to propose laws in its parliament punishing with up to seven years' imprisonment for the "crime" of attempted conversion.

As for China, "the scope of political openness and individual freedom is narrowing" there, especially during 2005, he said. Particularly worrisome, he said, are the penalties exacted for teaching children about God.

Then Eden Naby, an Assyrian scholar described how in Iraq, the land where the Magi are said to have originated, the Christian population is fleeing to Turkey, Syria and Jordan. She said Iraqi Kurdish soldiers openly had attacked Assyrian churches and warned that today's election in Iraq could open the door for Shariah, or Islamic law, throughout the country.

"It's time for fair-minded people to rally," she said, "because these last Aramaic speakers symbolize the move to eliminate Christianity from its native region."



March 18, 2005 Friday
Bipartisan Unity For Bill Supporting Workplace Religion
By Luiza Ch. Savage, Staff Reporter of the Sun

A bill that would place a heavier burden on employers to accommodate the religious practices of their employees has a good chance of becoming law this year, a bipartisan group of its backers in Congress said.

Senator Kerry, a Democrat of Massachusetts, and Senator Santorum, a conservative Pennsylvania Republican, yesterday reintroduced the Workplace Religious Freedom Act in the Senate, where Mr. Kerry predicted "overwhelming support" for the legislation.

Mr. Kerry has been pushing the bill for almost a decade, since he was contacted by "two Catholic ladies who lost their jobs because they couldn't work on Christmas," he said at a press conference yesterday. "No American should ever have to choose between keeping a job and keeping faith with their cherished religious beliefs and traditions," he said.

Senators Schumer and Clinton also support the bill.

Rep. Carolyn McCarthy, a Democrat of New York, and Rep. Mark Souder, a Republican of Indiana, are championing the bill in the House. Its supporters also include Rep. Anthony Weiner, a Democrat of Queens, who is running for mayor of New York City.

The legislation faces opposition from some liberal lawmakers concerned by warnings from the American Civil Liberties Union and other groups that predict the law will enable harassment of homosexuals or restrict access to abortions. Some conservatives are also wary of the bill, saying it would impose new burdens on business owners. Supporters say such concerns are misplaced.

The high participation of religious voters in the November elections has given the bill new momentum, said the director of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America, Nathan Diament, one of the bill's champions.

"There is no piece of legislation on Capitol Hill right now that has as large or as broad support in the faith communities as the WRFA," said Mr. Diament.

A broad coalition of more than 40 religious and civil rights groups, ranging from the Conference of Catholic Bishops to the North American Council for Muslim Women, support the legislation.

Current law requires employers to accommodate religious practices as long as they do not incur more than minimal cost or difficulty in doing so. The bill would change the test to require accommodation unless the employer faces a significant difficulty.

Mr. Souder said that has concerned some Republicans who worry about the cost to businesses. "I understand as a retail businessman that there are tradeoffs," said Mr. Souder, a managing partner in a company that owns historic shops. "In most places, this isn't a real business threat."

The proposed federal legislation is similar to a state law in New York that allows employees to negotiate work schedules that accommodate their religious observances, or to wear religious headgear to work. New York's law was modeled after the draft federal legislation, and it offers the most "comprehensive" protections in the country, Mr. Diament said.

New York Attorney General Eliot Spitzer has used the law to sue FedEx for refusing to promote employees who wear beards or dreadlocks for religious reasons, for example.

"New York's law has not resulted in the infringement of the rights of others, or in the additional litigation that the ACLU predicts will occur if WRFA is enacted. Nor has it been burdensome on business," Mr. Spitzer wrote in the Forward newspaper in June 2004.

Supporters say the bill would restore the intended meaning of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that required employers to "reasonably accommodate" the religious practices of employees as long as doing so did not impose an "undue hardship" upon the employer. A series of court decisions had lessened this protection.

The bill would not apply to employers with fewer than 15 employees.



