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## Vice President's Remarks at the 2006 Vilnius Conference

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**THE VICE PRESIDENT:** Thank you very much. Distinguished guests, colleagues, and friends, and my thanks for the welcome, and for the opportunity to join all of you today in this very important conference. I'm honored to be in your company.

I appreciate the thoughtful words of our co-hosts, President Kaczynski and President Adamkus, as well. And I want to extend special thanks to the government and the people of Lithuania for the hospitality shown to me and my wife.

Mr. President, this is our first visit to your country, and to see this beautiful part of the world with our own eyes is an experience we'll always cherish. We're grateful for the warm and the welcoming spirit of Lithuania. And to the citizens of this land, and to all the countries represented in the hall today, we bring friendship and good wishes from our President, George Bush, and from the people of the United States.

This conference has drawn together men and women from diverse nations and cultures, and from many different callings here today. We have elected and appointed officials, community activists, entrepreneurs, students, brave leaders of color revolutions. We're united by common ideals, announced at the first gathering of this conference last year: to free this region from all remaining lines of division, from violations of human rights, from frozen conflicts, and to open a new era of democracy. To this place we've brought the hopes and the aspirations of the peoples we represent. And from this place we will bold and confidently serve the cause of freedom, security, and peace.



It is fitting that we should gather in the Baltic region -- the very front lines of freedom in the modern world. For several generations, Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia were counted as provinces of an empire. In fact you were ancient nations, with your sovereignty lost by theft. The United States never recognized the legitimacy of that occupation, and we kept faith with you until the day your independence was restored.

In these 15 years, the Baltics have shown how far nations can progress when they embrace freedom, serve the interests of their people, and hold steadily to the path of reform. You have thrown off the stagnation of imperial dictatorship and a command economy, and now your children look to a future of promise as citizens of independent, prosperous democracies. You give both aid and inspiration to those who share this dream, from countries nearby, to the new democracies of the broader Middle East. Because you have persevered, you are now part of the family of democratic countries in the European Union, and your security is protected by the greatest partnership for freedom in our world, the NATO Alliance.

This great story has been repeated many times in the course of a generation, enhancing the lives of millions, and lifting the hopes of millions more. As maps of Europe traced the receding of an empire and the advance of freedom, the continent left behind the days of artificial division enforced by diplomatic stand-offs and militarized borders. With the consolidation of democracy, and the expansion of NATO and the European Union, countries that once were rivals have become partners.



This progress would not have been possible without leadership -- from patriots with names like Sakharov, Mindszenty, Walesa, Havel -- who, in decades of striving, challenged dictators, spoke the truth without apology, and refused to compromise their liberty. Their courage and their faithfulness to principle helped tip the balance of Europe toward freedom. And they provide a moral example for our own time. Ladies and gentlemen, if you and I stand firmly for the principles we know to be true, we also can build a legacy of freedom and progress, and make this young century a time of rising hopes and lasting peace.

It is clear in today's world that our values and our strategic interests are one and the same. In President Bush's words, "Democracy leads to justice within a nation - and the advance of democracy leads to greater security among nations." Regimes that repress and tyrannize their own people also threaten the peace and the stability of other lands. They feed rivalries and hatreds to obscure their own failings. They seek to impose their will by force, and they make our world more dangerous. We support democracy and reform, because governments accountable to their citizens are peaceful. Free peoples do not live in endless deprivation, tending old grievances, growing in their resentments, and posing threats to others. Free peoples do not dwell on every disagreement and conflict of the past; rather, they see the possibilities of the future, and turn their creative gifts to building a better tomorrow. Here in Europe, because nations live in freedom and in hope, they resolve disagreements calmly, and share in the work of building prosperity and security. The democratic unity of Europe ensures the peace of Europe.

We have every reason for confidence in the future of democracy, because the evidence is on our side, and because we are upholding great and enduring values -- which apply everywhere, and which can be stated in the plainest of terms. No one should have to live under repressive rule -- denied the right to chart their own destiny, or persecuted for the beliefs they hold or the words they speak. A beloved President of the United States, Ronald Reagan, once wrote these words in a letter to a leader of the former Soviet Union. "The peoples of the world," Reagan said, "despite differences in racial and ethnic origin have very much in common. They want the dignity of having some control over their own destiny. They want to work at the craft or trade of their own choosing and to be fairly rewarded. They want to raise their families in peace without harming anyone or suffering harm themselves. Government exists for their convenience and not the other way around."

