Thank you Assistant Secretary Crocker for the kind introduction. I also want to express my deepest gratitude to the United Nations Association National Capital Area and to its Human Rights Committee, including Ed Elmendorf, Christina Hansen, Heather Hill, Kristen Hecht, and UNA-NCA’s Executive Director Paula Boland, both for selecting me for this award and for all of the great coordination we have had over the past couple years regarding the United States’ role at the Human Rights Council. I am deeply humbled to be standing before all of you today and would not be here were it not for my colleagues in the Bureau of International Organization Affairs and other parts of the State Department, and for many colleagues and mentors near and far. I want to extend special thanks to my family, to Rob, and to several outside colleagues here tonight, including Mark Bromley at the Council for Global Equality, Dr. Marie Price at the George Washington University, Ryan Kaminski at the UN Foundation, and Jean Freedberg at the Human Rights Campaign.

I also want to take a moment to recognize the namesake of the award I am receiving today – Tex Harris. It is an incredible honor to receive an award named after one of the most influential and important U.S. diplomats of our time, a man who served in some of the toughest places and always placed human rights at the forefront of his work, whether that be in apartheid South Africa or Argentina
during the military dictatorship. Tex, I am so pleased you are here tonight and I commit here tonight to follow your example in my continued work serving the American people.

Just across the street in the Capitol building in 1917, the first steps toward the creation of the United Nations began with President Wilson’s 14 Points speech. At the time, rights were viewed more for groups through the concept of self-determination, than they were for the individual, but the march toward an international system that would make the world “safe for democracy” and safe from the scourge of war was just beginning. It of course took a second world war and the visionary leadership of Eleanor Roosevelt to bring us to the creation of the international human rights system through the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was adopted on this very day in 1948.

The Universal Declaration begins as follows, “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.” It notes soon thereafter that everyone is entitled to these rights and freedoms without distinction of any kind. As we all know too well, the reality in our own nation and around the world continues to fall far short of this aspiration. Yet we continue to march toward that better world, while at the same time fighting back against the forces of regression that try to use ideas like “traditional values” to undermine the inherent rights of individuals.
Five years ago, I was very fortunate to be asked to work with a very small group at the State Department to come up with a strategy on how to integrate the promotion and protection of the human rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons into our broader human rights policy. My area of special responsibility related to our engagement at the UN and the rest of the multilateral system. This was one of those rare moments when a brand new policy was under formulation and our small team had an incredible opportunity to think outside the box and to shoot for the moon on how we wanted to address this gap in our human rights policy. We knew that what we were doing would not be without controversy and that many would criticize the United States for playing an active role in promoting LGBTI rights, but we also knew that it was long past time for the U.S. to do this.

The statistics were, and remain, alarming. Today, gay people can be executed just for being who they are in at least nine countries, and they face criminal penalties in over 70, and perhaps over 80 UN member states. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex persons face not only criminal penalties, but a variety of other pressures that violate their human rights. Russia has led the way in the banning of so-called “gay propaganda,” which it claims is to protect children, but is really just an attempt to deny LGBTI people the ability to speak up and speak out. Propaganda laws, criminal laws, and discrimination – both official
and unofficial – create a context where LGBTI people also face alarming rates of violence. Following enactment of Russia’s law, a wave of videos showed groups of thugs attacking and brutalizing young gay men and then they posted videos of these altercations online. The authorities did nothing. Similarly, in other parts of the world, this violence is also widespread, with a raft of murders of trans women besetting Honduras, round after round of violence against the LGBTI community in Uganda, horrifying videos of ISIL throwing gay men from buildings, and sadly a recent spate of attacks against gay men in Dallas, Texas. Indeed, even though our laws are getting better, this remains an issue in the United States as well.

We cannot and must not ignore that reality at the UN. Our approach to addressing LGBTI rights at the UN has been and will continue to be one that is forthright and acknowledges our own challenges. Indeed, we had criminal laws on the books in seven U.S. states until the Supreme Court issued its decision in *Lawrence v. Texas* in 2003. It is remarkable how far we have come in just 12 years so we now see gay marriage affirmed as a right nationwide.

