



HUMAN RIGHTS

Michelle Bachelet: An Inspiration

By Maria Echaveste

Photo by Yvaine Martin.

Michelle Bachelet speaks before the United Nations Human Rights Council, September 2018.

In April 2019, I was fortunate to be part of a small group in attendance when United Nations Human Rights Commissioner Michelle Bachelet engaged in a conversation with Professor Harley Shaiken at UC Berkeley's Center for Latin American Studies. As I'm sure most readers know, Commissioner Bachelet has had an impressive career. Growing up a "military brat," as we say here in the United States, Bachelet lived in many regions of Chile and even spent two years in Bethesda, Maryland, where her father, a general in the Chilean Air Force, served at the Chilean Embassy in Washington, D.C.

Bachelet lost her father in 1974, after months of torture following General Pinochet's take-over of the Chilean government. She and her mother also suffered torture when they were detained as political prisoners. While these experiences, at least superficially, do not seem to presage her subsequent accomplishments, Bachelet went on to pursue a career in medicine and public health. As if that were not enough, she pursued later studies focused on civil-military relations and then ran for the presidency of Chile. She won, not once, but twice, serving as the President of Chile in 2006-2010 and then again in 2014-2018.

As I listened to Bachelet describe her activities over the past 18 months — traveling, meeting with leaders of various countries and human rights advocates around the

globe, investigating human rights abuses across the planet — I was exhausted. She had already had such a full career, serving as Chile's Minister for Health and the Minister for Public Defense before becoming President of Chile, how did she find the energy to take on this difficult job? More importantly, why would she tackle such a demanding and challenging position as UN High Commissioner for Human Rights? Having served in the Clinton White House, I was keenly aware of how challenging and exhausting it is to be a country's leader—the responsibilities and duties, the unpredictable nature of disasters (both natural and man-made), the demands of the public, of the media, of your family. I had to ask the question: with everything she had experienced, her long years of public service, why did she take on this difficult job, why didn't she sit back and enjoy the peace she had certainly earned?

Her comments in response serve as an inspiration. They are worth keeping in mind, especially now when so many of us here in the United States are exhausted by an administration that conducts public and foreign policy by tweet, where allies across the planet are not sure whether our country can be relied upon to honor its commitments, and finally, where the rules for governing and respect for institutions are broken almost every day. In such trying times, many of us — and I include myself — wonder what



Photo from Department of Homeland Security, Office of the Inspector General.

Families detained at the overcrowded Customs and Border Patrol station in Weslaco, Texas, June 2019.

ON CONDITIONS AT THE U.S. BORDER

"As a pediatrician, but also as a mother and a former head of state, I am deeply shocked that children are forced to sleep on the floor in overcrowded facilities, without access to adequate health care or food, and with poor sanitation conditions. ... Detaining a child, even for short periods under good conditions, can have a serious impact on their health and development — consider the damage being done every day by allowing this alarming situation to continue."

— Michelle Bachelet, from the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Bachelet appalled by conditions of migrants and refugees in detention in the US," July 2019



Photo by Marius Spiske.

Sign at the Global Climate Strike, September 2019.

ON CLIMATE CHANGE

“I am encouraged by the increasing recognition of the right to a healthy and sustainable environment, in over 100 national and regional laws, which defines the relationship between the environment and human rights. To each of us, a healthy environment is no less important than the food we eat, the water we drink, or the freedom of thought we cherish; all people, everywhere, should be able to live in a healthy environment and hold accountable those who stand in the way of achieving it.”

— Michelle Bachelet, from the Opening Statement to the 42nd Annual Meeting of the United Nations Human Rights Council, September 2019

we can do, what should we do. As Bachelet explained her decision to take on such a demanding role, I realized that her perspective helped me to think about what to do in response to the challenges in our own country.

Bachelet acknowledged that she did not say yes immediately when UN Secretary-General Guterres asked her to consider taking on the High Commissioner role. Yet, as they continued conversing, he stressed that as a former political prisoner, she would be able to speak with a moral clarity to those around the world who violate the human rights of their citizens. Moreover, she had specific skills derived from running a country, dealing with opposing factions as she tried to address the needs of Chile’s citizens. Honed over many years, those political skills are unmatched assets that should not be put on a shelf, as much as one might want to do so in order to enjoy family and grandchildren. In truth, what Bachelet conveyed was that when one has been blessed with the skills and experiences that are needed in a new role, it would be selfish to not serve if one is needed.

Hearing her thoughts and perspectives helped me realize that each of us can contribute to improving our world by focusing on our strengths and skills and identifying where we can best contribute. If Michelle

Bachelet — who by all accounts had served her country well and honorably and could look forward to a gentler and more peaceful existence — if she could find the energy and stamina to continue to serve the greater public interest, then none of us should give in to cynicism and hopelessness regarding the state of our country or the world.

In my case, I will continue to work on issues that can increase social and economic mobility and promote racial equity domestically. As I travel the country, I meet others who continue to try to improve their communities and schools, address poverty and inequality, reform our criminal justice system, address climate change, and work toward environmental justice — the list goes on. There’s no lack of work for any of us. So long as there are leaders like UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet who can inspire us through the lives they lead, I will continue to be hopeful for the future.

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Michelle Bachelet walks with Kristine Tompkins through part of 10 million acres of new parkland donated by the Tompkins Foundation to Chile.



Photo courtesy of Gobierno de Chile.