There is another reason we can have confidence in the future of democracy. Individual rights, self-determination, and respect for the dignity of each person are consistent with our nature as human beings. We are created in the image and likeness of God, and He has planted in our hearts a yearning to be free. And because of that immutable truth, the idea of liberty will always stir men and women to action. So to those who struggle to secure their freedom, let us offer the same support we would ask for ourselves, and the same words of encouragement once given by Pope John Paul II to an afflicted Europe: "Be Not Afraid."

The freedom movement is far from over, and far from tired. And we still live in a time of heroes. From Freedom Square in Tbilisi, to Independence Square in Kiev, and beyond, patriots have stepped forward to claim their just inheritance of liberty and independence. They have taken on tremendous duties. And they have earned the respect of a watching world.

Nations have produced great revolutions and have great tasks ahead of them, and one can hardly overstate the difficulties facing this new generation of leaders. The Republic of Georgia, in President Saakashvili's words, "started from hopelessness, despair, injustice, absence of electricity, absence of salaries and pensions and absence of the public order." President Saakashvili continued, "We started from a point at which countries and nations usually cease to exist."

President Yushchenko, also, has pointed out the difficulties of organizing a representative government in a country that had compromised the rule of law, little official respect for human rights, a corrupt bureaucracy, and an intimidated press corps. Confronting challenges like these will require time, consensus-building, and a steady, sustained effort to apply necessary but tough reforms. Yet President Bush and I are convinced that men and women who have the will to defy repressive regimes also have the character to secure democratic gains.

There is no single model of democracy; our systems vary according to the unique traditions of our countries, the languages we speak, and the events and the heroes of our history. Yet healthy, self-governing, forward-looking societies have the same basic strengths. Democracy starts with citizens casting their votes, but that is only the beginning. Elections must be fair, and regular, and truly competitive. Men and women must be free to speak their minds -- and here a simple test is proposed by the former Soviet dissident Natan Sharansky: "Can a person walk into the middle of the town square and express his or her views without fear of arrest, imprisonment, or physical harm? If he can, then that person is living in a free society. If not, it's a fear society."

In a free society, political parties must be able to function without harassment. Candidates must be able to seek resources and votes in a spirit of competition, not a climate of anxiety. There must be an active, independent news media to keep citizens informed, and to make possible the free exchange of ideas and debate. And election results must yield the voluntary and orderly transfer of power.

In a democracy, the state itself has only limited authority over the lives of its citizens, because the true strength of a nation is found in the institutions of civil society -- the family, communities of worship, voluntary associations, and free enterprise. Each person is entitled to freedom of conscience -- not merely the right to hold a religious belief, but to practice that belief and to share it with others. Citizens deserve basic guarantees of equal treatment under the law, and minority groups should be safe from oppression. Protecting civil society and upholding individual freedom requires the rule of law -- and that is at the very heart of government's reason for being. Government meets this obligation by ensuring an independent judiciary, a professional legal establishment, and honest, competent law enforcement.

When power is accountable and the rule of law is secure, people have the confidence they need to start businesses, invest capital, and plan for the future. And here again, the state has a limited but an essential role: to create the conditions for growth and wealth creation throughout the economy.

In times of economic transition, there can be a temptation to make policies that bring short-term benefits -- whether price controls, protectionism, or state ownership. But the experience of our world -- demonstrated by nations on every continent -- proves that closed and overregulated systems only hinder progress and pull a nation down. Long-term growth depends on the free market, because the engine of prosperity is the private sector. In a successful democracy, therefore, government must protect property rights; promote competition; encourage fair and open trade with other nations; and levy taxes that raise revenue without punishing work, savings, investment, and entrepreneurship.

Leaders must also persevere in fighting the two greatest enemies of economic progress -- bureaucratic roadblocks and official corruption. If the private sector is to thrive and to generate jobs, then entrepreneurs must be free to start companies, to hire workers, and do business without unreasonable interference or favoritism. And the only way for an economy to consistently attract commerce and investment is to root out corruption at every level, and to require openness, transparency, and accountability in the systems of business and government.

In all these ways, democracies -- both old and new -- can follow a course to political stability and economic prosperity. I am not here to say that the practice of democracy is easy. In my own country, at the time of our founding, some 20 percent of our people lived and worked in bondage. Those chains were broken only after a devastating civil war, and another century passed before fundamental rights were guaranteed to all of our citizens. As an American I cannot claim that our country is perfect. But we have learned through hard experience that nothing is more important than proclaiming an ideal of freedom, equality, and justice -- and, despite difficulties, always reaching for that ideal. There is no question that every ounce of effort in such a cause is repaid in national unity, in peaceful progress, and, above all, in greater opportunity and dignity in people's lives.

