I was on a battleship in the Atlantic Ocean in 1945 when the world’s powers got together and formed the United Nations with a clear and express purpose of preventing war in the future. The United Nations was dedicated to peace. A few years later the same global powers assembled and concluded a commitment to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Now, those two great commitments have been abandoned by the world. The United Nations is no longer a repository and guarantor of peace, and even the greatest of nations have not met the expectations of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

This year in this forum we are striving to encapsulate ideas from the previous 13 years of meetings, with an emphasis on reducing government commitments and investment of human and financial resources into violence and warfare at the expense of human rights and peaceful solutions to problems.

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What is needed now, more than ever, is leadership that steers us away from fear and fosters greater confidence in the inherent goodness and ingenuity of humanity.

Last year, governments and people united behind the new edition, you might say, of Sustainable Development Agenda, and No. 16 (and you can look it up), one of its key commitments, is to (and I quote) reduce violence and related death rates, to end abuse, to end exploitation, trafficking and all forms of torture, to promote the rule of law at the national and international levels, and to ensure equal access to justice for all. It emphasizes that inclusive and peaceful societies are the key to progress.

So, here is another effort, many years later, 60 years later, to recommit the world powers and people to the finest aspects of our ethical values that we inherited from our major religions. This
forum here is exploring how we can hold our governments accountable to that commitment at a time when conflict and violent extremism are both on the rise.

Since the attacks of September 11, 2001, known as 9/11, we have brought together some of the world's most effective and courageous human rights defenders and peacemakers to work for human freedom and peace while limiting the reach of violent extremists.

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Representatives from more than 50 nations have met here to discuss the rise of militarism and the reliance on violence by the major powers to address the threat of terrorism. During that time we have seen the “global war on terror” escalate out of control and result in an erosion of human rights and more and more widespread violence.

On 9/11, a small but determined and well-organized number of al-Qaeda members were confined to a relatively small geographic area, but related movements have now spread widely throughout most of the world, partly because of an unbalanced militaristic response to the attacks by the major powers. Torture has been carried out with impunity, even in my own country; the right to privacy has disappeared; and freedoms of religion, association, and speech are under attack.

In recent years, I have spoken out the best I could about the abuse of religious scriptures to promote various forms of violence, including the death penalty, discrimination and abuse of women, and unjust resort to warfare. These are direct violations of my own faith and other great religions, which are founded on love, kindness to strangers, not judging others, justice, and resolving disputes in the least violent manner.

The cynical use of religion by groups like al-Qaeda, Da’esh, and Boko Haram has had catastrophic consequences to which the United Nations and major governments have failed to respond adequately.

In recent years, this forum has explored the setbacks experienced by women and girls as some major leaders use religion to exert control over their lives and to dominate the life of communities and families.
Drawing on these discussions, I authored a book called “A Call to Action: Women, Religion, Violence and Power,” in which I describe the almost unbelievable persistence of violence against females of all ages.

We explored how girl children face discrimination even before they are born, through sex-selective abortions and infanticide; the horrible forced marriage of young girls by the millions, the trafficking of women and girls into sex slavery, and the tragic phenomena of genital cutting and so-called “honor killings.”

The ongoing problem of sexual violence plagues almost every nation.

- 1 in 3 women face intimate violence sometime in their lives.
- Sexual assault in our American military and on our college campuses continues on a scale that is direct proof that male abuse and domination of women has become normalized. It’s a normal thing to expect.
- We ignore the fact that women are paid about 23 percent less than men for a year’s hard work.

We must also realize that women are key agents of the changes we need. Women are excluded from leadership in religion, in family and community decision-making, and in legislatures and other political offices. When half of the world’s population is not consulted on important decisions and policies, it is no wonder that so many problems persist.

Societies that exclude or permit abuse of women are more violent and warlike, while having women at the forefront of peace efforts or community dialogue tends to calm tensions and avert hostilities. We know that some of the most warlike leaders have been women, but when women are empowered in significant numbers, in the corporate world as well as in politics and in daily life, better decisions are made and more sustainable solutions are adopted.

Last year here we heard testimony from women from Colombia, Iraq, Nigeria, Syria, the United States, and other nations involved in warfare who told us that they warned of the coming crises and sought to have preventive action, but that their voices were ignored or suppressed. Where would we be today, you think, if their voices had been heard and if governments had listened to their peace efforts?

“When half of the world’s population is not consulted on important decisions and policies, it is no wonder that so many problems persist.”
We need to amplify the voices of peacemakers and human rights defenders, especially women.

It is clear that we must embrace human rights and aggressively challenge our society’s acceptance of violence, which should never be seen as normal or as the preferred means of solving problems. But we know that this is true: The first time a problem arises in the world, the first response is, “What kind of violence would control this new problem?” But violence is now normal in our homes, communities, in our culture, in law enforcement and in foreign policy.

Here in the United States, lethal police violence and the use of the death penalty, disproportionately against African-Americans, communicates the clear message that the state may kill in the interest of public safety, ignoring far less violent means of protecting the public. The public at large responds by thinking that violence is useful in achieving peaceful objectives. That’s a contrary factor in words: Violence is useful in achieving peaceful objectives.

“We lose sight of the fact that violence is evidence of failure, not success.”

While defending a community or a nation with military force is sometimes justifiable or is sometimes necessary, the distinction between self-defense and excessive force against others has been undermined in the global wars on terror, drugs, and crime.