December 27, 2004, Monday

Freedom Fighter

By Meghan Clyne E

"No bullets, no lies -- you can't hide; it's genocide!"

Back in August, on a sweltering Washington day, roughly 50 people picketed in front of Sudan's embassy. They had assembled to denounce the Khartoum government and its grotesque human-rights abuses in Darfur. The noontime demonstration had been a daily routine on Massachusetts Avenue since late June; every Friday, an act of civil disobedience was staged. On this particular day, a Catholic priest would be arrested in solidarity with the Sudanese.

Shortly after 12:30, a blonde wearing shades strolled confidently up to the protesters. She greeted the organizers, conversed with clergymen in attendance, and then, before a crowd grown silent, delivered a damning account of Khartoum's atrocities. She urged divestment from oil companies funding Gen. Omar Bashir's reign of terror, and called for Sudan's removal from the U.N. Human Rights Commission. With her remarks concluded, and the priest locked away in the paddy wagon, the protesters began to disband; she mingled with the lingering ones, discussing the crisis.

Sound exhausting? For Nina Shea, it's all in a day's work.

Shea is the director of the Center for Religious Freedom (part of Freedom House, America's oldest human-rights group), and vice chairman of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. She is not your stereotypical "human-rights activist": no leftist hunger-striking protester here. Shea is impassioned yet savvy, an experienced legal mind, and a symbol of how the quest for worldwide human rights and religious freedom is increasingly the purview of the right-leaning. She is known especially for her advocacy in behalf of Christians (rare within the human-rights establishment); in 1997, Shea's first book, *In the Lion's Den*, won her recognition from *Newsweek* for "making Christian persecution Washington's hottest cause." Indeed, it was Christianity that prompted Shea to work for human rights in the first place: "I'm a Catholic, and I see it as my vocation."

This inspiration explains Shea's intense, and long, commitment to her cause. A native of Pennsylvania, educated at Smith College and American University's School of Law, Shea initially pursued traditional law-firm practice before finding fulfillment in human-rights law. Her first client was the great Soviet dissident Andrei Sakharov; next were the desaparecidos in El Salvador, then Romanian family-reunification cases, then South Africa -- and Nicaragua. It was her exposés of the Sandinistas, and the ensuing backlash from the American Left, that turned Shea away from her liberal-Democratic politics and the International League for Human Rights. In 1986 she married writer and editor Adam Meyerson (they have three children) and helped establish the Puebla Institute -- which evolved into the Center for Religious Freedom, and merged with Freedom House in 1995. Throughout Shea's career, the scope of her work has known no limit: She has fought in behalf of religious minorities nearly everywhere, from the Falun Gong in China to Muslim dissidents in Iran.

And for nearly everyone in Sudan, one of Shea's most heavily targeted oppressor regimes. Now, because of Darfur, Sudan has finally captured the world's attention; Shea, however, had been a vociferous critic of General Bashir's regime long before the current crisis. She was on the case during his first murderous campaign, against black Christians and animists in the south, where some 2 million died and another 5 million were displaced.

During that genocide, Shea cobbled together a coalition of religious and other leaders united in seeking an end to the atrocities. She testified several times before Congress, and took her case to the Clinton White House, where she met resistance on what administration officials had designated a "backburner issue." Undeterred, she wrote in 1998 an attention-grabbing op-ed in the *Wall Street Journal* documenting Khartoum's jihad against non-Muslims and pleading for the world to end its indifference. Shea found an important ally in George W. Bush; under his leadership, "one thing led to another," and peace protocols halting the violence were finally signed in June.

Shea's longtime attention to Sudan helped with the early classification of the Darfur situation -- as another genocide. She was

instrumental in bringing the slaughter there to the attention of American policymakers and international human-rights organizations. The results have been historic: In September, Colin Powell declared before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that "evidence leads us to the conclusion that genocide has occurred and may still be occurring in Darfur." According to Shea, it was the first time a party to the 1948 Genocide Convention had "formally charged another party with 'genocide' and invoked the convention's provisions while genocide has been in progress."