Nor do I need to remind anyone here just what the alternative is. You have seen it, and you have lived it -- centralized control; intimidation of political opponents; unremitting corruption with an undercurrent

of violence; economic stagnation; and national decline. That is a nightmare of history that no rational person would ever want to repeat.

We can also take heart from the experience of Eastern and Central Europe after the Cold War. In the 1990s, many predicted that the move toward democracy and free markets would end in failure. And it is true there were setbacks. Some parties promised reform and did not deliver -- but that was not the end of reform. Some economies faced painful dislocations -- but that was not the end of reform. In all cases, nations that moved forward with a reform agenda have been successful. We must keep in mind that progress cannot fairly be assessed by a single moment in time, whether good or bad -- but instead by whether there is steady, hopeful advancement over time.

Reform is an uneven path, but it is not chaos; indeed, the surest way to invite constant political, social, and economic upheaval is to reject the hard but necessary choices. And nations that take the right path need to know that you do not walk alone. On his visit to Washington last year, President Yushchenko said, "It is very important to feel that we have partners standing by, that we are not left in solitude coping with these troubles." The United States of America is committed to being a good partner on this journey. Our goal is to help others find their own voice, attain their own freedom, and make their own way.

Through direct aid and active diplomacy, the United States will continue our strong support for the development of democratic institutions that are transparent, accountable, and decentralized. We're helping citizen groups to promote broad voter participation, and governments to ensure that elections conform to international standards of fairness. We have funded programs to provide training for journalists, to foster the growth of independent news organizations. We're supporting groups that monitor state action and defend human rights. And we're standing with many nations to confront health issues such as the spread of HIV-AIDS.

Americans are also assisting in the realm of commerce, providing advice on fiscal management issues, supporting small business development, and giving guidance to those seeking accession to the World Trade Organization. And as we help nations to fully participate in the global economy, America will give strong encouragement to those aspiring to membership in NATO and to the European Union.

The United States is proud to work in partnership with a growing European Union. And we're proud that NATO has grown into a greater force for peace and stability than ever before. The young democracies in our great alliance have renewed it -- bringing energy, and wisdom, and moral clarity to the councils of Europe. For them, the experience of tyranny is real, and recent. So they understand the need for vigilance against danger, the duty to call evil by its name, and the responsibility of free peoples to defend the innocent and to confront the violent. In the years ahead, more nations will make the tough decisions, and do the hard and essential work, to meet the standards for NATO and EU membership. America looks to the day when you are ready to join those institutions, and they are ready to join you.

The spread of democracy is an unfolding of history; it is a benefit to all, and a threat to none. The best neighbor a country can have is a democracy -- stable, peaceful, and open to relations of commerce and cooperation instead of suspicion and fear. The nations of the West have produced the most

prosperous, tolerant system ever known. And because that system embraces the hopes and dreams of all humanity, it has changed our world for the better. We can and should build upon that successful record. The system that has brought such great hope to the shores of the Baltic can bring the same hope to the far shores of the Black Sea, and beyond. What is true in Vilnius is also true in Tbilisi and Kiev, and true in Minsk, and true in Moscow.

All of us are committed to democratic progress in Belarus. That nation has suffered in major wars and experienced terrible losses, and now its people are denied basic freedoms by the last dictatorship in Europe. With us today are democracy advocates from Belarus. We welcome you to this conference. I had also expected to meet today with the opposition leader, Alyaksander Milinkevich -- but he was recently put in jail by the regime in Minsk. The regime should end this injustice and free Mr. Milinkevich, along with the other democracy advocates held in captivity. The world knows what is happening in Belarus. Peaceful demonstrators have been beaten, dissidents have vanished, and a climate of fear prevails under a government that subverts free elections and bans your own country's flag. There is no place in a Europe whole and free for a regime of this kind. The people of Belarus deserve better. You have the right to determine your destiny. And your great nation has a future in the community of democracies.

America and all of Europe also want to see Russia in the category of healthy, vibrant democracies. Yet in Russia today, opponents of reform are seeking to reverse the gains of the last decade. In many areas of civil society -- from religion and the news media, to advocacy groups and political parties -- the government has unfairly and improperly restricted the rights of her people. Other actions by the Russian government have been counterproductive, and could begin to affect relations with other countries. No legitimate interest is served when oil and gas become tools of intimidation or blackmail, either by supply manipulation or attempts to monopolize transportation. And no one can justify actions that undermine the territorial integrity of a neighbor, or interfere with democratic movements.

