

Tom Lantos Institute Conference: Jewish Life and Anti-Semitism in Contemporary Europe

Budapest, 1-2 October, 2013

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Good afternoon. I'd like to first thank the Lantos Institute, the Lantos Foundation, for hosting this affair, for the government of Hungary for hosting us in this magnificent building. I've been asked today to speak about executive power and countering anti-Semitism. Now of course, in our system, in the United States, executive power is somewhat limited compared to parliamentary systems where the executive and the legislative are together. Our executive has, of course, has many tools, foreign aid, funding of NGOs, but, our strongest tool is persuasion, or what our President Teddy Roosevelt said "the bully pulpit." And that remains our tool. The office that I represent, the Special Envoy for monitoring and combating anti-Semitism, can persuade. We twice a year put out reports, the international religious freedom report, we contribute to the human rights report, the SEAS can sometimes speak out, but frankly, more importantly, it's our entire government that speaks out. When Secretary Kerry speaks out against anti-Semitism, when President Obama, recently in Stockholm, spoke directly of anti-Semitism. But if the executive branch is the way we counter anti-Semitism primarily, this office would not exist without the legislative branch of our government.

Now today in the news we hear about the lack of bipartisanship in a very concrete way in the United States. And this lack of bipartisanship touches on almost every issue we deal with. But one it does not is countering anti-Semitism. When this office was created in 2004, Republicans like Senator George Voinovich, Congressman Chris Smith, were instrumental, and on the Democratic side, of course, Tom Lantos. I had the good fortune of meeting Tom Lantos approximately 35 years ago, before he was a member of Congress, when we worked together on fostering U.S.-Israel relationships. Now I can't claim to be a close friend of Tom Lantos through all those years, but like many young people of that time, Tom Lantos was a role model for me. We miss him, and we will miss him today at these two days. We will miss his passion for fighting for what is just, we will miss his commitment to the causes he believed in, and we will miss his wisdom, that he brought to the political process. For great man, it is tempting to say we know exactly what he would recommend us to do today. But in truth, we can't say that. But I do think we can say a few things. First, he would be so proud of the Lantos family. For all its generations. I know personally of three generations who are working on the causes that Tom Lantos held so deeply. And for all I know, one of those great-grandchildren may be doing so as well and we'll have four generations. And number two, he would tell us that to combat anti-Semitism, we must confront historical truth. If nothing else, his fight for recognition of Raoul Wallenberg screams that message to us today.

Now, I could go through a long list of the things I have seen that indicate the return of anti-Semitism in this continent and in other places. But others can do that better than I. But let me touch on a few examples of what I've seen in the five months I've been in this office. What has struck me most. Now of course, the treatment of Israel stands out. We in the United States believe Israel should be treated just as any other nation – Israel can be criticized like any other nation. But when Israel is delegitimized, when Israel is defamed, when Israel is held to a double standard, we believe that crosses the line, and yes, into anti-Semitism. I was struck in the first few weeks of my job, when I visited the very great capital of a nation, cosmopolitan nation in Europe, Brussels, and I was told by countless members of the Jewish community that it was not wise to walk in the streets with a kippah on, with a star of David or any other symbol of Judaism, if you didn't want to be harassed and maybe physically intimidated. Recently, I was in a great cosmopolitan capital of Europe, celebrating Shabbat. And I usually do not wear a kippah, except when praying, and I experienced that feeling directly. Leaving a Shabbat dinner, in a very nice neighborhood, in this great cosmopolitan city, I walked downstairs with my kippah on, I did not have a thought of taking it off, walked into the street and as soon as my foot touched the ground, my colleague grabbed my arm, and said "You'd better take off that kippah." In Berlin, at the conference on security, OSCE and Jewish communities, I was taken aback, as my fellow attendees were, by a film put out by the Jewish security agency SPCJ. Now this is a gathering of people who knew how to talk, and the chattering through most of the speeches and presentations kept up. But by the end of this film, about Toulouse, you could have heard a pin drop for thirty seconds. And as powerful as that film was, about the butchery of children, about the most cold blooded butchery, what was even more concerning, was the reaction, the rise in threat levels to the French Jewish communities right after the killing. The statements about it – "He should have killed more, he should have killed more." Now history is my touchstone, as I approach this job, all of us have our own skills, and what we bring to our tasks, and of course history never repeats itself. But as other speakers before me have mentioned, it gives us great lessons. So today, what do we see? We see the greatest recession, hopefully ending, but the greatest recession since the Great Depression. We see parliamentary parties in Europe, openly xenophobic, openly anti-Semitic, with significant representation in parliaments. And we see paramilitaries, representing those parties. So what does this evoke for us? For me, it can't help but evoke the late twenties and the early thirties. Now it is a different time. But it should raise our antenna. And this week, we saw in the most graphic way, Golden Dawn, and we are grateful for the Greek government for shining a light on its despicable nature. When we talk about Golden Dawn, though, of course, the obvious question is Jobbik, here in Hungary. And I'm not going to go over the list of despicable crimes of Jobbik, others will do that better. I think we should say Jobbik is not Hungary. Someone wrote me an email this week and said: Fidesz is not Jobbik! Well of course Fidesz is not Jobbik, that is absolutely true, and it is important to say, and it's important to recognize the positives – the positives of this government and the positives of this country. We heard the Deputy Prime Minister today say many things that were