While Darfur has loomed large in recent months, it has hardly been Shea's only priority: She has also worked doggedly to ensure the protection of religious minorities under the new Iraqi constitution. On that same afternoon -- barely an hour after her Sudan-embassy speech -- Shea meets with Eden Naby, an Assyrian Christian and an advocate for the ChaldoAssyrian community.

That community is not faring well. Under Saddam Hussein, many Iraqi Christians were exiled and killed; while the removal of the Baathist regime led to some immediate improvements, these Christians have a long way to go before attaining real security and freedom. Because they are concentrated in the north of Iraq, they face oppression especially from the Kurds, who see the Assyrians as a threat to their territorial control. The abduction of ChaldoAssyrian women is commonplace, the destruction is widespread -- and government leaders disavow the brutality while secretly supplying those who perpetrate it.

The plight of Iraq's religious minorities is a familiar subject for Shea. Last fall, when she and her colleagues saw that the first draft of the Iraqi constitution lacked any provision for religious freedom in its bill of rights, "we almost dropped dead," Shea recalls, well aware of what unprotected religious minorities endure in extremist Muslim societies. So they worked through Senate offices -- especially with Republicans Rick Santorum and Sam Brownback -- to push for religious protections for individuals. But the constitution's second draft included only group rights, which, in the Middle East, are little better than none at all: "For Muslims, it means that the only people who really have rights . . . to religious freedom are the clergy." Finally, on the third round, at the last minute, Shea & Co. succeeded in having individual religious rights enshrined in Iraqi law.

Still, the struggle for religious freedom in Iraq is ongoing. So Shea listens to Naby attentively, offering tips for getting her cause on U.S. officials' agendas -- from writing about the situation to speaking before a Senate committee. "What we try to do," Shea explains, "is rely on the facts that are provided to us from trusted groups that we work with. And then our 'value added' is that we have contacts and experience in official Washington to try to raise the profiles of these issues . . . to give [these groups] help in advancing their causes, by strategizing with them."

Often it is an uphill battle. The Hudson Institute's Michael Horowitz, who has worked extensively with Shea, says there is an institutional bias in the Washington foreign-policy establishment that shuns this kind of sustained commitment to human rights. "The drill is: sign a piece of paper, declare victory, move on to the next issue" -- with protections of religious freedom often sacrificed in the process. Shea points to the constitution of Afghanistan as an example: "Religious freedom was never guaranteed in that bill of rights; and now Afghan Muslims are being, and have been, arrested under the Karzai government for blasphemy."

Shea sees extreme Islam -- especially as manifested in the state-imposed application of sharia law -- as one of the largest threats to religious freedom worldwide (along with persecution in the remaining Communist regimes, particularly China and Vietnam). A few months ago, Shea and Center for Religious Freedom senior fellow Paul Marshall completed a book (Radical Islam's Rules: The Worldwide Spread of Extreme Sharia Law, to be released early next year) documenting sharia's abuses in seven Muslim countries. They are also attentive to radical Islam here: The center recently concluded a study of pamphlets circulated in mosques throughout the United States bearing the official stamp of the Saudi government -- documents disseminating hate and promoting intolerance among America's Muslims.

In her ongoing struggle against this extremist Islam and other manifestations of religious persecution, Shea has developed a reputation for her knowledge and reliability. Virginia representative Frank Wolf calls her "very focused, and tough" (citing her success in getting the religious-freedom commission formed -- over the objections of many in the business community -- as an example). Barrett Duke, a member of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission -- which recently awarded Shea its John Leland religious-freedom prize -- says that having Shea join his efforts in behalf of North Korean religious freedom "automatically advanced the cause."

