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President Bush Visits Prague, Czech Republic, Discusses Freedom

Large Hall
Czernin Palace
Prague, Czech Republic

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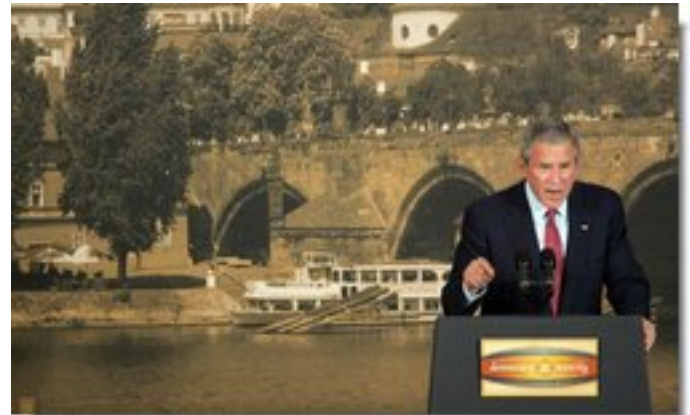
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4:07 P.M. (Local)

THE PRESIDENT: President Ilves, Foreign Minister Schwarzenberg, distinguished guests: Laura and I are pleased to be back in Prague, and we appreciate the gracious welcome in this historic hall. Tomorrow I attend the G-8 Summit, where I will meet with the leaders of the world's most powerful economies. This afternoon, I stand with men and women who represent an even greater power -- the power of human conscience.

In this room are dissidents and democratic activists from 17 countries on five continents. You follow different traditions, you practice different faiths, and you face different challenges. But you are united by an unwavering conviction: that freedom is the non-negotiable right of every man, woman, and child, and that the path to lasting peace in our world is liberty. (Applause.)

This conference was conceived by three of the great advocates for freedom in our time: Jose Maria Aznar, Vaclav Havel, and Natan Sharansky. I thank them for the invitation to address this inspiring assembly, and for showing the world that an individual with moral clarity and courage can change the course of history.



It is fitting that we meet in the Czech Republic -- a nation at the heart of Europe, and of the struggle for freedom on this continent. Nine decades ago, Tomas Masaryk proclaimed Czechoslovakia's independence based on the "ideals of modern democracy." That democracy was interrupted, first by the Nazis and then by the communists, who seized power in a shameful coup that left the Foreign Minister dead in the courtyard of this palace.

Through the long darkness of Soviet occupation, the true face of this nation was never in doubt. The world saw it in the reforms of the Prague Spring and the principled demands of Charter 77. Those efforts were met with tanks and truncheons and arrests by secret police. But the violent would not have the final word. In 1989, thousands gathered in Wenceslas Square to call for their freedom. Theaters like the Magic Lantern became headquarters for dissidents. Workers left their factories to support a strike. And within weeks, the regime crumbled. Vaclav Havel went from prisoner of state to head of state. And the people of Czechoslovakia brought down the Iron Curtain with a Velvet Revolution.

Across Europe, similar scenes were unfolding. In Poland, a movement that began in a single shipyard freed people across a nation. In Hungary, mourners gathered at Heroes Square to bury a slain reformer -- and bury their communist regime, too. In East Germany, families came together for prayer meetings -- and found the strength to tear down a wall. Soon, activists emerged from the attics and church basements to reclaim the streets of Bulgaria, and Romania, and Albania, and Latvia, and Lithuania, and Estonia. The Warsaw Pact was dissolved peacefully in this very room. And after seven decades of oppression, the Soviet Union ceased to exist.

Behind these astonishing achievements was the triumph of freedom in the battle of ideas. The communists had an imperial ideology that claimed to know the directions of history. But in the end, it was overpowered by ordinary people who wanted to live their lives, and worship their God, and speak the truth to their children. The communists had the harsh rule of Brezhnev, and Honecker, and Ceausescu. But in the end, it was no match for the vision of Walesa and Havel, the defiance of Sakharov and Sharansky, the resolve of Reagan and Thatcher, and fearless witness of John Paul. From this experience, a clear lesson has emerged: Freedom can be resisted, and freedom can be delayed, but freedom cannot be denied.



In the years since liberation, Central and Eastern European nations have navigated the difficult transition to democracy. Leaders made the tough reforms needed to enter NATO and the European Union. Citizens claimed their freedom in the Balkans and beyond. And now, after centuries of war and suffering, the continent of Europe is at last in peace.

