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Story of Mikhail Khodorkovsky

Hon. Roger F. Wicker

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 7, 2003, the gentleman from Mississippi (Mr. *Wicker*) is recognized for 60 minutes as the designee of the majority leader.

Mr. WICKER. Mr. Speaker, I shall not take near 60 minutes, but I intend to yield the vast majority of this time back to the Chair so the Chair can recognize my friend, the gentleman from Texas (Mr. *Poe*). I appreciate the leadership accommodating me so I can tell to the Members the story, the unfortunate story, of Mikhail Khodorkovsky and the state of affairs in the Russian Federation today.

Since June of 1987, when President Reagan stood at the Brandenburg Gate and urged Mikhail Gorbachev to "Tear down this wall," through glasnost and perestroika, through monetary reform and trade, the United States has taken an approach towards active engagement toward democratic reform in Russia.

As cochairman of the Russia Democracy Group, I am committed to seeing these efforts continue. Today the U.S. looks to Russia as a partner in this changing world. At the same time, the responsibility lies on our shoulders to hold our Russian counterparts accountable as they move towards democracy. Recent events in Russia such as the consolidation of power by the Kremlin, restrictions on the media, and the government seizure of private companies, have raised concerns over the path Russia is taking to freedom.

One recent incident in particular draws to mind memories of Russia under the Soviet Union, not the free and democratic society we had hoped it would become. Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who is pictured here to my left, was CEO of the YUKOS Oil Company, the largest company in Russia. In October of 2003, he was arrested at gunpoint and tried for a multitude of politically motivated charges. The trial, if you can call it that, was completed on May 31 of this year, and Mr. Khodorkovsky was sentenced to 9 years in prison.

Recently I, along with many Members of Congress, had the opportunity to meet with one of Mr. Khodorkovsky's business partners, Leonid Nevzlin. Mr. Nevzlin, now living in

Israel, has also been charged by the Russian courts for his connection to YUKOS.

While in the United States, Mr. Nevzlin spoke before the U.S. Helsinki Commission and confirmed what many of us feared. Russia is quickly moving away from democracy rather than embracing it.

Mikhail Khodorkovsky's account of the trial and the deterioration of law in Russia is a compelling story that needs to be heard. Following his sentencing, Mr. Khodorkovsky wrote his thoughts from his prison cell as he awaited his departure for the Siberian prison camps. I believe it is important today that I read his profoundly eloquent statement in its entirety.

"Despite obvious lack of evidence of my guilt and a mass of evidence that I was not involved in any crimes whatsoever, the court has decided to send me to the camps.

"I do not intend to harshly criticize the esteemed judge, Irina Kolesnikova. I can imagine what sort of pressure she was under from the initiators of the Khodorkovsky case while she was preparing the verdict. Scores of government functionaries, or just plain self-interested intermediaries, were ready to bring any amount of money to the court to make sure I was sent to Siberia.

"When it comes right down to it, Kolesnikova is not the problem. The problem is that the judiciary in Russia has turned completely into a mindless appendage, a blunt weapon of the executive. Actually, not so much of the executive branch of power as of several economic groups with criminal ties. Millions of our fellow citizens have seen today that despite our country's top leadership's statements about the need to strengthen due process, there is nothing to pin our hopes on for now. This is a shame and a stain on our country, and it is a misfortune.

"I do not admit guilt, and consider that my innocence has been proven. This is why I will appeal the sentence handed down to me today. For me, it is a fundamental matter of principal to obtain truth and justice in my Motherland.

“I know that the sentence in the criminal case against me was ultimately decided in the Kremlin. Some people in the President’s entourage insisted that only an acquittal could bring back society’s trust in the government, while others insisted that I be locked up for a long time in order to deprive me of the will to live, to be free, and to fight.

“I want to say thank you for the former, and bring attention to the latter that they have not won.

“They will never be capable of understanding that freedom is an internal state of a person. It is precisely those who wish me ill, the ones who have dreams at night of a Khodorkovsky rabidly thirsting for vengeance, who are doomed to spend the rest of their lives trembling over the stolen assets of YUKOS.

“It is they who are profoundly unfree and will never be free. It is their pitiful existence that is the true prison.

“I, on the other hand, have the full right to say whatever I think and to act as I deem necessary without needing to get my plans approved by any overseers. And this is why my living space from now on is the territory of freedom. The captives are those who remain slaves of the system, who have to grovel, to lie, and to debase others in order to preserve their incomes and their dubious status in this obscene society.

“I will engage in civic activities; I plan to create several philanthropic organizations, for example a foundation to support Russian poetry and one for Russian philosophy, as well as a Union for Aid to Russian Prisoners. I remain an active participant in the programs of Open Russia. I will soon be holding an extramural press conference at which I will discuss the highest-priority steps. This will be the first press conference from jail in post-Soviet history.

“While I no longer have significant personal assets, there are many people willing to provide financial support for my programs because of their association with my name?

“I want to say a big thank you to everyone who gathered here today inside and outside the courthouse, and to everybody who supported me over the preceding year and a half. You are the decent and valiant people of Russia. I solemnly state that you can always count on me. Even though I do not have big money anymore, we can accomplish a great deal together.

“I would like to say a separate word of thanks to those tens of thousands of ordinary inhabitants of Russia, from every corner of our country, who have supported me with their letters. My time in jail has shown me yet again that the Russia people are not mindless beasts of burden, as certain ideologists close to those in power assert. No, they are a righteous and noble people.

“I will work together with those who want and are able to speak openly about our country, about our people, and about our common present and future. I will fight for freedom, for mine, for Platon Lebedev’s, for that of my other friends, and for that of all Russia. And particularly for that

of the next generations, those to whom our country will belong in only a few years.”

Mr. Speaker, Mr. Khodorkovsky concludes his letter with these profound paragraphs:

“For them, my fate must become a lesson and an example.

Thank you to my family. They have been and remain my support, now and always. It may take many years, but I will walk out from the barbed wire and will return home. I have never been as sure of anything as I am of this.

“Even though years of prison await me, I am still experiencing a great sense of relief. My life is now a clean slate; there is nothing extraneous, accidental, or superficial in it anymore. I see my future as bright, and the air of tomorrow’s Russia as pure.

“I have lost my place in the oligarchs’ clique. But I have gained a huge number of true and loyal friends.

“I have regained a sense of my country. I am now together with my people, and now, we shall overcome together as well.

“Do not despair. Truth always wins out sooner or later.”

Thus ends the statement of Mikhail Khodorkovsky.

Mr. Speaker, as Russia’s participation in the international community increases, it is imperative that the United States works to ensure that this country continues toward democracy for the people of Russia and for the entire world.

Rest assured that Mikhail Khodorkovsky is right. In the end truth will win out, as will freedom.

I thank the leadership and the Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, I yield back the balance of my time.