

that they won't suffer any consequences for their actions, and so they carry on. But when we do act, we send a powerful moral message. Right here in Geneva, the international community acted this year to strengthen a global consensus around the human rights of LGBT people. At the Human Rights Council in March, 85 countries from all regions supported a statement calling for an end to criminalization and violence against people because of their sexual orientation and gender identity.

At the following session of the Council in June, South Africa took the lead on a resolution about violence against LGBT people. The delegation from South Africa spoke eloquently about their own experience and struggle for human equality and its indivisibility. When the measure passed, it became the first-ever UN resolution recognizing the human rights of gay people worldwide. In the Organization of American States this year, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights created a unit on the rights of LGBT people, a step toward what we hope will be the creation of a special rapporteur.

Now, we must go further and work here and in every region of the world to galvanize more support for the human rights of the LGBT community. To the leaders of those countries where people are jailed, beaten, or executed for being gay, I ask you to consider this: Leadership, by definition, means being out in front of your people when it is called for. It means standing up for the dignity of all your citizens and persuading your people to do the same. It also means ensuring that all citizens are treated as equals under your laws, because let me be clear—I am not saying that gay people can't or don't commit crimes. They can and they do, just like straight people. And when they do, they should be held accountable, but it should never be a crime to be gay.

And to people of all nations, I say supporting human rights is your responsibility too. The lives of gay people are shaped not only by laws, but by the treatment they receive every day from their families, from their neighbors. Eleanor Roosevelt, who did so much to advance human rights worldwide, said that these rights begin in the small places close to home—the streets where people live, the schools they attend, the factories, farms, and offices where they work. These places are your domain. The actions you take, the ideals that you advocate, can determine whether human rights flourish where you are.

And finally, to LGBT men and women worldwide, let me say this: Wherever you live and whatever the circumstances of your life, whether you are connected to a network of support or feel isolated and vulnerable, please know that you are not alone. People around the globe are working hard to support you and to bring an end to the injustices and dangers you face. That is certainly true for my country. And you have an ally in the United States of America and you have millions of friends among the American people.

The Obama Administration defends the human rights of LGBT people as part of our comprehensive human rights policy and as a priority of our foreign policy. In our embassies, our diplomats are raising concerns about specific cases and laws, and working with a range of partners to strengthen human rights protections for all. In Washington, we have created a task force at the State Department to support and coordinate this work. And in the coming months, we will provide every embassy with a toolkit to help improve their efforts. And we have created a program that offers emergency support to defenders of human rights for LGBT people.

This morning, back in Washington, President Obama put into place the first U.S. Government strategy dedicated to combating human rights abuses against LGBT persons abroad. Building on efforts already underway at the State Department and across the government, the President has directed all U.S. Government agencies engaged overseas to combat the criminalization of LGBT status and conduct, to enhance efforts to protect vulnerable LGBT refugees and asylum seekers, to ensure that our foreign assistance promotes the protection of LGBT rights, to enlist international organizations in the fight against discrimination, and to respond swiftly to abuses against LGBT persons.

I am also pleased to announce that we are launching a new Global Equality Fund that will support the work of civil society organizations working on these issues around the world. This fund will help them record facts so they can target their advocacy, learn how to use the law as a tool, manage their budgets, train their staffs, and forge partnerships with women's organizations and other human rights groups. We have committed more than \$3 million to start this fund, and we have hope that others will join us in supporting it.

The women and men who advocate for human rights for the LGBT community in hostile places, some of whom are here today with us, are brave and dedicated, and deserve all the help we can give them. We know the road ahead will not be easy. A great deal of work lies before us. But many of us have seen firsthand how quickly change can come. In our lifetimes, attitudes toward gay people in many places have been transformed. Many people, including myself, have experienced a deepening of our own convictions on this topic over the years, as we have devoted more thought to it, engaged in dialogues and debates, and established personal and professional relationships with people who are gay.

