

Opening Statement of Riley M. Barnes
Nominee for Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of Democracy,
Human Rights, and Labor
Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
September 3, 2025

Chairman Risch, Ranking Member Shaheen, Members of the Committee, thank you for considering my nomination to be Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (DRL).

I want to extend my gratitude to President Trump for this nomination. If confirmed, it will be an incredible honor and privilege to work for Secretary Rubio in this capacity. I am also grateful to Senator Cornyn for his generous introduction. Texas is home, and I am very proud to have Senator Cornyn represent me in the Senate, and as a former boss.

I would like to introduce my family next. It's their love and constant help that make it possible for me to pursue public service. With me today is my beautiful wife of twelve years, Katie. Next to her are: Benjamin, Henry, and Mary Margaret. I'm very proud of them. And I should note also with Katie is little Charlie, due in November, who is named – in part – after my father who passed away four weeks ago today.

In his first remarks to State Department employees, Secretary Rubio emphasized that, "We are a nation founded on a powerful principle, and that powerful principle is that all men are created equal, because our rights come from God our Creator – not from our laws, not from our governments." The Secretary went on to say that we will always be strong defenders of that principle. And that's why the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor is important. We are a nation of individuals, each made in the image of God and possessing an inherent dignity. This is a truth that our founders understood as essential to American self-government.

I believe our country and our government is the best in the world, and our strength comes from our enduring values. These values aren't an endless list of "rights" that people create and change and form to meet their own needs or desires. These values aren't identity politics. They are the historic, natural rights that we have as individuals, pursuing life, liberty, and happiness in this world. For rights to be untethered from this core principle is to make them mere sentiments, easily manipulated by authoritarians and bad actors. Natural rights are a blessing and an immutable reality. President Trump and Secretary Rubio, like our Founding Fathers, understand this.

If confirmed, I will work diligently to elevate the unalienable rights and freedoms recognized in our founding documents. These provide a firm foundation for DRL's work. America's recognition of unalienable rights is unique in human history. And it is our duty to defend those rights for our citizens, and champion them for the rest of the world to enjoy.

When I started talking to my children about this opportunity, I told them the Bureau's job is to tell the truth: to call out countries that violate these rights, and to expose and punish bad actors whose assaults on human dignity threaten the American way of life, a life of freedom.

Part of this job would also require challenging those who censor these values. As Secretary Rubio has said, free speech is among the most cherished rights we enjoy as Americans. It is a right enshrined in our constitution, and it sets us apart as a beacon of freedom around the world. It is important that we defend free speech as an essential element of good governance.

Our country is the strongest defender of religious freedom around the world. Championing this first freedom would be an essential component of my job if confirmed. Pushing back on the scourge of antisemitism – and strongly encouraging partners to do more to fight it – is greatly needed.

Combating human trafficking is also vital to protecting our communities and fortifying our national security. To achieve these goals, I'm committed to working with the President's nominees to lead the Office of International Religious Freedom, the Office of the Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism, and the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons.

Finally, if confirmed, I will ensure DRL defends the interest of American workers on the global stage. That means fighting for a level playing field and protecting American workers and industry from foreign actors that violate labor laws and undermine our national security. Forced labor and child labor are morally reprehensible and threaten American prosperity. The work of DRL, including the TIP Office, to prohibit the importation of goods made with forced labor is critical to ensuring the American economy flourishes.

Thank you again for your time this morning. As a former Senate staffer, I have deep respect for this institution, the committee, and the important role you fulfill in the conduct of U.S. foreign policy. If confirmed, I am committed to working closely with this committee on issues of mutual concern, and promise to make myself available to committee Members. I look forward to your questions.