Now I wish to take this

opportunity to speak about the ongoing

cause of human rights and democracy

in Russia. These are not issues we

hear much about from the current Russian

Government, unfortunately, unless

it is to denounce those Russian

citizens who aspire to these universal

values.

I had an opportunity the other week

to meet with one of these brave Russian

champions of human rights,

human dignity, and freedom—a man by

the name of Boris Nemtsov. I know

several other people and other Members

of Congress had a similar opportunity

to speak with him. Mr. Nemtsov

is but one of the many Russians who

believe their country deserves a government

that enhances and enshrines

the human rights of its people in an inviolable

rule of law, that allows citizens

to hold their leaders accountable

through a real Democratic process.

This Saturday, March 20, many Russian

human rights activists are planning

public demonstrations all across

their great country—I might add at

great risk, since there is very little

doubt that the Russian Government

may even forcibly repress some of

these public demonstrations, which

will be peaceful. I asked Mr. Nemtsov

what we in Washington could do to

support the cause of human rights in

Russia, and he simply said:

It is my pleasure to do that today.

The Russian Government will surely

take whatever I say here and similar

things said by others and try to paint

Russia’s champions of human rights

and democracy as puppets and proxies

of the United States. Of course, they

would say and do the exact same thing

even if no Americans spoke up for the

human rights of Russia’s citizens. So

we should refrain from internalizing

the Kremlin’s talking points, especially

when Russians themselves are

requesting our moral support for their

cause. Because the fact is, this isn’t

about particular individuals or particular

demonstrations held this week

or any week in Russia. This is about

universal values—values that we in the

United States embody but do not own,

values that should shape the conduct of

every government, be it ours or Russia’s

or any other country’s. When we

see citizens of conviction seeking to

hold their governments to the higher

standard of human rights, we should

speak up for them.

This is all the more necessary when

we realize the obstacles those citizens

face, especially in Russia. I wish to

read a passage from the 2009 Country

Report on Human Rights Practices,

which was recently released by our

State Department. Here is how they

described the human rights situation

in Russia:

It will be very interesting to see how

the police and the government treat

these demonstrations that will take

place across Russia on March 20. These

conditions would be intolerable in any

country, and this conduct would be unacceptable

for any government. Clearly,

Russia today is not the Soviet

Union, neither in its treatment of Russia’s

people nor in its foreign policy.

But I fear that may be damning with

faint praise, and Russians themselves

are right to hold their country and

their government up to higher standards.

Russia is a great nation, and like all

Americans of good will, I want Russia

to be strong and successful. I want Russia’s

economy to be a vibrant source of

wealth and opportunity for all Russians.

I want Russia to play a proud

and responsible role in world affairs. I

will continue to affirm in public and in

private that the best way for Russians

to secure what they say they care

about most—reduced corruption, a

strengthened and equitable rule of law,

economic modernization—is by nurturing

a pluralistic and free civil society,

by building independent and sustainable

institutions of democracy, and

by respecting the human rights of all.

I was happy to see that Russian political

parties not aligned with the Kremlin

actually won more seats in regional

parliamentary elections this week.

Perhaps this signals a growing recognition

among Russians that the authoritarian

tendencies of the Kremlin need

to be rolled back through popular opposition.

Perhaps the Russian Government

could allow future elections at

all levels to be freer and fairer. Perhaps.

But there is still a long way to go

for the cause of democracy in Russia,

and I hope these small electoral gains

only embolden democracy’s defenders.

As we speak up for the rights of Russia’s

dissidents, we must do the same

for the rights of Russia’s neighbors as

well—neighbors such as the country of

Georgia. I visited Georgia in January,

and I had a chance to travel to the socalled

‘‘administrative boundary line’’

with the breakaway region of

Abkhazia. On the other side of that

boundary line is sovereign Georgian

territory occupied by Russian troops,

as it has been since the 2008 invasion.

When I was in Munich last month for

an annual security conference, I heard

several Russian officials speaking from

the same script, alleging acts of aggression

by Georgian forces against

Russian peacekeepers—the same kind

of rhetoric we heard before the 2008 invasion.

This should give us all pause. I

know Washington has a lot of foreign

policy challenges at the moment, but

we cannot forget Georgia and the support

it deserves amid a continuing

threat from its neighbor to the north.

A Russian government that better

protects the human dignity of its people

would be more inclined to deal with

its neighbors in peace and mutual respect.

That is why we should all say a

silent prayer and a public word of support

for Russia’s courageous human

rights activists, as they make their

voices heard this Saturday. These

brave men and women want the best

for their country. They want a government

that is not only strong but just,

peaceful, inclusive, and democratic. I

urge Russia’s leaders to recognize that

peaceful champions of universal values

are not a threat to Russia, and that

groups such as this should not face the

kinds of violence, repression, and intimidation

that Russian authorities

have used against similar demonstrators

in the past. The eyes of the world

will be watching.

Mr. President, I suggest the absence

of a quorum.