This evolution is evident in many places. To highlight one example, the Delhi High Court decriminalized homosexuality in India two years ago, writing, and I quote, "If there is one tenet that can be said to be an underlying theme of the Indian constitution, it is inclusiveness." There is little doubt in my mind that support for LGBT human rights will continue to climb. Because for many young people, this is simple: All people deserve to be treated with dignity and have their human rights respected, no matter who they are or whom they love.

There is a phrase that people in the United States invoke when urging others to support human rights: "Be on the right side of history." The story of the United States is the story of a nation that has repeatedly grappled with intolerance and inequality. We fought a brutal civil war over slavery. People from coast to coast joined in campaigns to recognize the rights of women, indigenous peoples, racial minorities, children, people with disabilities, immigrants, workers, and on and on. And the march toward equality and justice has continued. Those who advocate for expanding the circle of human rights were and are on the right side of history, and history honors them. Those who tried to constrict human rights were wrong, and history reflects that as well.

I know that the thoughts I've shared today involve questions on which opinions are still evolving. As it has happened so many times before, opinion will converge once again with the truth, the immutable truth, that all persons are created free and equal in dignity and rights. We are called once more to make real the words of the Universal Declaration. Let us answer that call. Let us be on the right side of history, for our people, our nations, and future generations, whose lives

will be shaped by the work we do today. I come before you with great hope and confidence that no matter how long the road ahead, we will travel it successfully together. Thank you very much. (Applause.)

RECOGNIZING MR. ELLIS WILKERSON FOR HIS CONTRIBUTIONS AND SERVICE TO COMMUNITY AND COUNTRY

**HON. BENNIE G. THOMPSON**

OF MISSISSIPPI

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

*Tuesday, January 10, 2012*

Mr. THOMPSON of Mississippi. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to honor Mr. Ellis Wilkerson of Yazoo County, Mississippi.

Mr. Ellis Wilkerson served in the National Guard for 20 years, Special Force 1st/20 and 1st/114 Artillery. Mr. Wilkerson also served in the U.S. Army Infantry from 1968–1970. He is the recipient of the Infantry Badge, Vietnam Campaign Badge, Purple Heart, and Bronze Star.

Mr. Wilkerson is married to Mary Johnson-Wilkerson and they have two sons. He is a member of Pleasant Grove M.B. Church where he serves as a Deacon. Mr. Wilkerson is a one hundred percent disabled Veteran, and he is also retired from the VA Medical Center.

Mr. Speaker, I ask my colleagues to join me in recognizing Mr. Ellis Wilkerson for serving our country honorably.

VERA ORTEGON TRIBUTE

**HON. SCOTT R. TIPTON**

OF COLORADO

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

*Tuesday, January 10, 2012*

Mr. TIPTON. Mr. Speaker, I rise today in honor of outgoing Pueblo, Colorado City Council Representative Vera Ortegon. Councilwoman Ortegon's last day representing her at-large district was December 31, 2011.

A businesswoman, microbiologist, and mother, Vera Ortegon immigrated to the United States from Colombia to attend college, and has since become an American success story. Her wide variety of experience has served her well during her two terms of office, beginning in 2007.

While working as a production manager for the Schering Corporation in New Jersey, Mrs. Ortegon earned bachelor's and master's degrees in microbiology from Rutgers and Fairleigh Dickinson University. Simultaneously, she has been managing partner of a family-owned real estate company since 1976. In 1980, she moved to Pueblo with her husband. She later continued her studies in the University of Colorado's Ph.D. program in molecular biology, while also working as an instructor, researcher, and director of the Biotechnology Center at the Colorado Springs campus.

More recently, Vera has worked for the Office of Economic Development and International Trade, Southeastern Colorado Conservancy District Board, and as President of the Board of Water Works. She is active with the Pueblo Economic Development Corporation, the 10th Judicial District Nominating Commission, and is Vice President of the John Neumann Catholic Schools Board. She is married with two sons.