

**Ambassador Morningstar
Farewell Event at the
Azerbaijan National Art Museum**

JULY 24, 2014

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen.

I am very happy to be giving my farewell speech to a group of alumni of U.S.-sponsored exchange programs. I have worked very hard over the years on these programs, and I have said many times that I think that our exchanges are the most valuable programs that we have with Azerbaijan. You are the future leaders of Azerbaijan, and in many cases, you are already assuming important leadership roles.

I am also glad to see so many representatives of the press here tonight. The press plays a critical role in every society, including in Azerbaijan.

As you know, I am coming to the end of my time as Ambassador. In fact, I will be leaving a week from now. I have been packing and saying my good-byes, but I wanted to take time to share a few thoughts about my two years here and about the future of our relationship with Azerbaijan.

First of all I want to make clear that Faith and I have been here the last two years for one reason: We care deeply about Azerbaijan. Everything that I have done or said over the past two years has been with only one thing in mind. To work with Azerbaijan to continue its progress in becoming a democratic, market based country. I have been and always will be a friend of Azerbaijan. I agreed to serve as Ambassador because I had a long relationship with this country and its people. I have been coming to Azerbaijan since 1995, and I consider many Azerbaijanis to be real friends. It has been an honor and a pleasure to serve as Ambassador, so it is with sadness that I leave.

Let me emphasize, first and foremost that the United States recognizes and I recognize the courageous course that Azerbaijan has taken in maintaining its sovereignty and independence over the past 23 years. The United States will always support Azerbaijan's sovereignty and independence. When I first visited Azerbaijan almost 20 years ago, it was a different place. A cease-fire had been declared to end major hostilities with respect to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The economy was in bad shape. But since then, Azerbaijan has seen tremendous economic growth, and much of the country has changed dramatically. Baku is a much different city today than it was two decades ago. Azerbaijan and its people have overcome enormously difficult challenges, and you should be proud of that.

Azerbaijan has demonstrated its sovereignty and independence in many ways. In the energy area Azerbaijan fully committed itself to the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, despite much pressure to do otherwise. This pipeline has been the cornerstone of Azerbaijan's economic growth. And most of all the United States supported the pipeline because it helped Azerbaijan and neighboring Georgia maintain their sovereignty and independence.

It was equally brave for Azerbaijan to commit to the Southern Gas Corridor, which will bring gas to Georgia, Turkey and on into Europe. I was particularly pleased to help move the Southern Gas Corridor closer to realization. I also hope our bilateral economic cooperation continues to grow, not just in energy, but in other fields. And I also hope bilateral trade and investment will continue to increase.

Azerbaijan showed courage and determination as well in the geopolitical area with its strong support in Kosovo, Iraq and Afghanistan. Along with sending troops to Afghanistan, Azerbaijan made the political decision to serve as a transit hub for goods going to and from Afghanistan. It did not need to do that and our cooperation in this area has taken place without a hitch. Our cooperation abounds in numerous other areas from working with border services, working on non-proliferation and cooperation to prevent trafficking in persons. This coming Fall non-stop flights will begin between Azerbaijan and the United States. There are so many programs that that we have that very few have even heard of.

We continue to work to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. By spending the last two years in Azerbaijan, including much time in the regions, Faith and I have learned how painful this conflict has been for all Azerbaijanis. We need a renewed effort to once and for all resolve this conflict. Peace would bring substantial benefits to people across the region and ensure Azerbaijan's prosperity into the future. You and the people of the region deserve nothing less.

The economic and security elements of our bilateral relationship are important. But they are not the only pieces of our relationship with Azerbaijan. We talk all the time, with officials at all levels, about democracy and human rights. These things matter to the United States. They define us and our foreign policy.

As President Obama told an audience of European youth in Brussels last month, "Yes, we believe in democracy...; and independent judiciaries and opposition parties; civil society and uncensored information so that individuals can make their own choices... That is what we believe. That's what makes us strong."

Obviously we and Azerbaijan sometimes look at these issues differently. But as with any partner, continued dialogue is important. We can have disagreements, but we need to keep talking. We need to try to understand each other's positions and recognize each other's interests. We need to stop talking at and past each other and need to talk to each other on these very important issues.

We recognize that Azerbaijan is in a complicated neighborhood. We need to stand by Azerbaijan as it strives to maintain its sovereignty and independence. We know that the paramount concern of the Government is to preserve stability. We also want to help preserve stability in Azerbaijan. We have seen what has happened in too many countries when stability has been lost.

That said, we strongly believe Azerbaijan will be more stable over the long term if society is more open, and if people are allowed more freedom to express themselves. We say this not because it will make the United States happy, but because we believe it is in Azerbaijan's interest. We believe there is a balance between stability and openness, and we think that a country in which individuals have the freedom to act and to create opportunities for themselves ultimately will be successful. This is in the long-term interest of both the people and the government of Azerbaijan.

In many ways, an open, active civil society can be a tremendous positive force. I am always impressed by the hard work and dedication of activists and NGO leaders in Azerbaijan. I am particularly proud of the work that Faith has done with many of the women in this country. Activists and leaders care deeply about their country. They see needs in society, and they want to make things better. They want to make a difference.

We do not consider individuals or organizations like these a destabilizing force. Again, I want to be clear: the United States does not want in any way to create instability or unrest in Azerbaijan. But we also believe that the Government should look at the individual cases that we have talked a lot about, the most recent being the case of Hasan Huseynli, and look at the cost-benefit to determine whether these cases increase stability or create unnecessary problems. We support NGOs and civil society generally because we believe strongly in the value of their work. Our guiding principle is that NGOs must operate transparently, and we encourage close dialogue with the government.

Going forward, I hope a greater understanding and appreciation of the importance of our bilateral relationship will evolve. We recognize that Azerbaijan has chosen its own path, and we strongly support Azerbaijan's independence and sovereignty. We will continue to look for ways to deepen our relationship. But to do so, we must overcome some of the issues that create irritants and make it harder for us to accomplish things that are in our mutual interest.

In closing, let me say again that I am honored to have served as Ambassador to Azerbaijan. Faith and I will always treasure our time here. I will continue to follow very closely the progress of our important bilateral relationship, and I will provide whatever support I can to ensure Azerbaijan reaches its full potential. I will always remain a friend of this country, and I look forward to remaining engaged for another 20 years.

Thank you.