With this new era have come new threats to freedom. In dark and repressive corners of the world, whole generations grew up with no voice in their government and no hope in their future. This life of oppression bred deep resentment. And for many, resentment boiled over into radicalism and extremism and violence. The world saw the result on September the 11th, 2001, when terrorists based in Afghanistan sent 19 suicidal men to murder nearly 3,000 innocent people in the United States.

For some, this attack called for a narrow response. In truth, 9/11 was evidence of a much broader danger -- an international movement of violent Islamic extremists that threatens free people everywhere. The extremists' ambition is to build a totalitarian empire that spans all current and former

Muslim lands, including parts of Europe. Their strategy to achieve that goal is to frighten the world into surrender through a ruthless campaign of terrorist murder.

To confront this enemy, America and our allies have taken the offensive with the full range of our military, intelligence, and law enforcement capabilities. Yet this battle is more than a military conflict. Like the Cold War, it's an ideological struggle between two fundamentally different visions of humanity. On one side are the extremists, who promise paradise, but deliver a life of public beatings and repression of women and suicide bombings. On the other side are huge numbers of moderate men and women -- including millions in the Muslim world -- who believe that every human life has dignity and value that no power on Earth can take away.



The most powerful weapon in the struggle against extremism is not bullets or bombs -- it is the universal appeal of freedom. Freedom is the design of our Maker, and the longing of every soul. Freedom is the best way to unleash the creativity and economic potential of a nation. Freedom is the only ordering of a society that leads to justice. And human freedom is the only way to achieve human rights.

Expanding freedom is more than a moral imperative -- it is the only realistic way to protect our people in the long run. Years ago, Andrei Sakharov warned that a country that does not respect the rights of its own people will not respond to the rights of its neighbors. History proves him right. Governments accountable to their people do not attack each other. Democracies address problems through the political process, instead of blaming outside scapegoats. Young people who can disagree openly with their leaders are less likely to adopt violent ideologies. And nations that commit to freedom for their people will not support extremists -- they will join in defeating them.

For all these reasons, the United States is committed to the advance of freedom and democracy as the great alternatives to repression and radicalism. (Applause.) And we have a historic objective in view. In my second inaugural address, I pledged America to the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world. Some have said that qualifies me as a "dissident president." If standing for liberty in the world makes me a dissident, I wear that title with pride. (Applause.)

America pursues our freedom agenda in many ways -- some vocal and visible, others quiet and hidden from view. Ending tyranny requires support for the forces of conscience that undermine repressive societies from within. The Soviet dissident Andrei Amalrik compared a tyrannical state to a soldier who constantly points a gun at his enemy -- until his arms finally tire and the prisoner escapes. The role of the free world is to put pressure on the arms of the world's tyrants -- and strengthen the prisoners who are trying to speed their collapse.

So I meet personally with dissidents and democratic activists from some of the world's worst dictatorships -- including Belarus, and Burma, and Cuba, and North Korea, Sudan, and Zimbabwe. At

this conference, I look forward to meeting other dissidents, including some from Iran and Syria. One of those dissidents is Mamoun Homsy. In 2001, this man was an independent member of the Syrian parliament who simply issued a declaration asking the government to begin respecting human rights. For this entirely peaceful act, he was arrested and sent to jail, where he spent several years beside other innocent advocates for a free Syria.

Another dissident I will meet here is Rebiyah Kadeer of China, whose sons have been jailed in what we believe is an act of retaliation for her human rights activities. The talent of men and women like Rebiyah is the greatest resource of their nations, far more valuable than the weapons of their army or their oil under the ground. America calls on every nation that stifles dissent to end its repression, to trust its people, and to grant its citizens the freedom they deserve. (Applause.)

There are many dissidents who couldn't join us because they are being unjustly imprisoned or held under house arrest. I look forward to the day when a conference like this one include Alexander Kozulin of Belarus, Aung San Suu Kyi of Burma, Oscar Elias Biscet of Cuba, Father Nguyen Van Ly of Vietnam, Ayman Nour of Egypt. (Applause.) The daughter of one of these political prisoners is in this room. I would like to say to her, and all the families: I thank you for your courage. I pray for your comfort and strength. And I call for the immediate and unconditional release of your loved ones. (Applause.)

