

Administration of Barack Obama, 2014

Remarks to European Youth in Brussels, Belgium

March 26, 2014

Thank you. Please, please have a seat. Good evening. *Goede avond. Bonsoir. Guten abend.* Thank you, Laura, for that remarkable introduction on—before she came out she told me not to be nervous. *[Laughter]* And I can only imagine—I think her father is in the audience, and I can only imagine how proud he is of her. We're grateful for her work, but she's also reminding us that our future will be defined by young people like her.

Your Majesties, Mr. Prime Minister, and the people of Belgium: On behalf of the American people, we are grateful for your friendship. We stand together as inseparable allies, and I thank you for your wonderful hospitality. I have to admit, it is easy to love a country famous for chocolate and beer. *[Laughter]*

Leaders and dignitaries of the European Union, representatives of our NATO alliance, distinguished guests: We meet here at a moment of testing for Europe and the United States and for the international order that we have worked for generations to build.

Throughout human history, societies have grappled with fundamental questions of how to organize themselves, the proper relationship between the individual and the state, the best means to resolve inevitable conflicts between states. And it was here in Europe, through centuries of struggle—through war and Enlightenment, repression and revolution—that a particular set of ideals began to emerge: the belief that, through conscience and free will, each of us has the right to live as we choose; the belief that power is derived from the consent of the governed and that laws and institutions should be established to protect that understanding. And those ideas eventually inspired a band of colonialists across an ocean, and they wrote them into the founding documents that still guide America today, including the simple truth that all men—and women—are created equal.

But those ideals have also been tested, here in Europe and around the world. Those ideals have often been threatened by an older, more traditional view of power. This alternative vision argues that ordinary men and women are too small-minded to govern their own affairs, that order and progress can only come when individuals surrender their rights to an all-powerful sovereign. Often, this alternative vision roots itself in the notion that, by virtue of race or faith or ethnicity, some are inherently superior to others, and that individual identity must be defined by "us" versus "them," or that national greatness must flow not by what a people stand for, but what they are against.

In so many ways, the history of Europe in the 20th century represented the ongoing clash of these two sets of ideas, both within nations and among nations. The advance of industry and technology outpaced our ability to resolve our differences peacefully, and even among the most civilized of societies on the surface, we saw a descent into barbarism.

This morning, at Flanders Field, I was reminded of how war between peoples sent a generation to their deaths in the trenches and gas of the First World War. And just two decades later, extreme nationalism plunged this continent into war once again, with populations enslaved and great cities reduced to rubble and tens of millions slaughtered, including those lost in the Holocaust.

It is in response to this tragic history that, in the aftermath of World War II, America joined with Europe to reject the darker forces of the past and built a new architecture of peace. Workers and engineers gave life to the Marshall plan. Sentinels stood vigilant in a NATO alliance that would become the strongest the world has ever known. And across the Atlantic, we embraced a shared vision of Europe, a vision based on representative democracy, individual rights, and a belief that nations can meet the interests of their citizens through trade and open markets, a social safety net, respect for those of different faiths and backgrounds.

For decades, this vision stood in sharp contrast to life on the other side of an Iron Curtain. For decades, a contest was waged, and ultimately, that contest was won not by tanks or missiles, but because our ideals stirred the hearts of Hungarians who sparked a revolution, Poles in their shipyards who stood in Solidarity, Czechs who waged a Velvet Revolution without firing a shot, and East Berliners who marched past the guards and finally tore down that wall.

Today, what would have seemed impossible in the trenches of Flanders, the rubble of Berlin, a dissident's prison cell—that reality is taken for granted: a Germany unified, the nations of Central and Eastern Europe welcomed into the family of democracies. Here in this country, once the battleground of Europe, we meet in the hub of a union that brings together age-old adversaries in peace and cooperation. The people of Europe, hundreds of millions of citizens—east, west, north, south—are more secure and more prosperous because we stood together for the ideals we share.

And this story of human progress was by no means limited to Europe. Indeed, the ideals that came to define our alliance also inspired movements across the globe, among those very people, ironically, who had too often been denied their full rights by Western powers. After the Second World War, people from Africa to India threw off the yoke of colonialism to secure their independence. In the United States, citizens took freedom rides and endured beatings to put an end to segregation and to secure their civil rights. As the Iron Curtain fell here in Europe, the iron fist of apartheid was unclenched, and Nelson Mandela emerged upright, proud, from prison to lead a multiracial democracy. Latin American nations rejected dictatorship and built new democracies, and Asian nations showed that development and democracy could go hand in hand.