I am grateful that many of you have launched effective collaboration between citizens and government to reduce violence, advance human rights, and create economic prosperity. Determined diplomacy has resulted in the nuclear nonproliferation agreement with Iran, possibly avoiding a war, and also the new normalization of relations between the United States and Cuba. We celebrate these hopeful examples while remembering that all too often, unnecessary violence prevails.

The United States is complicit in the oppression of abusive governments when we provide weapons and financial aid to them, as is the case in Egypt, in Honduras, and other nations. And we must never forget the plight of the Palestinians.

We lose sight of the fact that violence is evidence of failure, not success. We have failed to heed signs of trouble early enough to address the underlying cause of the problem, or we are in denial about the cause of the problem. We may be too self-serving to care about it, or we seek power and are content with the situation, especially when only the other side is suffering, as from high-level bombing or the use of drones.
We cannot end or control the tide of personal, family or community violence, and definitely not terrorism, until we reduce excessive state violence and militarism.

I remember that in 1968, opposing the war in Vietnam, Martin Luther King Jr. stated it that was not possible to separate excessive state-sanctioned violence from the bloodshed in our communities. They both exist when we normalize violence. He called on us to reject violence and its cycle of destruction. The world needs to heed his call today.

We are at a turning point in history. We can choose either policies of peace and human rights or we can continue our moves toward warfare and human suffering.

This is also a time when ordinary people throughout the world are expressing fear, frustration, and anxiety about the future. Many people have lost trust in their governments as the social contract frays. But instead of allowing for constructive dialogue with the public, many governments have tightened their grip, treating journalists and regular citizens as threats to national security.

Meanwhile, governments invest far too much in the machinery of war, when investment in human rights would produce more peaceful results. Peace and prosperity are more likely when people are included and respected by their own governments.

The Arab Awakening or Arab Spring began when young people rejected systemic human rights abuses and unjust governments. The catastrophic violence that has followed is a failure of those nations’ leaders to govern justly, and a failure of the international community to help create and support inclusive peace processes and democratic institutions.

The cost of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan so far is nearing $1.7 trillion, (that’s 1,700 billion dollars), and global military spending is on the rise, now reaching the level that we knew during the Cold War. The manufacturing and sale of small arms, the cause of 90 percent of civilian deaths, has skyrocketed since 9/11.

The expanded use of drone warfare by the United States outside of declared war zones may constitute war crimes, according to the United Nations. Even though some dangerous terrorists are killed, they are immediately replaced, and the use of drones results in more people joining extremist organizations and may make this a choice of other nations — and perhaps terrorist groups — in the distant future — perhaps not so distant. What would we do if almost every country on earth could
afford a few drones, loaded with weapons, flying over American cities?

The next president of the United States will decide whether to commit more than a trillion dollars (a thousand billion dollars) to upgrade an already excessive nuclear arsenal, including a cruise missile with a nuclear warhead that’s called the Long Range Standoff Weapon. All of the so-called “upgrades” in our nuclear arsenal are actually new technologies that will spur current and potential nuclear powers into joining a new arms race. This will result in tremendous increases of military expenditures by many nations. We should reduce nuclear arsenals, not build new ones.

Our next president should reinvigorate the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) and enter determined negotiations with existing and potential nuclear nations — particularly Pakistan and India — to reduce and eliminate these weapons that are a threat to humanity’s existence and a drain on our resources.

As long as our new investments in warfare outpace those in peaceful solutions, we will be swimming against an increasingly forceful tide.

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Tomorrow, this group will issue “A Call for Peace, Dignity and Justice” in our concluding session. I will send this document to the leaders of the U.S. Congress, to the incumbent president, and to candidates seeking the White House in November. I urge every one of you to share this document with your own government.

From this conference, we set our sights on a world in which there is a renewed commitment to human rights and peace. It’s just that simple. Restore, recommit ourselves and our governments to human rights and peace.

We must leave behind the fruitless and catastrophic enmities and competitions that have left our world divided and fearful.

In the spirit of the Universal Sustainable Development Agenda, we call on all governments to respond peacefully to the inevitable challenges that we’ll face in the future.

The United States is the world’s superpower, and we are likely to maintain the strongest military, and also an influential culture, as well as one of the dominant economies. We’re likely to have that in future years.
My prayer is that we also, the United States, become the undisputed champion of peace. Wouldn’t it be nice if every country on earth, when they have a threat of warfare, would say, “Why don’t we go to Washington, because the American people are dedicated to peace?”

I pray also that we become the undisputed champion of human rights. We should restore the United Nations to its original purpose and commitment. Our hallmark should be a peaceful diplomacy.

We know that among the founding fathers of our country, they knew that human rights were the driving force in the creation of our nation. As I’ve said before, the United States did not invent human rights; human rights invented America. And we should once more set an example for the rest of the world.

We should be pre-eminent also in gender equality.

People everywhere should see us in the forefront of the struggle for environmental quality, dealing effectively with the real threat of global warming.

Every citizen should be confident that our children and grandchildren will have a happier and more fulfilling life even than the one we have.

We should be seen as generous in sharing our wealth and prosperity with others.

I could go on down the list. My ultimate hope, however, is that people of all nations will join in a competition for best exemplifying and demonstrating these commitments to peace and human rights.

Thank you.