Within the UN context, the U.S. had taken to the sidelines when LGBTI issues first started coming to the fore in the early 2000s. The U.S. signed a short Norwegian-led joint statement at the Human Rights Council in 2006, but then declined to sign a broader statement in the General Assembly, led by France and the Netherlands, in 2008. We retroactively joined that statement on January 21,
2009, one day after President Obama was inaugurated. In 2010, Secretary Clinton asked the Department to develop a broader policy on LGBT issues – we only more recently added the “I” for intersex – and it was at that time that I penned our multilateral strategy and helped shape our broader approach in other areas including foreign assistance, decriminalization, and refugee and asylee policy – the latter of which allowed Syrian activist Subhi Nahas to address the Security Council this August.

The multilateral strategy to promote LGBT rights was the first part of our strategy to be approved by Secretary Clinton. Through it, the United States has engaged with partner nations from every region of the globe to take important steps on LGBTI issues across the UN. Our biggest achievements to date have been at the Human Rights Council, where I led our process on whipping votes in favor of the first-ever UN resolution on the human rights of LGBT persons. Since that vote in June 2011, the Council has adopted a second resolution on the subject and attention throughout the UN has grown. We have been instrumental in creating space to talk about these issues in many other fora, from UNICEF, to UNESCO, to the General Assembly, to the Security Council most recently, where in August the U.S. and Chile led a briefing on ISIL’s campaign against LGBTI people. At this meeting, Jordan became the first Arab country to ever speak on these issues at the UN. Despite continued reticence from some UN members, I am convinced that we
have built a space to address human rights violations against LGBTI people at the UN and can use this platform not only to speak out, but to expand international consensus that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex people deserve to be treated the same as everyone else.

During my tenure working on UN issues, the LGBTI file has been but one part of a broader effort that I am helping to spearhead on how the U.S. engages at the UN. I have done this by creating a more methodical and statistically informed approach to UN votes and elections. This may sound like the ultimate “inside baseball,” but it is an essential part of achieving U.S. objectives at the UN; if you can’t win votes at the UN, you can’t get things done.

I am very excited to help create new and more creative approaches to lobbying and running campaigns at the UN and other international organizations. In general, the U.S. sits in a tough place, as voting blocs like the Non-Aligned Movement and the Group of 77 control a majority vote in most fora. We, however, have enormous diplomatic capacity that can be put to work in breaking these blocs apart and using data to drive how we do so. The incoming generation of U.S. diplomats understands this, at least those that did Model UN do, but we have a long way to go in professionalizing our approach to these bodies. Other nations such as Egypt and Cuba have a separate multilateral career track. While we do not have that, I am pleased to be helping us develop new approaches to these
campaigns, whether they involve passing a resolution or ensuring that the U.S. is elected to limited membership bodies. In 2012, I helped develop these approaches when I ran the United States campaign to be re-elected to the Human Rights Council in a competitive slate. More recently, I was pleased to get a chance to re-test these strategies in the successful race for the UNESCO Executive Board, which we won just last month.

These are exciting times to be engaging on human rights issues globally, but also difficult ones. The UN’s limits are being tested in places like Syria, South Sudan, and Ukraine. Countries that wish to avoid scrutiny are bottling up the system with extraneous activities that detract time and remove resources that could be applied to pressing issues. The critics are many, including many here in the U.S. that not only criticize the UN, but criticize U.S. engagement at the UN. I know, however, that the work being done right now on these issues remains as important as ever. I have met LGBTI activists from many tough places around the world that have told me that our speaking out brings them hope in dark times, that it gives them the strength to speak out themselves, and in some places it even builds the case that will lead to decriminalization and hopefully someday full acceptance for them to live their lives open and honestly, like I can do here. I, along with my colleagues, do this work for them, not for ourselves.
Thank you again to the UNA-NCA for this tremendous recognition today.

Tomorrow, the work continues for all of us to leave this world a little better than we found it.