
Remarks as delivered.

THE WHITE HOUSE
Office of the Vice President

For Immediate Release
October 22, 2009

REMARKS BY VICE PRESIDENT BIDEN
ON AMERICA, CENTRAL EUROPE, AND A PARTNERSHIP
FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

Central University Library
Bucharest, Romania

VICE PRESIDENT BIDEN: Thank you, Mr. Ambassador. Director, Mr. Mayor, former Presidents who I've had the honor to meet in the past, it's good to be back in Romania. And, Mr. Mayor, as we say in America, thank you for the passport to come into your city. I appreciate it very much.

What a magnificent forum, what a magnificent forum. And I say to all the students, thank you. I'm honored that you are here.

Ladies and gentlemen, it's an honor to be back in Romania. This is not my first trip, nor God-willing, will it be my last. And it's great to be back in Central Europe to help mark an extraordinary season of change. Twenty years ago, the world watched in awe and admiration as the men and women throughout this region broke the shackles of oppression and emerged a free people.

It's literally hard to imagine that this beautiful library was the scene of such heavy fighting in 1989. I was reviewing pictures of what it looked like with tanks stationed outside. Ladies and gentlemen, when the firing stopped and the smoke cleared, the façade of this building was scarred by shells and bullets. Five hundred thousand books were burned, part of your history and your legacy. And just blocks away, in University Square, some of freedom's young defenders were struck down. But their courage and conviction prevailed, and I hope and know set an example to all of you who followed.

When the Iron Curtain was lifted, the wall fell in Berlin, in their places grew democracy, a democracy that you've deserved for a long time. Across Europe, a new sense of possibility took hold, galvanizing the region, uplifting a continent, and literally inspiring the world. The story of freedom -- your story -- is one of the greatest achievements in modern history. And it's important that we celebrate that remarkable -- that remarkable moment. It's also important that we remember how far Central Europe has come in the last 20 years.

Early in my career as a United States Senator, a young senator then, I brought my two now grown sons, but then very young sons, to Central Europe as they reached their teenage years. I took them immediately to Dachau, so they would begin to know what men and women are capable of at their worst, but also understand what men and women were capable of at their best.

I took them to the Berlin Wall. I had them walk through Checkpoint Charlie, so that the rest of their lives, they'd remember, they'd understand that the freedom we sometimes take for granted was not a birthright for tens of millions of people on this continent.

And today, I come back to Central Europe and Romania, not only with an official delegation from the United States government, but with my 11-year-old granddaughter, Finnegan Biden. Finnegan, stand up. I want these people to see you. (Applause.) And my daughter, Kathleen Biden. Would you stand up, Kathleen? I'm going to embarrass you, I know. (Applause.)

I brought them along, because I want them to understand, particularly my granddaughter -- as my son learned -- I want them to see and understand first-hand the story of this region and of this continent. My granddaughter is visiting museums and monuments that chronicle the turmoil of the 20th century in Poland, here and in the Czech Republic.

And she has seen with her own young eyes, she has seen in the people she meets and in the vibrancy of your cities and your streets the incredible, incredible possibilities of this 21st century. She is a witness to a powerful fact: that the true validation of 1989, the real story of your country and this region lies less in what you tore down, and more in what you have built.

Those of us who know about the bloodshed and the freedom fighters in Hungary in 1956; those who felt the chilling end to the warm Prague spring of 1968 in Wenceslas Square; those who shut down the shipyards in Gdansk in 1980; those here in Romania who endured the most ruthless totalitarian dictatorship in the latter half of the 21st [sic] century in Europe. Each and every one was struggling not only against something, but for something -- for government, a government that responds to the needs of its people; for a more tolerant society, built on respect and dignity; for the freedom to think, to believe, and to pursue your dreams.

You have begun to realize those dreams that only the bold imagined 20 years ago -- a Europe whole and free, anchored in a European-Atlantic alliance institutions of NATO, and the European Union.

We Americans are incredibly proud to have been your partners in the peaceful reunification of Europe. As President Obama said on the eve of NATO Summit last spring, and I quote him, "This shared history gives us hope -- but it must not give us rest. This generation cannot stand still."

We cannot stand still because we now face another season of change, another season of challenge -- an economic crisis that has hurt too many people and eroded their confidence, a war in Afghanistan now in its eighth year, and new forces shaping this young century. Those new forces, among other things, include the spread of weapons of mass destruction and dangerous disease; the expanding chasm between the rich and poor; ethnic animosities and failed states; a rapidly warming planet and an uncertain supply of energy, food, water; the challenge to freedom and security posed by radical fundamentalism.

I come here today with a straightforward, simple message: The United States and Europe, a Europe whole and united, will meet these challenges together, for that's the only way they can be met. No amount of idle talk, no distortion of the facts, can chip away at this unassailable truth: The United States of America remains committed to our alliance with Europe, which we Americans believe, and continue to believe, is the cornerstone of American foreign policy, as it has been, for the last 60 years. We are all the more committed, because our European partners have grown broader and stronger. We, the United States, cannot succeed without you. And if you will forgive my presumption, I do not believe you can fully succeed without us.

I know that some in Central Europe look at the problems and responsibilities the United States has assumed around the world, and conclude that we have no longer focused -- we no longer are focused on this region of the world. In fact, it's precisely because of our global responsibilities and your growing and capacity and willingness to meet them with us that we value our partnership with Central Europe and Europe now more than we ever had. It's quite to the contrary.