In the eyes of America, the democratic dissidents today are the democratic leaders of tomorrow. So we're taking new steps to strengthen our support. We recently created a Human Rights Defenders Fund, which provides grants for the legal defense and medical expenses of activists arrested or beaten by repressive governments. I strongly support the Prague Document that your conference plans to issue, which states that "the protection of human rights is critical to international peace and security." And in keeping with the goals of that declaration, I have asked Secretary Rice to send a directive to every U.S. ambassador in an un-free nation: Seek out and meet with activists for democracy. Seek out those who demand human rights. (Applause.)

People living in tyranny need to know they are not forgotten. North Koreans live in a closed society where dissent is brutally suppressed, and they are cut off from their brothers and sisters to the south. The Iranians are a great people who deserve to chart their own future, but they are denied their liberty by a handful of extremists whose pursuit of nuclear weapons prevents their country from taking its rightful place amongst the thriving. The Cubans are desperate for freedom -- and as that nation enters a period of transition, we must insist on free elections and free speech and free assembly. (Applause.) And in Sudan, freedom is denied and basic human rights are violated by a government that pursues genocide against its own citizens. My message to all those who suffer under tyranny is this: We will never excuse your oppressors. We will always stand for your freedom. (Applause.)

Freedom is also under assault in countries that have shown some progress. In Venezuela, elected leaders have resorted to shallow populism to dismantle democratic institutions and tighten their grip on power. The government of Uzbekistan continues to silence independent voices by jailing human rights activists. And Vietnam recently arrested and imprisoned a number of peaceful religious and political activists.

These developments are discouraging, but there are more reasons for optimism. At the start of the 1980s, there were only 45 democracies on Earth. There are now more than 120 democracies -- more people now live in freedom than ever before. And it is the responsibility of those who enjoy the blessings of liberty to help those who are struggling to establish their free societies. So the United States has nearly doubled funding for democracy projects. We're working with our partners in the G-8 to promote the rise of a vibrant civil society in the Middle East through initiatives like the Forum for the Future. We're cooperating side-by-side with the new democracies in Ukraine and Georgia and Kyrgyzstan. We congratulate the people of Yemen on their landmark presidential election, and the people of Kuwait on elections in which women were able to vote and run for office for the first time. (Applause.) We stand firmly behind the people of Lebanon and Afghanistan and Iraq as they defend their democratic gains against extremist enemies. (Applause.) These people are making tremendous sacrifices for liberty. They deserve the admiration of the free world, and they deserve our unwavering support. (Applause.)

The United States is also using our influence to urge valued partners like Egypt and Saudi Arabia and Pakistan to move toward freedom. These nations have taken brave stands and strong action to confront extremists, along with some steps to expand liberty and transparency. Yet they have a great distance still to travel. The United States will continue to press nations like these to open up their political systems, and give greater voice to their people. Inevitably, this creates tension. But our relationships with these countries are broad enough and deep enough to bear it. As our relationships with South Korea and Taiwan during the Cold War prove, America can maintain a friendship and push a nation toward democracy at the same time. (Applause.)

We're also applying that lesson to our relationships with Russia and China. (Applause.) The United States has strong working relationships with these countries. Our friendship with them is complex. In the areas where we share mutual interests, we work together. In other areas, we have strong disagreements. China's leaders believe that they can continue to open the nation's economy without opening its political system. We disagree. (Applause.) In Russia, reforms that were once promised to empower citizens have been derailed, with troubling implications for democratic development. Part of a good relationship is the ability to talk openly about our disagreements. So the United States will continue to build our relationships with these countries -- and we will do it without abandoning our principles or our values. (Applause.)

We appreciate that free societies take shape at different speeds in different places. One virtue of democracy is that it reflects local history and traditions. Yet there are fundamental elements that all democracies share -- freedom of speech, religion, press, and assembly; rule of law enforced by independent courts; private property rights; and political parties that compete in free and fair elections. (Applause.) These rights and institutions are the foundation of human dignity, and as countries find their own path to freedom, they must find a loyal partner in the United States of America.

Extending the reach of freedom is a mission that unites democracies around the world. Some of the greatest contributions are coming from nations with the freshest memories of tyranny. I appreciate the Czech Republic's support for human rights projects in Belarus and Burma and Cuba. I thank Germany, and Poland, and the Czech Republic, and Hungary, and Slovenia, and Georgia, Lithuania, Estonia, Croatia for contributing to the new United Nations Democracy Fund. I'm grateful for the commitment many new democracies in Central and Eastern Europe are making to Afghanistan and Iraq. I

appreciate that these countries are willing to do the hard work necessary to enable people who want to be free to live in a free society. (Applause.)

