Thank you, Madame President, for inviting me to participate in this roundtable discussion on moving the Kyrgyz Republic toward a democratic future. I am glad to see my colleague, Assistant Secretary Eric Schwartz, here as well. Thanks, also, to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace for hosting this important event. I trust the discussions here will be open and frank, and that they will be helpful to both policymakers and the people of Kyrgyzstan.

The African-American novelist James Baldwin, who went to Europe to escape the prejudice of 20th century America, said: “Words like freedom, justice, democracy are not common concepts; on the contrary, they are rare. People are not born knowing what these are. It takes enormous and, above all, individual effort to arrive at the respect for other people that these words imply.”

The people of the Kyrgyz Republic have struggled to find freedom, justice, and democracy. In its nineteen years of independence, the country has developed the most active civil society and most independent media in the Central Asian region. The people have demanded that their leaders be accountable, and in April of this year they forced the departure of the increasingly authoritarian and corrupt president Kurmanbek Bakiyev.

The government that took his place, led by diplomat and philosophy professor Roza Otunbayeva, has sought to put the country back on a path to democracy. It immediately announced plans to make the National Television and Radio Network public, and we hope that process will move ahead quickly. It took steps to redress past injustices, for example by amnestying all those convicted, including women and children, for the Eid disturbances in Nookat in October 2008.

The ethnic unrest in June devastated lives and families, shocked the world and focused our attention on this small but important cultural crossroads. We were horrified at the violence and taken aback by the large numbers of displaced persons fleeing to other parts of the Kyrgyz Republic and across the border into
Uzbekistan. I visited the refugee camps just days into the crisis and was deeply moved by the stories I heard.

The United States has responded quickly to this crisis with $48 million in funding, technical assistance and programs to deal with the immediate humanitarian needs as well as support for strengthening democratic processes. My own Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, which has long been a strong supporter of civil society and democracy in the Kyrgyz Republic, set aside $2 million, including establishing press centers in Osh and Jalalabad to establish a base for journalists to report from the region, and providing election-related assistance. Secretary Clinton, Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg, Assistant Secretary Robert Blake, Ambassador Stephen Rapp, Assistant Secretary Schwartz and others have held discussions with members of the Kyrgyz government and civil society as well as OSCE and UN officials.

Our efforts will continue. We will continue to engage with the government, new members of Parliament, the various special representatives to the Kyrgyz Republic, and the OSCE in Vienna and the Astana Summit in our efforts to promote national unity and ethnic reconciliation. After the Parliamentary election, DRL will solicit proposals to conduct more programs to support strong democratic processes and institutions, human rights protections, and an engaged civil society.

Despite its difficult circumstances, the Constitutional Referendum of June 27 created the first parliamentary republic in Central Asia, significantly increasing the powers of parliament and decreasing those of the president, including giving the president a single six-year term. There were some flaws and minor irregularities, but the process was assessed positively by the OSCE and by local monitoring organizations.

In this time of political uncertainty, it is critical for the government and the people of the Kyrgyz Republic to come together in a spirit of respect and reconciliation, and to overcome violence and the rhetoric of war.

First and foremost, stability and safety must be re-established for all citizens in the south. We hope the OSCE’s Police Advisory Group will be deployed in the south as soon as possible. The United States has offered to contribute funding and police officers to this effort.
We support the actions taken by the Kyrgyz government to move toward a parliamentary democracy, and we encourage the authorities to ensure that the upcoming elections take place in an atmosphere of fairness, inclusiveness, and transparency. It will be critical for the new parliament to take up their responsibilities in the same spirit, as representatives of the people and public servants. A DRL grant whose activities are supporting informed debate on human rights and inter-ethnic tolerance in the elections will engage with newly elected members of Parliament to help them implement their campaign promises and commitments.

We recognize the difficulties of promoting reconciliation and we know President Otunbayeva’s government is seeking ways to address the ongoing abuses in the south, including arbitrary detentions, harassment, physical abuse, threat of forced home demolitions, and people being turned away from medical care. Such abuses threaten to undermine progress in promoting peace and reconciliation and must be stopped.

A thorough and credible international investigation of the June violence is the government’s duty in protecting its people, and is critical for ensuring accountability for past abuses and a strong foundation for the rule of law on which the country can move forward. The success of that effort will depend on not only the timely deployment of recognized international experts who enjoy the full cooperation of local authorities, but also on cooperation with local civil society organizations, especially the human rights activists who have been documenting evidence of abuses. We stand ready to help in any way we can.

We applaud efforts to improve freedom of media through such actions as making National Television and Radio a public network. We also see a need to increase the availability of objective information in Russian-, Kyrgyz-, and Uzbek-language media, to encourage an informed debate on the critical issues of the moment. A DRL journalism training grant has created two television news magazine programs, one focusing on youth in reconciliation and reconstruction efforts, and the other highlighting coverage of regional events throughout the Kyrgyz Republic.

We appreciate the tremendous challenge of rebuilding the homes that were destroyed in the June violence in a way that promotes reconciliation but respects the right of people to restore the communities they had. We hope that people will be allowed to rebuild their homes as they wish and that reconstruction will take place quickly before the onset of winter.
We are disturbed by the intimidation of human rights defenders through arrests and trials, such as the continued detention of Ulugbek Abdusalimov and the recent conviction of Azimjon Askarov, who along with several others was sentenced to life in prison in a trial that did not reflect a fair and just legal process. We urge that the appeal process be fair and transparent, and that it take place in a secure location.

We fully recognize that no democracy, including our own, is perfect. Our national journey toward liberty and justice for all has been long and difficult, and it is still far from complete. Yet, over time, our independent branches of government, our free media, our openness to the world -- and the civic courage of our own citizens -- help us keep faith with our Bill of Rights, our international obligations and the precepts of the UN Universal Declaration.

We stand with all the people of the Kyrgyz Republic and with the government and at this difficult time in their nation’s trajectory. We are ready to help however we can and look forward to continuing our cooperation and partnership. We look to the international community, Kyrgyzstan’s neighbors and especially Kazakhstan as Chairman-in-Office of the OSCE to join us in supporting Kyrgyz Republic’s path toward democracy and national reconciliation.
Drafter: Rachel Waldstein DRL/NESCA, x73314

DRL/NESCA: KJohnstone OK
DRL/NESCA: JHawkins OK
DRL/AE: LCarey OK
DRL/IRF: NBadat OK
DRL/P: PDavis OK
SCA/CEN: FSellin OK
INL: EHamrin OK
PRM: THushek OK
EUR/ACE: RStoddard OK
EUR/RPM: APahigian
S/CRS: RGoldenberg
S/WCI: DOrntlicher OK
USAID: BWallin OK
G: ERichardson
D: DSchrepel
Embassy Bishkek