The young people in the audience today—young people like Laura, were born in a place and a time where there is less conflict, more prosperity, and more freedom than any time in human history. But that's not because man's darkest impulses have vanished. Even here, in Europe, we've seen ethnic cleansing in the Balkans that shocked the conscience.

The difficulties of integration and globalization, recently amplified by the worst economic crisis of our lifetimes, strained the European project and stirred the rise of a politics that too often targets immigrants or gays or those who seem somehow different.

While technology has opened up vast opportunities for trade and innovation and cultural understanding, it's also allowed terrorists to kill on a horrifying scale. Around the world, sectarian warfare and ethnic conflicts continue to claim thousands of lives. And once again, we are confronted with the belief among some that bigger nations can bully smaller ones to get their way, that recycled maxim that might somehow makes right.

So I come here today to insist that we must never take for granted the progress that has been won here in Europe and advanced around the world, because the contest of ideas continues for your generation. And that's what's at stake in Ukraine today. Russia's leadership

is challenging truths that only a few weeks ago seemed self-evident: that in the 21st century, the borders of Europe cannot be redrawn with force; that international law matters; that people and nations can make their own decisions about their future.

To be honest, if we defined our interests narrowly, if we applied a cold-hearted calculus, we might decide to look the other way. Our economy is not deeply integrated with Ukraine's. Our people and our homeland face no direct threat from the invasion of Crimea. Our own borders are not threatened by Russia's annexation. But that kind of casual indifference would ignore the lessons that are written in the cemeteries of this continent. It would allow the old way of doing things to regain a foothold in this young century. And that message would be heard not just in Europe, but in Asia, in the Americas, in Africa, and the Middle East.

And the consequences that would arise from complacency are not abstractions. The impact that they have on the lives of real people—men and women just like us—have to enter into our imaginations. Just look at the young people of Ukraine who were determined to take back their future from a government rotted by corruption, the portraits of the fallen shot by snipers, the visitors who pay their respects at the Maidan. There was the university student, wrapped in the Ukrainian flag, expressing her hope that "every country should live by the law." A postgraduate student, speaking of her fellow protestors, saying, "I want these people who are here to have dignity." Imagine that you are the young woman who said, "There are some things that fear, police sticks, and tear gas cannot destroy."

We've never met these people, but we know them. Their voices echo calls for human dignity that rang out in European streets and squares for generations. Their voices echo those around the world who at this very moment fight for their dignity. These Ukrainians rejected a government that was stealing from the people instead of serving them and are reaching for the same ideals that allow us to be here today.

None of us can know for certain what the coming days will bring in Ukraine, but I am confident that eventually, those voices—those voices for human dignity and opportunity and individual rights and rule of law—those voices ultimately will triumph. I believe that over the long haul, as nations that are free, as free people, the future is ours. I believe this not because I'm naive, and I believe this not because of the strength of our arms or the size of our economies, I believe this because these ideals that we affirm are true, these ideals are universal.

Yes, we believe in democracy, with elections that are free and fair, and independent judiciaries and opposition parties, civil society and uncensored information so that individuals can make their own choices. Yes, we believe in open economies based on free markets and innovation and individual initiative and entrepreneurship and trade and investment that creates a broader prosperity. And yes, we believe in human dignity: that every person is created equal, no matter who you are or what you look like or who you love or where you come from. That is what we believe. That's what makes us strong.

And our enduring strength is also reflected in our respect for an international system that protects the rights of both nations and people: a United Nations and a Universal Declaration of Human Rights; international law and the means to enforce those laws. But we also know that those rules are not self-executing; they depend on people and nations of goodwill continually affirming them. And that's why Russia's violation of international law—its assault on Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity—must be met with condemnation. Not because we're trying to keep Russia down, but because the principles that have meant so much to Europe and the world must be lifted up.

Over the last several days, the United States, Europe, and our partners around the world have been united in defense of these ideals and united in support of the Ukrainian people. Together, we've condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine and rejected the legitimacy of the Crimean referendum. Together, we have isolated Russia politically, suspending it from the G-8 nations and downgrading our bilateral ties. Together, we are imposing costs through sanctions that have left a mark on Russia and those accountable for its actions. And if the Russian leadership stays on its current course, together, we will ensure that this isolation deepens. Sanctions will expand. And the toll on Russia's economy, as well as its standing in the world, will only increase.

