The task of reforming the United Nations Human Rights Council is a daunting one. Since the council was set up in 2006 to replace the discredited U.N. Commission on Human Rights, it has achieved little to cheer about. Human rights pariahs such as China, Cuba, Egypt, Russia, and Saudi Arabia have been easily elected to the council and have so far achieved great success in making sure it doesn’t do its real job. Israel gets pummeled time and again, while countries like Zimbabwe, Belarus, and Uzbekistan escape serious attention. Even the situation in Sudan has received only a weak and mostly ineffective response. A newly released Freedom House "Report Card on the Human Rights Council" gives the council a passing grade in only one of 11 criteria.

With this litany of failures, it is understandable when critics claim that the council is unsalvageable and that no amount of resources can fix its inherent problems. But these critics overlook the fundamental reason why it has failed to date. The council’s primary weakness is not that the world’s most repressive societies manage to get themselves elected and then run roughshod over the council’s other members, but rather that the majority of the world’s democracies let them do it. There are more democracies than dictatorships in the world today; yet curiously, it is the despots who focus their diplomatic energies on the council.

The United States is perhaps the only democracy with the clout needed to move the council in the right direction. At a time when Freedom House has tracked three straight years of global backsliding in fundamental political rights and civil liberties, it is all the more urgent to try to shore up the world’s only global body dedicated to protecting and advancing human rights.

The decision by the Barack Obama administration to seek a seat on the council, and the United States’ successful election in May, was a welcome first step. The George W. Bush-era policy of non-engagement with the council was an ineffective, if not counterproductive, way of addressing the council’s flaws. The global human rights community issued an audible sigh of relief in March when Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced that the United States would run for a seat on the premise that "working from within, we can make the council a more effective forum to promote and protect human rights."

But it is far too soon to assume that the United States will be able to play the role of a white knight. Getting elected to the council was merely a start. The presence of the United States on the council is far less important for its vote on key resolutions than for the significant political resources it can bring to bear by
sponsoring important resolutions and by securing other members’ support. Despite the fact that democracies outnumber nondemocracies on the council by a ratio of nearly 2-to-1, only a handful of the council’s 47 members can be counted upon to vote consistently in accordance with human rights priorities. It will take enormous diplomatic effort to turn this around.

The jury is out on whether the United States will be able to perform a highly delicate balancing act between maintaining steadfast support for core civil and political rights, and demonstrating to allies and foes alike that America values a multilateral approach.

The Obama administration has already achieved one laudable success in helping to secure, in June at the last council session, passage of a resolution to continue examination of Sudan. The resolution passed, albeit just barely, because of significant behind-the-scenes U.S. lobbying that helped break down the council’s debilitating tradition of bloc voting by securing the yes votes (or in some cases the abstentions) of important African and Latin American democracies. Efforts like these require U.S. diplomats to travel to key capital cities and engage in genuine discussions with their counterparts, listening to concerns and making acceptable compromises or trade-offs.

Although the Sudan resolution marked a rare and unexpected success, it will require even greater effort to bring other council members around on fundamental human rights issues, such as protecting freedom of expression or censuring the world’s most egregious rights abusers, issues on which the council has so far failed miserably. In the coming year, the United States will have its work cut out for it in ensuring the continued mandates of special rapporteurs for countries like Somalia and Burma and in defeating the annual resolutions that attempt to criminalize speech critical of religions or religious practices.

In doing so, Obama will need a strong ambassador who possesses a rare combination of diplomatic experience, human rights commitment, political clout, and a mandate to reach out bilaterally in Geneva and in the world’s capitals on priority issues -- someone cut from the same cloth as Max Kampelman, who back in the 1980s led the U.S. delegation in ensuring that critical democracy and human rights components became a permanent part of what later became the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

But Obama has already lost valuable time and resources. The previous U.S. ambassador to Geneva stepped down in January and a replacement has yet to be named, meaning that there was no ambassador in place on Sept. 14, when the United States took its seat as a full council member at the current session. Moreover, the United States has not made a decision on whether it will appoint a single permanent representative for Geneva, whose broad portfolio will include the council, or whether it will take the important step of appointing an ambassador exclusively for the Human Rights Council (as it does for the World Trade Organization, also based in Geneva). The ambassador will also need increased staffing in Geneva, New York, and Washington to handle the now year-round work of the council.

Just as importantly, the new ambassador will need political support at the administration’s highest levels. The confirmation of an assistant secretary for the State Department’s Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor will provide an important, if long overdue, senior human rights voice in this administration, but the U.S. mission will need the backing of the secretary of state herself if it is to succeed.

Rights-abusing countries have invested considerable energy in making the Human Rights Council serve their own purposes. Reclaiming the council as a body that protects victims rather than abusers will take an equal investment of time and resources. The Obama administration, which still enjoys remarkable international popularity and goodwill, has the rare chance to do so. Let us hope this chance is not wasted.