In all these ways, the freedom agenda is making a difference. The work has been difficult, and that is not going to change. There will be triumphs and failures, progress and setbacks. Ending tyranny cannot be achieved overnight. And of course, this objective has its critics.

Some say that ending tyranny means "imposing our values" on people who do not share them, or that people live in parts of the world where freedom cannot take hold. That is refuted by the fact that every time people are given a choice, they choose freedom. We saw that when the people of Latin America turned dictatorships into democracies, and the people of South Africa replaced apartheid with a free society, and the people of Indonesia ended their long authoritarian rule. We saw it when Ukrainians in orange scarves demanded that their ballots be counted. We saw it when millions of Afghans and Iraqis defied the terrorists to elect free governments. At a polling station in Baghdad, I was struck by the words of an Iraqi -- he had one leg -- and he told a reporter, "I would have crawled here if I had to." Was democracy -- I ask the critics, was democracy imposed on that man? Was freedom a value he did not share? The truth is that the only ones who have to impose their values are the extremists and the radicals and the tyrants. (Applause.)

And that is why the communists crushed the Prague Spring, and threw an innocent playwright in jail, and trembled at the sight of a Polish Pope. History shows that ultimately, freedom conquers fear. And given a chance, freedom will conquer fear in every nation on Earth. (Applause.)

Another objection -- objection is that ending tyranny will unleash chaos. Critics point to the violence in Afghanistan, or Iraq, or Lebanon as evidence that freedom leaves people less safe. But look who's causing the violence. It's the terrorists, it's the extremists. It is no coincidence that they are targeting young democracies in the Middle East. They know that the success of free societies there is a mortal threat to their ambitions -- and to their very survival. The fact that our enemies are fighting back is not a reason to doubt democracy. It is evidence that they recognize democracy's power. It is evidence that we are at war. And it is evidence that free nations must do what it takes to prevail. (Applause.)

Still, some argue that a safer goal would be stability, especially in the Middle East. The problem is that pursuing stability at the expense of liberty does not lead to peace -- it leads to September the 11th, 2001. (Applause.) The policy of tolerating tyranny is a moral and strategic failure. It is a mistake the world must not repeat in the 21st century.

Others fear that democracy will bring dangerous forces to power, such as Hamas in the Palestinian Territories. Elections will not always turn out the way we hope. Yet democracy consists of more than a single trip to the ballot box. Democracy requires meaningful opposition parties, a vibrant civil society, a government that enforces the law and responds to the needs of its people. Elections can accelerate the creation of such institutions. In a democracy, people will not vote for a life of perpetual violence. To stay in power, elected officials must listen to their people and pursue their desires for peace -- or, in democracies, the voters will replace them through free elections.

Finally, there's the contention that ending tyranny is unrealistic. Well, some argue that extending

democracy around the world is simply too difficult to achieve. That's nothing new. We've heard that criticism before throughout history. At every stage of the Cold War, there were those who argued that the Berlin Wall was permanent, and that people behind the Iron Curtain would never overcome their oppressors. History has sent a different message.

The lesson is that freedom will always have its skeptics. But that's not the whole story. There are also people like you, and the loved ones you represent -- men and women with courage to risk everything for your ideals. In his first address as President, Vaclav Havel proclaimed, "People, your government has returned to you!" He was echoing the first speech of Tomas Masaryk -- who was, in turn, quoting the 17th century Czech teacher Comenius. His message was that freedom is timeless. It does not belong to one government or one generation. Freedom is the dream and the right of every person in every nation in every age. (Applause.)

The United States of America believes deeply in that message. It was the inspiration for our founding, when we declared that "all men are created equal." It was the conviction that led us to help liberate this continent, and stand with the captive nations through their long struggle. It is the truth that guides our nation to oppose radicals and extremists and terror and tyranny in the world today. And it is the reason I have such great confidence in the men and women in this room.

I leave Prague with a certainty that the cause of freedom is not tired, and that its future is in the best of hands. With unbreakable faith in the power of liberty, you will inspire your people, you will lead your nations, and you will change the world.

Thanks for having me. And may God bless you. (Applause.)

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