

Remarks by IFES President CEO Bill Sweeney Accepting the 2018 Legacy Award:

Thank you.

Thank you to my family, thank you the IFES team.

Thank you to the four IFES Board chairmen I had the pleasure to work with: Peter Kelly, Bill Hybl, Don Sweitzer, and Ken Blackwell. All of you provided leadership, guidance and friendship – without micromanagement or interference – in support of the IFES mission.

Thanks to Board members who have become friends and allies and living proof that promotion of American values and ideals overcomes partisanship, even in D.C.

Colleagues across the spectrum of the democracy movement, the United States and other governments, the media and friends from my jungle gym career ladder of Democratic politics, business, and IFES.

Thank you.

Ronald Reagan warned us that “freedom is never more than one generation from extinction.”

John Kennedy said, “we do these things not because they are easy but because they are hard.”

Those two statements well define the rationale for our mission and the challenges confronting IFES teams around the world every day.

An election in many countries is a simultaneous political risk by all incumbents and a statement of hope and opportunity for the future.

Election Day is often the only time when the government has to visibly provide a service to everyone, everywhere, simultaneously.

IFES’ direct mission to “have every voice heard and every vote counted” has never been more challenged than in these days of determined assault on the integrity of the vote by nation states as well as increasingly sophisticated domestic political players.

It is easier in this era of low trust in public institutions to challenge and undermine the credibility and integrity of the vote and the public servants delivering the election. It is more convenient to complain rather than to sustain. What we all are learning is that we can no longer take the right to vote or the voting, counting or actual functioning of the election for granted.

We are witnessing the weaponization of every minute in the electoral process, to attack the credibility of the vote as part of a vision of political success, by both domestic and foreign opponents of the human rights values itemized in Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Since 2009, the IFES team has followed what is known as the Jack Welch rule: be either first or second in a market or don’t be in the market, as well as Gary Hamel’s focus on core competencies. That translates into the ambition to be the best in the world in providing technical assistance to election management bodies so those public servants can “have every voice heard and every vote counted” in their transition to a culture of democracy and the rule of law. Together we have helped to define election administration as a discipline within public administration, because elections are distinct.

IFES has moved the democracy movement away from anecdotes about the 1948 Texas election and the 1960 presidential outcome in Illinois to a tool kit of programmatic disciplines, frameworks, websites, manuals and best practices supported by field testing with metrics, dashboards and scorecards.

The proceeds from last year's dinner underwrote the next contribution, the Holistic Exposure and Adaptation Testing, or HEAT, a tool to strengthen election technologies and procedures.

In 2009, when I started as president and CEO, the IFES team set four topics for our future: gender, disability, technology and youth.

IFES is now recognized as a global leader in gender programming, especially in the sensitive question of violence against women in the political process. In many societies, the first time a woman has worked outside the home is to staff a polling place. For many women, their first engagement in public life is working as a poll worker or precinct captain.

Leadership on disability and inclusion has become a signature issue for IFES. Last January, I was the keynote at a global election conference in India concerning access and inclusion. Almost every case study and illustration used in the two-day conference had an IFES logo. At the London Global Disability Summit this summer, IFES was the only democracy and governance NGO invited. It has been an inspiring chapter for all of us to work with more people like Nay Lin Soe, the 2016 Democracy Award recipient who said, "see our abilities and not our disabilities."

Technology, cybersecurity, fake news, bots, sponsorship of election interference and attempts to undermine the integrity of the vote change dramatically with every election in virtually every country. There is an arms race underway led by governments and followed by domestic politicians aided by consulting firms. It is not healthy for democracy and IFES is responding to the challenge, but more needs to be done.

Youth engagement is the great challenge and opportunity ahead for IFES. The demographics point to younger electorates in the countries where IFES is deployed. A demand for a 16-year-old vote is emerging. Mobile technology is the preferred style of communication and learning. It is hard but not impossible to recruit, train and retain key personnel who will be the next generation of electoral and political leadership.

My friends, tonight is hopefully the last dinner I have any responsibility for.

My first was the 1973 Democratic congressional dinner. Roz Wyman was the first chairwoman of a million-dollar Democratic Party fundraiser. Among my duties was being Milton Berle's driver, which impressed my grandmother and my mother. Google Milton Berle.

It is the right time for both transition and refreshing, as well as new energy and leadership at IFES.

I have been able to get by with a little help from my friends through chapters in politics, business and IFES. Tennessee Williams said "life is partly what we make it and partly what it is made by the friends we choose."

Thank you for your friendship and your constant support of IFES as we've turned what was the best kept secret in Washington, D.C. into a global leader. IFES works to make every voice heard and every vote

count. Millions of people demand to vote for their future and create democratic cultures and traditions in their countries around the world.

Thank you.