Russia has a choice to make. And there is no question that a return to democratic reform in Russia will generate further success for its people and greater respect among fellow nations. Democratization in Russia helped to end the Cold War, and the Russian people have made heroic progress in overcoming the miseries of the 20th century. They deserve now to live out their peaceful aspirations under a government that upholds freedom at home, and builds good relations abroad.

None of us believes that Russia is fated to become an enemy. A Russia that increasingly shares the values of this community can be a strategic partner and a trusted friend as we work toward common goals. In that spirit, the leading industrialized nations will engage Russia at the Group of Eight Summit in St. Petersburg this summer. We will make the case, clearly and confidently, that Russia has nothing to fear and everything to gain from having strong, stable democracies on its borders, and that by aligning with the West, Russia joins all of us on a course to prosperity and greatness. The vision we affirm today is of a community of sovereign democracies that transcend old grievances, that honor the many links of culture and history among us, that trade in freedom, respect each other as great nations, and strive together for a century of peace.

Our cooperation is vital, because democracies have great duties in today's world. The challenges of a new era require concerted action by nations and peoples who believe liberty is worth defending. For the sake of our security, we must act decisively against known dangers. And to secure freedom and

peace for generations to come, we must be true to the democratic dreams of others, and remember our brothers and sisters who have kept their hopes in exile.

The end of the Cold War did not usher in an era of quiet and tranquility. A new enemy of freedom has emerged -- and it is focused, resourceful, and rapacious. This enemy perverts a religious faith to serve a dark political objective -- to establish, by violence and intimidation, a totalitarian empire that denies all political and religious freedom. To that end, the terrorists do not seek to build large standing armies. Instead, they want to demoralize free nations with dramatic acts of murder, and to gain weapons of mass destruction so they can hold power by threat or blackmail. We need not have any illusions about their ambitions, because the terrorists have stated them clearly. They have killed many thousands in many countries. They would, if able, kill hundreds of thousands more -- and still not be finished.

This is not an enemy that can be ignored or appeased. And every retreat by civilized nations is an invitation to further violence against us. Men who despise freedom will attack freedom in any part of the world -- and so responsible nations have a duty to stay on the offensive, together, to remove this threat. We are working to prevent attacks before they occur, by tracking down the terrorists wherever they dwell. We are working to deny weapons of mass destruction to outlaw states and their terrorist allies. We are working to prevent any nation from becoming a staging ground for future terrorist violence. And we are working to deny the terrorists future recruits, by replacing hatred and resentment with democracy and hope across the broader Middle East.

Our commitment to this cause is being tested today in Afghanistan and in Iraq. The task is difficult, but the progress has been steady, and the nations of our coalition have performed superbly. All 26 members of NATO have contributed assistance to operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. And some of the most steadfast allies in the cause are nations that have recently won their own freedom. From a Lithuanian Provincial Reconstruction team in Afghanistan; to Latvian military training teams in Iraq; to Estonian infantrymen; to Georgian security forces; to Polish and Romanian army units -- countries that have known tyranny themselves have a clear understanding of what is at stake. And they have generously taken up the cause of democracy in other lands.

Because our coalition has stood by our commitment to the Afghan and Iraqi people, some 50 million men, women, and children who lived under dictators now live in freedom. Afghanistan is a rising democracy, with the first fully elected government in its 5,000-year history. Iraq has the most progressive constitution and the strongest democratic mandate in the entire Arab world. And despite threats from assassins and car bombers, Iraqis came forward by the millions to cast their votes and to proclaim their rights as citizens of a free country.

Many days of challenge are still ahead in the war on terror, and much more will be asked of us as we help the peoples of a troubled region to consolidate their own democratic gains. And yet, as President Bush has said, the fight we have entered is "the current expression of an ancient struggle -- between those who put their faith in dictators, and those who put their faith in the people." We have seen that fundamental clash of ideas played out in the history of Europe and the experience of Europe can be a source of confidence to us all.

We have learned, ladies and gentlemen, that the desire of human beings to be free is the most potent

force on this Earth. Tyrants may, for a time, deny the hopes of others, violate the rights of others, and even take the lives of others. Yet they have no power to inspire hope or to raise the sights of a nation. The ideals that you and I believe in -- liberty, and equality, and justice under law -- speak to the best in mankind. We have seen these ideals lift up whole countries and secure generations of peace. And we will see that promise renewed in our own time, in places near and far. So let us persevere in freedom's cause -- united, confident, and unafraid.

Thank you. (Applause.)

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