Ambassador Feinstein's Welcoming Remarks

Warsaw Conference on "The Idea of Republicanism"
February 22, 2011

Witam wszystkich Państwa! [Ladies and Gentlemen]

[Vice Rector Włodzimierz Lengauer, Ambassador Barry Delongchamps, Professor Richard Wolin, Professor Chantal Delsol, Professor Marcin Krol, Professor Andrzej Waszkiewicz and organizer/moderator Wojciech Przybylski.]

To dla mnie wielka przy**jem**ność, że mogę otworzyć dzi**siej**szą de**ba**tę / razem z Profesorem Lengauerem i François, / moim sza**co**wnym / fran**cu**skim / ko**le**gą ambasa**do**rem.

[It is my pleasure to join Professor Lengauer and François, my esteemed French counterpart, in welcoming you to this evening's debate.]

Teraz po**zwo**lą państwo, że będę mówił **jed**nak po angielsku.

[Now if you please, I will speak in English.]

As diplomats who are busy getting things done and keeping our home offices informed, it is not often that François and I have the luxury of thinking deeply about the historical and intellectual basis of our political systems. It is a pleasure to do so today. But while we have been asked to describe our countries' different approaches to republicanism, I must start

by emphasizing how much we share. Our founding fathers were profoundly influenced by Montesquieu and Rousseau; Polish Solidarity activists recalled American revolutionaries as well as Polish constitutionalists; and today, democracy proponents around the world cite Solidarity's example.

My second general observation is that, well… "some of my best friends are Republicans." I'm sorry, I couldn't resist that. I know, we should be talking about republicans with a small "r," but as I will discuss in a moment, our leaders' ability to overcome partisan differences is central to republican notions of pursuing the common good.

Lech Wałęsa[1] began his historic address to the U.S. Congress in November 1989 by quoting the preamble to the American Constitution.

"My **na**ród! -- We the people -- Ni**ko**mu na tej sali nie muszę przypo**mi**nać, skąd te słowa po**cho**dzą, nie muszę też przypo**mi**nać, że ja, e**le**ktryk z Gdańska, też mam **pra**wo się nimi posłu**gi**wać."

["*My, naród* -- We the people," he said. "I do not need to remind anyone here where these words come from. And I do not need to explain that I, an electrician from Gdansk, am also entitled to invoke them."]

[1] NB: Wałęsa was not yet president when he addressed Congress in November 1989.

Wałęsa's address, delivered more than 200 years after the U.S. Constitution's adoption, underscored that document's relevance in the modern world. It also reinforced the importance of the historic bond between the United States and Poland, which adopted Europe's first constitution in 1791. The idea of a Polish constitution was controversial in its time. The same was true in America, where supporters and opponents of a federalist system engaged in heated debate and published countless pamphlets and essays, including the Federalist Papers. On the whole, though, the debate in America was less contentious – and less dangerous – than the debate that took place in France a few years later.

Even so, because the deliberations were so controversial, delegates to the Constitutional Convention in 1787 met in utmost secrecy. When the proceedings ended, people gathered outside Philadelphia's Independence Hall eager to learn what had been produced behind closed doors. As the delegates left the building, a Mrs. Powel of Philadelphia asked Benjamin Franklin, "Well, Doctor, what have we got?" With no hesitation, Franklin replied, "Madam, you have a republic, if you can keep it."

Wałęsa's historic address to Congress and Franklin's admonition underscore the dynamic tension between two concepts that shape our

understanding of the idea of the republic: the principle of inalienable rights and the notion of the common good, or the national interest.

The Constitution has been hailed as a model compromise – enshrining checks and balances among three branches of government, separation of powers between the federal government and the states, and a commitment to uphold the inalienable rights and liberties of private citizens. In their wisdom, the founders chose a republican model of government to balance the risks and benefits of centralized power (which the founders feared could become despotism) against those of democracy (which the founders feared could devolve into mob rule). This elegant solution enabled the empowerment of the majority while safeguarding individual liberty against the tyranny of that same majority.

The founders realized that democracies, by their very nature, are flawed because they rely on the wisdom and judgment of human beings. To address this inherent weakness, representative democracies must ensure that government is bound by law and there is adequate space in public discourse for a plurality of voices. Citizens' trust that their voices can influence government decision-making rests at the core of the social contract on which our republic is based.

Of course, our Constitution was not perfect. It recognized and protected the institution of slavery. It made no mention of the principle of equality so eloquently celebrated in the Declaration of Independence and the equally eloquent Declaration of the Rights of Man. But despite these shortcomings, the founders had the foresight to include in the preamble the idea that forming a more perfect union is a never-ending process. And, for more than two centuries through initiatives like the women's suffrage and civil rights movements, American citizens have worked to do just that.

As Secretary Clinton said in her keynote address in Krakow last July, "societies move forward when the citizens that make up these groups are empowered to transform common interests into common actions that serve the common good." The common good is best served by guaranteeing fundamental, inalienable rights, including freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of assembly, and freedom of the press.

And, as Secretary Clinton also noted in Krakow, the success of Poland's peaceful democratic transformation is a powerful example of how a vibrant civil society can improve lives and help countries to become stronger and more prosperous.

Many friends and colleagues in Warsaw have remarked that American celebrations of Ronald Reagan's 100th birthday are noticeably

nonpartisan. In response, I have pointed out that this is the nature of republicanism in the United States. One doesn't necessarily have to agree with President Reagan's policies or political views to recognize his achievements and contributions.

As President Obama said at the memorial service to honor victims of January's tragic shootings in Tucson, "we know, first and foremost, that we are all Americans, and that we can question each other's ideas without questioning each other's love of country."

Similarly, when elected officials leave office, they often end up working with former opponents on issues of national interest. The first President Bush and President Clinton teamed up to coordinate U.S. relief efforts in the wake of the 2004 tsunami, just as President Clinton and the second President Bush did after the earthquake in Haiti. Likewise, President Obama invited his former opponent Hillary Clinton – and, fortunately for me, members of her campaign staff – to join his team and help him advance the national interest.

A number of Solidarity activists have told me that they looked to the American Revolution and the American Constitution as models for Poland in the turbulent '80s and early '90s. We often forget there were genuine fears at the time that Central Europe's peaceful revolutions might spiral out

of control. The republican ideal guided Polish patriots in a moment of profound and potentially dangerous change.

Last summer, I had the honor of hosting a group of Egyptian and Jordanian democracy activists at my home. They were on a study tour to Poland organized by Freedom House. Many of those activists were involved in organizing the demonstrations in Cairo's Tahrir Square. Just as Poles in 1989 looked to America, the heroes of Egypt's peaceful revolution looked to Poland for inspiration.

As Lech Wałęsa said in his address to Congress, Solidarity was a non-violent movement. "Niczego nie zbu**rzy**liśmy, (…) ale **by**liśmy u**par**ci, bardzo uparci, gotowi do po**świę**ceń, zdolni do ofiar, wie**dzie**liśmy, czego chcemy i nasza siła okazała się większa."

Solidarity's example reflects the republican ideal at its best – individuals of many different viewpoints and from many backgrounds setting aside those differences and coming together to work for the common good.

Of course, disagreements and debate are inevitable – in fact, they are essential to the process. And in that spirit of healthy and lively debate, I look forward to this evening's discussion.

Dziękuję bardzo.