And meanwhile, the United States and our allies will continue to support the Government of Ukraine as they chart a democratic course. Together, we are going to provide a significant package of assistance that can help stabilize the Ukrainian economy and meet the basic needs of the people. Make no mistake: Neither the United States nor Europe has any interest in controlling Ukraine. We have sent no troops there. What we want is for the Ukrainian people to make their own decisions, just like other free people around the world.

Understand, as well, this is not another cold war that we're entering into. After all, unlike the Soviet Union, Russia leads no bloc of nations, no global ideology. The United States and NATO do not seek any conflict with Russia. In fact, for more than 60 years, we have come together in NATO, not to claim other lands, but to keep nations free. What we will do—always—is uphold our solemn obligation, our Article 5 duty to defend the sovereignty and territorial integrity of our allies. And in that promise, we will never waver; NATO nations never stand alone.

Today, NATO planes patrol the skies over the Baltics, and we've reinforced our presence in Poland. And we're prepared to do more. Going forward, every NATO member state must step up and carry its share of the burden by showing the political will to invest in our collective defense and by developing the capabilities to serve as a source of international peace and security.

Of course, Ukraine is not a member of NATO, in part because of its close and complex history with Russia. Nor will Russia be dislodged from Crimea or deterred from further escalation by military force. But with time, so long as we remain united, the Russian people will recognize that they cannot achieve security, prosperity, and the status that they seek through brute force. That's why, throughout this crisis, we will combine our substantial pressure on Russia with an open door for diplomacy. I believe that, for both Ukraine and Russia, a stable peace will come through deescalation: direct dialogue between Russia and the Government of Ukraine and the international community, monitors who can ensure that the rights of all Ukrainians are protected, a process of constitutional reform within Ukraine, and free and fair elections this spring.

So far, Russia has resisted diplomatic overtures, annexing Crimea and massing large forces along Ukraine's border. Russia has justified these actions as an effort to prevent problems on its own borders and to protect ethnic Russians inside Ukraine. Of course, there is no evidence—never has been—of systemic violence against ethnic Russians inside of Ukraine. Moreover, many countries around the world face similar questions about their borders and ethnic minorities abroad, about sovereignty and self-determination. These are tensions that have led in other places to debate and democratic referendums, conflicts and uneasy coexistence. These are difficult issues, and it is precisely because these questions are hard that they must be

addressed through constitutional means and international laws so that majorities cannot simply suppress minorities and big countries cannot simply bully the small.

In defending its actions, Russian leaders have further claimed Kosovo as a precedent, an example they say of the West interfering in the affairs of a smaller country, just as they're doing now. But NATO only intervened after the people of Kosovo were systematically brutalized and killed for years. And Kosovo only left Serbia after a referendum was organized not outside the boundaries of international law, but in careful cooperation with the United Nations and with Kosovo's neighbors. None of that even came close to happening in Crimea.

Moreover, Russia has pointed to America's decision to go into Iraq as an example of Western hypocrisy. Now, it is true that the Iraq war was a subject of vigorous debate not just around the world, but in the United States as well. I participated in that debate, and I opposed our military intervention there. But even in Iraq, America sought to work within the international system. We did not claim or annex Iraq's territory. We did not grab its resources for our own gain. Instead, we ended our war and left Iraq to its people and a fully sovereign Iraqi state that could make decisions about its own future.

Of course, neither the United States nor Europe are perfect in adherence to our ideals, nor do we claim to be the sole arbiter of what is right or wrong in the world. We are human, after all, and we face difficult decisions about how to exercise our power. But part of what makes us different is that we welcome criticism, just as we welcome the responsibilities that come with global leadership.

We look to the east and the south and see nations poised to play a growing role on the world stage, and we consider that a good thing. It reflects the same diversity that makes us stronger as a nation and the forces of integration and cooperation that Europe has advanced for decades. And in a world of challenges that are increasingly global, all of us have an interest in nations stepping forward to play their part, to bear their share of the burden, and to uphold international norms.

So our approach stands in stark contrast to the arguments coming out of Russia these days. It is absurd to suggest—as a steady drumbeat of Russian voices do—that America is somehow conspiring with Fascists inside of Ukraine or failing to respect the Russian people. My grandfather served in Patton's army, just as many of your fathers and grandfathers fought against fascism. We Americans remember well the unimaginable sacrifices made by the Russian people in World War II, and we have honored those sacrifices.