Duke gives some of the credit to Shea's effectiveness, which, he says, engenders respect in America's halls of power: "Nina works within the parameters that government allows, but she's not afraid to speak out against government intransigence." Part of her success, he says, comes from "knowing when to play along, and knowing when to put her foot down. She does that superbly, and this is why she's as effective as she is, and why government officials still listen to her." In addition to Shea's shrewdness, Duke also lauds the depth of her commitment, a sentiment echoed by New Jersey representative Christopher Smith, vice chairman of the House Committee on International Relations. He recounts how when -- in his view -- the Clinton administration "sold out the best and the brightest in China," Shea was "sick at heart."

In the course of Smith's work on China, the dissident Wei Jingsheng told him, "The stronger and more clear you are on human rights, the less we get beaten in prison. They do respect strength." Shea's strength in support of human rights is respected worldwide; she is crystal clear on the non-negotiability of religious freedom -- and, says Horowitz, of getting the political establishment to recognize it as "a core element of freedom itself."

Meghan Clyne is a reporter at the New York Sun.

**A Thanksgiving Message
By Senator Rick Santorum**

November 28, 2005 Monday

Sen. Rick Santorum, R-Pa., issued the following column:

Next Thursday is Thanksgiving, a day in which we gather with our families, friends, and neighbors to express our thanks for all we have been fortunate enough to receive throughout the year. It is also a time to celebrate the history of our nation, to remember those first brave men and women who traveled across the ocean to the New World and established the community foundation that, ultimately, became America. As you join with your families this week to enjoy all that comes with this quintessential American day, I'd like to share with you some of the things for which I am grateful.

First and foremost, I am extremely thankful for the faith and trust that you, the residents of Pennsylvania, have placed in me by twice asking me to represent you in the United States Senate. Besides being a husband and father of six magnificent children, this has been one of the greatest privileges of my life.

With this trust comes both great challenges and great opportunities. Pennsylvania is one of the most diverse states in the nation, comprised of individuals from all types of backgrounds and with different interests, concerns, and livelihoods. The challenge is in ensuring that the voice of every one of these individuals is heard. From farmers, to small business owners, to seniors and sportsmen - every Pennsylvanian deserves representation in the United States Senate, and I am thankful that you have entrusted me with the responsibility of fighting for your priorities.

Being a United States Senator from Pennsylvania has also given me the opportunity to engage, and hopefully make a difference, in some of the most important issues facing America today. Americans have a responsibility to the members of our community who are in need, and as we enjoy Thanksgiving and the rest of the holiday season, we must all remain conscious of those who are less fortunate than ourselves. My time in the Senate has presented me with the opportunity to interact with many Americans who struggle with the financial and emotional burden of extreme poverty. It has given me the unique chance to work with those in poverty-stricken communities as they aspire to a better life. This holiday season, I am extremely grateful to the millions of Americans who have moved from welfare to work, to those who have embraced educational, counseling, and job training services and to the faith-based and community organizations that serve them. And I am grateful that I have the opportunity to further strengthen Pennsylvania's communities and assist those in need.

As I have traveled throughout the Commonwealth these last eleven years, visiting each Pennsylvania county every year, I have been fortunate to meet thousands of Pennsylvania residents. Through these meetings, I have learned much about those I have the good fortune to represent and how I can best do my job. These men and women have reinforced my belief that, without question, there is no state that better exemplifies the graciousness and generosity of the American spirit than Pennsylvania. I have been lucky to represent such a constituency.

Finally, as we are safe at home this holiday season, we must all be mindful of the men and women in uniform who are not. Many of these brave soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines are on the other side of the globe, protecting the freedoms that we hold so dear. America is fortunate to be represented by the finest, most qualified, and most committed voluntary fighting force in the world. They are across the world, fighting to make America stronger and the world a better, safer place - we owe them, and their families, a debt of gratitude that can never be repaid.

Throughout the next few weeks, I hope you each have the opportunity to be with those you love - spending time with our families and friends is what truly makes this time of year so special. Have a wonderful Thanksgiving and a safe, happy, and healthy holiday season. God Bless.