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Promoting Free and Responsible Media: An Integral Part of America's Foreign Policy

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"Freedom of the press is not an end
in itself but a means to the end
of achieving a free society."

Former U.S. Supreme Court
Justice Felix Frankfurter

This spring, independent newspapers in Kyrgyzstan can look forward to the delivery of a new color printing press. In a program designed to promote free and dynamic media in the country, the U.S. Department of State has provided funding for that press and for training courses for Kyrgyz journalists. The project is a concrete demonstration of how the promotion of open media is an important component of U.S. foreign policy.

The right of the press to freely publish, editorialize, critique, and inform is a fundamental principle of American democracy. In fact, the form of government Americans enjoy today would not have been possible without a great compromise known as the Bill of Rights, the first ten amendments to the U.S. Constitution. The first amendment declares that "Congress shall make no law...abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press." Freedom of the press exists not merely because it is codified in law. It exists and flourishes today because the American people cherish it. They do so because the free press has had an important role to play in forging our great nation and in elevating it to the position of world leader in democracy and human rights.

While freedom of the press prospers in America today, it is far from a uniquely American institution. Free and responsible media can have a positive influence in any country, including those that are newly emerging

democracies. Free press is essential in achieving stable, democratic government, like that enjoyed by Americans.

Promoting freedom of the press is really about promoting human freedom. For people to play an active role in the politics of their country, they must be informed. Even something as simple as voting can be difficult without enough information. A free press transmits to the people information about their leaders, the policies of other nations, and even the practices of national businesses. American support of free press is grounded in the belief that with a full and complete understanding of the state of affairs in their country and in the world, people will choose for themselves those institutions, policies, and practices that best preserve and protect fundamental civil and human rights.

The United States supports free and responsible media by encouraging other governments to adopt practices that protect press freedoms and by funding media training and support programs that instruct foreign journalists in the United States and abroad. Most programs involve those countries that could most benefit from a free press, such as emerging democracies. While freedom of the press brings a host of benefits to any country, American support for free and responsible media is best explained in four ways.

First, America supports the development of free and responsible media because the right to a free press, and the freedoms of thought and speech that free press entails, are fundamental and universal human rights that ought to be enjoyed by all people based on their humanity. This belief is displayed in the U.S. Constitution, in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and in the United States' history of combating censorship and media control domestically and abroad.

Second, the presence of a free press is essential for true and full democracy to emerge. Only a free press can provide voters with the information they need to choose the best leaders. Too often, governments use state-controlled media to present a distorted set of facts.

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Likewise, without protections, governments can coerce private media into publishing or not publishing vital information. In short, free media ensure that governments will represent the interests of their citizens and that citizens can hold their governments accountable. In public discourse, a free press allows the expression of many editorial opinions and commercial advertisements. This environment is a "marketplace of ideas" where citizens and consumers choose and support those ideas that are better than others. Such a system ensures the best result without silencing any viewpoint.

Third, a strong, positive relationship exists between open reporting and free, open, and effective economies. Economic growth results in improvements in standards of living, education, and health care—in short, a better and freer life in a country that is generally more stable and peaceful. A recent World Bank publication, entitled *The Right to Tell*, documents the role open media play in supporting economic growth. The president of the World Bank Group, James D. Wolfensohn, wrote in the book's introduction that "to reduce poverty, we must liberate access to information and improve the quality of information. People with more information are empowered to make better choices." Free media promote the exchange of successful business practices, create trading partners, and can make economies more efficient by disseminating useful technology. Open reporting also preserves the support and trust of investors, both domestic and foreign.

Finally, America promotes free and responsible media because it is essential that American actions and intentions be reported accurately. The United States strives to promote democracy and human rights, eliminate hunger and disease, and maintain security in the world. Unfortunately, U.S. actions or policies in support of those goals are sometimes misrepresented by state-controlled media or private groups. To combat anti-Americanism, to build trust, and to better educate people worldwide about America, it is critical that a free and responsible media accurately report U.S. actions.

In addition to physical investments such as the Kyrgyz

printing press, the Department of State and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) support freedom of the press by funding media training and management programs. As examples, in 2003 such funding will support programs by the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) to train print and media professionals in Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan. Participants in the programs will be instructed in professional ethics, investigating techniques, and how to maintain independence from state sponsors and interest groups that could impede editorial freedom. Another ICFJ program funded by the Department of State will present a year-long series of workshops in southeastern Europe to improve journalists' abilities to report on the sale of women and girls. A program sponsored by USAID and managed by Internews, an international non-profit

organization that fosters independent media in emerging democracies, will train journalists from Cambodia and Indonesia in the creation of sustainable, unbiased media outlets.

In the eyes of Americans, every human has a right to receive accurate information about his or her government, other governments, and the state of the world. And equally important, free media serve as a check on powerful government, while preserving the integrity of a nation's economy and accurately accounting for U.S. actions abroad. Though a printing press may seem little more than a machine to many, its delivery to Kyrgyzstan will soon enable the people of that nation to enjoy these rights and opportunities as never before, and to build a better, freer country for it.