heartening. Prime Minister Orbán, on more than one occasion, has strongly condemned anti-Semitism. His first government brought us National Holocaust Commemorative Day. In the last year, the Speaker of the Parliament has been given the authority to censure and potentially expel MPs who resort to hate speech. We have now this government bringing us the 2014 (Holocaust) Memorial Year. And we have the support of this government for the Holocaust Memorial Documentation Center. But let us not forget what we are dealing with: anti-Semitism – a disease as virulent, as resilient, and sometimes unfortunately many of us believe, eternal, that we must fight every day. And though we can appreciate the good, it is not enough. What the United States believes – we believe, like Tom Lantos, in historical truths. If you don't confront the truths, you can't confront anti-Semitism. Some, and we are not talking about Jobbik here, in this country, talk about the Holocaust equaling Germany– “Germany is the Holocaust.” We know and we've heard here, the Deputy Prime Minister told us, that is not the case, but that is not what everybody says here. Now this is not a problem just for Hungary. All through occupied Europe, we have this debate going on. Some countries have clearly confronted it, some countries are still working on it. In fact, in the United States, where we never had an occupation nor did we have European-style anti-Semitism in the thirties, but every day I walk the halls of the State Department, I can't help but remember a diplomat named Breckenridge Long, who made sure that though the quotas that were themselves scandalously low for countries that had many Jews, he made sure those quotas were never filled, through the thirties and even in the early forties. Thousands of Jews, thousands of children could have been saved except for the active effort of Breckinridge Long and other diplomats in my State Department. We too have to confront. And we do. Some want to rehabilitate Hungarian cultural figures and though we understand, in the United States even, the importance of looking at people who contributed, we cannot ignore the anti-Semitic past of these people, we cannot teach about them without making sure they are stained by that memory. And educating we believe in. We believe that youth must know. We believe that any educational program must be comprehensive, it must not ignore the historical truths, and that institutions like the Holocaust Museum and Documentation Center are excellent facilities and tools for doing that training. And finally, we believe in overwhelming hate speech with good speech. And that means when hate speech arises, the response is quick, it's definitive, no people talking about “I am speaking only in my capacity as, in my personal capacity as opposed to my government capacity,” and that response is broad. That it is not just one member of the government, or party, but that it is across the board, all the time. As I said, it is not just important for our office to speak, it is important for our elected officials across the board to speak and they do. And finally, we have to speak out not just against Jobbik, sometimes that's the easy way, but sometimes against allies. Such as journalist Bayer. And make it clear, absolutely crystal clear, that the government and the country are against this type of speech. When it comes to anti-Semitism, we can't pull our punches. When it comes to hate, there are no compromises. I was brought up in a system that respects compromises. Respects the “art of the possible” in the legislative process. But with hate, there is no deal.

And if we want a lesson of history, we only have to go back to Weimar, where the parties in Germany thought they could deal with the National Socialists. What we believe is not easy to accomplish. As I said, government is all about democracy and compromises. But as said before, history will judge us when it comes to anti-Semitism and it will judge us harshly if we don't react now, and comprehensively. It's also not easy when we realize that anti-Semitism will be here long after all of us have done our job, long after all of us are gone from this earth, and probably long after our children and grandchildren are gone. But I find some comfort in a Jewish sage's saying: "It is not your responsibility to finish the work, but neither are you free to desist from it." And the same sage, Rabbi Tarfon, sums up personally for me what our work on anti-Semitism is about, what all work against hate must be about, when he said, "The day is short, the work is much, the workers are lazy, the reward is great, and the Master is insistent." Thank you.