Since the end of the cold war, we have worked with Russia under successive administrations to build ties of culture and commerce and international community, not as a favor to Russia, but because it was in our national interests. And together, we've secured nuclear materials from terrorists. We welcomed Russia into the G-8 and the World Trade Organization. From the reduction of nuclear arms to the elimination of Syria's chemical weapons, we believe the world has benefited when Russia chooses to cooperate on the basis of mutual interests and mutual respect.

So America, and the world and Europe, has an interest in a strong and responsible Russia, not a weak one. We want the Russian people to live in security, prosperity, and dignity like everyone else, proud of their own history. But that does not mean that Russia can run roughshod over its neighbors. Just because Russia has a deep history with Ukraine does not mean it should be able to dictate Ukraine's future. No amount of propaganda can make right something that the world knows is wrong.

In the end, every society must chart its own course. America's path or Europe's path is not the only ways to reach freedom and justice. But on the fundamental principle that is at stake here—the ability of nations and peoples to make their own choices—there can be no going back. It's not America that filled the Maidan with protesters, it was Ukrainians. No foreign forces compelled the citizens of Tunis and Tripoli to rise up; they did so on their own. From the Burmese Parliamentarian pursuing reform to the young leaders fighting corruption and intolerance in Africa, we see something irreducible that all of us share as human beings, a truth that will persevere in the face of violence and repression and will ultimately overcome.

For the young people here today, I know it may seem easy to see these events as removed from our lives, remote from our daily routines, distant from concerns closer to home. I recognize that both in the United States and in much of Europe, there's more than enough to worry about in the affairs of our own countries. There will always be voices who say that what happens in the wider world is not our concern, nor our responsibility. But we must never forget that we are heirs to a struggle for freedom. Our democracy, our individual opportunity, only exist because those who came before us had the wisdom and the courage to recognize that our ideals will only endure if we see our self-interest in the success of other peoples and other nations.

Now is not the time for bluster. The situation in Ukraine, like crises in many parts of the world, does not have easy answers nor a military solution. But at this moment, we must meet the challenge to our ideals—to our very international order—with strength and conviction.

And it is you, the young people of Europe, young people like Laura, who will help decide which way the currents of our history will flow. Do not think for a moment that your own freedom, your own prosperity, that your own moral imagination is bound by the limits of your community, your ethnicity, or even your country. You're bigger than that. You can help us to choose a better history. That's what Europe tells us. That's what the American experience is all about.

I say this as the President of a country that looked to Europe for the values that are written into our founding documents, and which spilled blood to ensure that those values could endure on these shores. I also say this as the son of a Kenyan, whose grandfather was a cook for the British, and as a person who once lived in Indonesia as it emerged from colonialism. The ideals that unite us matter equally to the young people of Boston or Brussels or Jakarta or Nairobi or Krakow or Kiev.

In the end, the success of our ideals comes down to us, including the example of our own lives, our own societies. We know that there will always be intolerance. But instead of fearing the immigrant, we can welcome him. We can insist on policies that benefit the many, not just the few; that an age of globalization and dizzying change opens the door of opportunity to the marginalized and not just a privileged few. Instead of targeting our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters, we can use our laws to protect their rights. Instead of defining ourselves in opposition to others, we can affirm the aspirations that we hold in common. That's what will make America strong. That's what will make Europe strong. That's what makes us who we are.

And just as we meet our responsibilities as individuals, we must be prepared to meet them as nations. Because we live in a world in which our ideals are going to be challenged again and again by forces that would drag us back into conflict or corruption. We can't count on others to rise to meet those tests. The policies of your government, the principles of your European Union, will make a critical difference in whether or not the international order that so many generations before you have strived to create continues to move forward or whether it retreats.

And that's the question we all must answer: What kind of Europe, what kind of America, what kind of world will we leave behind? And I believe that if we hold firm to our principles and are willing to back our beliefs with courage and resolve, then hope will ultimately overcome fear, and freedom will continue to triumph over tyranny, because that is what forever stirs in the human heart.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 6:16 p.m. at the Palais des Beaux-Arts. In his remarks, he referred to Laura Hemmati, cofounder, Leader Arise, and her father Farid Hemmati; and King Philippe and Queen Mathilde and Prime Minister Elio Di Rupo of Belgium.

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