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What We All Owe to Liu Xiaobo

*Excerpts of remarks by Rep. Chris Smith
Chair, Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights
And International Organizations
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Liu Xiaobo's premature death was a jarring shock to everyone who admired this champion of freedom and democracy. We mourn his loss because it is a tragic loss for his wife, family and friends and a catastrophic loss for China and the entire world.

We owe Liu Xiaobo a debt of gratitude because he demonstrated that the noble ideas of democracy and due process, liberty and the rule of law are not foreign ideas in China.

These are universal principles that beat strongly in the hearts of people everywhere from New Jersey to the Ninevah plains of Iraq, from Poland to Peru, and from Burma to Beijing.

We owe Liu Xiaobo a debt of gratitude because he reminded us that the desire for democracy and human rights are shared by everyone because each person is endowed by the Creator with inalienable rights.

The Chinese Communist Party has tried to curtail his ideas, they call them dangerous and subversive, and they seek to silence, censor, and repress them. Yet, they live on in the hearts of untold millions of Chinese people.

With Liu Xiaobo's death, we are also reminded of the words of Dr. Martin Luther King who said "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." We should all agree that what was done to Liu Xiaobo and his wife Liu Xia was a grave injustice.

Liu Xiaobo's imprisonment in 2009 became a death sentence. The blame for this should lie squarely on the Chinese government and for his death they alone should be held accountable.

Liu Xiaobo was the first Nobel Peace Prize winner to die in state custody since Carl von Ossietzky died after being held in a Nazi concentration camp.

Two days ago we heard the Chinese government complaining that it was "stabbed in the back" by those expecting it to deal quickly with its client state in North Korea. How shameful it is to play the victim card while a victim of their own repression lay dying.

No nation should be judged entirely by crimes of the past, but this crime—the death and silencing of Liu Xiaobo—should follow the Chinese Communist Party like an unwashable, permanent stain.

We must never forget Liu Xiaobo's enduring contributions—whether during the Tiananmen Massacre where he helped save the lives of many students or with Charter 08—the treatise urging political and legal reforms in China based on constitutional principles.

We must not forget Liu Xiaobo; we must advance and preserve his legacy, and repeatedly confront the Chinese Communist Party with his ideas and memory.

In this time of need we must signal the Congress's unanimous support for Liu Xiaobo's family, his wife Liu Xia, and all those bravely standing up for human rights and liberty in China.

I was invited by Liu Xiaobo's family to attend the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize ceremony. It was a moving ceremony; the now famous empty chair spoke volumes about the Chinese Communist Party's abiding fear that human rights and democracy will undermine its power.

I will always remember the words of Liu Xiaobo's speech that day about the importance of pressing for human rights:

"Freedom of expression is the foundation of human rights, the source of humanity, and the mother of truth. To strangle freedom of speech is to trample on human rights, stifle humanity, and suppress truth."

And he also expressed his hopes for China's future:

“... I firmly believe that China's political progress will not stop, and I, filled with optimism, look forward to the advent of a future free China. For there is no force that can put an end to the human quest for freedom, and China will in the end become a nation ruled by law, where human rights reign supreme.”

Liu Xiaobo will sadly never see a free China. Chinese authorities have gone to great lengths to stifle his ideas and those who followed him. In recent years, the government of President Xi Jinping has engaged in an extraordinary assault on the rule of law, human rights, ethnic minority groups, and civil society.

As China's economic and military might grows, more and more countries will be afraid to raise subjects that the Chinese Communist Party wants to make taboo.

The U.S. stands alone — inadequate as its efforts are at times — in its willingness to keep on raising human rights issues that need to be raised. The U.S. cannot lightly shrug off the mantle of being democracy's defender, no matter how heavy that mantle may become.

It is tempting to be pessimistic about China's future and the future of U.S.-China relations. But I am not pessimistic. Constant repression has not dimmed the desires of the Chinese people for freedom and reform. I attribute this fact, in part, to Liu Xiaobo's ideas and example.

Nevertheless, the U.S. cannot be morally neutral or silent in the face of the Chinese government's repression of fundamental freedoms. Human rights is not a secondary interest, but one critically-linked to U.S. economic and security interests.

The U.S. must not shy away from meeting with China's other Nobel Laureate, the Dalai Lama, or other dissidents. We must use Congressionally-authorized sanctions to hold Chinese officials accountable for torture and gross abuses. We must connect Internet and press freedoms as both economic and human rights priorities. And we must demand, repeatedly and clearly, that the unconditional release of political prisoners is in the interest of better U.S.-China relations.

I believe that someday China will be free. Someday, the people of China will be able to enjoy all of their God-given rights. And a nation of free Chinese men and women will honor and celebrate Liu Xiaobo as a hero. He will be honored along with all others like him who have sacrificed so much, and so long, for freedom.