Together, we have responsibilities to shoulder, and we have promises to keep. Those responsibilities are larger now, and the promises more significant. We see Central Europeans rising to this moment, heeding the call to leadership of major regional and international institutions. Twenty years ago, imagine the Presidency of the European Parliament, head of UNESCO, Chair of the Council in Europe, Justices on the European Court of Justice, Commissioners in the European Commission. The time for Central Europe has come. You have shown yourselves ready for our common challenges, willing to tackle them, and able to overcome them. That's why in America, we no longer think in terms of what we can do for Central Europe, but rather in terms of what we can do with Central Europe.

First and foremost, we are bound together by shared values, and a common commitment to protect those values, whenever and wherever they are challenged. NATO is the bedrock of that commitment. One of the high points of my career was leading the effort as a United States Senator to expand NATO to Central Europe. As a matter of fact, Mr. President, you'll remember, I suggested that Romania should be in the first tranche. I was the one who fought until the very end to see it included in the first tranche. Thank you for making me look so prescient, you've done so well.

As President Obama has said, there are no old members, there are no new members of NATO; there are just members. Under Article 5, an attack on one is an attack against all. Our countries are bound together by America's dedication to European security -- and by Europe's dedication to America's security, which you demonstrated quickly and powerfully in the wake of 9/11, the first time Article 5 was invoked, without us asking.

Today, we carry heavy responsibilities -- we, all of us. Our sons and daughters, like my son, are serving side by side in Afghanistan, in Iraq, and in the Balkans. For this -- for the

courage of our friends and for their losses -- the American people are grateful.

Our alliance was built around consultation and collaboration for collective defense. That's what it is about. But faced with new threats, we need a new vision on how to meet them, and new capabilities to succeed.

That's why the decision to develop what we call a new strategic concept for NATO is so very important -- and that's why it is so vital that Central European voices make themselves heard in this process.

One powerful example of how this can work is our partnership on -- our new approach to missile defense. In the 20th century, NATO successfully prepared to defend Allied territory against what was then a very real Soviet challenge on what we all used to call the "central front" that divided Europe. Today, a new major threat is growing that could reach all of our European allies well before it reaches the United States. It comes from ballistic missiles -- short-range and intermediate-range ballistic missiles -- a technology that has spread to many new countries, and less stable countries, since the end of the Cold War. This technology, coupled with the spread of nuclear know-how, poses a great threat to all of us.

And we are determined -- we are determined to ensure that our NATO allies have the protection they need when they need it, because that's our solemn obligation under Article 5. Taking into account how the threat has evolved, and how our technology has improved significantly, the United States believes there is a better way to defend against ballistic missiles than the approach we had been pursuing up until several years ago.

This phased adaptive approach the United States is proposing, it has adapted its design to meet the growing threat to Europe, with a proven technology that will cover more of Europe -- including Central Europe -- more effectively than the previous approach.

It meets the missile threats of today, and allows us to improve our defenses against that threat well into the future. Its flexibility will enable us to adapt if the threat changes. Its very existence will deter those who might think about coercing or attacking our forces, or our allies in Europe -- and it will defend them, our friends in Europe, against that threat should deterrence fail. Simply put, our missile defense plan

means greater security for Europe, and greater security for America.

Some -- maybe even understandably -- jump to the conclusion that this new missile defense approach was meant to appease Russia at the expense of Central Europe. Nothing could be further from the truth. That is absolutely wrong. Missile defense is not about Russia. Our approach is driven by security requirements of the United States and our NATO allies, period. Period.

What is true is that we are working to strengthen our relationship with Russia. We believe that a more constructive relationship with Russia will benefit all. But we're not naïve. The truth is we share some common interests: cutting the arsenals of nuclear weapons; securing vulnerable nuclear materials; stabilizing Afghanistan; preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons.

And we also continue to have disagreements with Russia on matters of basic principle. In February, in Munich, Germany, in the very first major foreign policy speech of our administration, I enunciated our administration's outline for foreign policy, and I made clear our core principles. The United States stands against the 19th century notion of "spheres of influence." We will not tolerate it, nor will we be co-opted by it.

We stand for the right of sovereign democracies to make their own decisions, to choose their own alliances, without the right of any country to veto those decisions. We will never make a deal about anything with anyone above your heads or behind your backs. The maxim we live by is clear: nothing about you without you, nothing about you without you. And I would argue, look at our track record, look at our track record.

We've all learned over the past two years that as the globe around us shrinks, the bonds between us grow. We are partners in today's global economy. That's why we worked with our European partners -- the IMF and the World Bank -- to make sure international support for your economies was there when you needed it most.

That's why it's heartening to see how many of you have successfully braved this worldwide recession and put your nations on the road to recovery. And working together, we can

all learn lessons from this crisis that will help us lay the foundation for a renewed century of growth and to rebuild prosperity.

One lesson we need to work together toward is a more secure energy future. We need sustainable energy security that includes diversification of supplies and transit routes, smart investments to deal with climate change. The connections between European countries should exist not just through European countries. Here, in this region -- by history, geography and necessity -- the countries of Central Europe are well placed to lead all of Europe.

Ladies and gentlemen, finally, let me say a word about leadership in an area that Central Europeans are uniquely qualified to provide -- the advocacy of democracy. Americans, I believe, are rightly proud that people around the world occasionally look to our example, and look for our leadership. But the truth of the matter is you are the model for millions -- not us, you -- Romania and other Central European countries. The example you set 20 years ago inspired the world. The leadership you exert over the next 20 years can change that world, encouraging, supporting, and consolidating young democracies in Central and Eastern Europe.

In Eastern Europe, countries still struggle to fulfill the promise of a strong democracy, or a vibrant market economy. Who to look to better than you? Who to look to better than Central European countries that 20 years ago acted with such courage and resolve, and over the last 20 years, have made such sustainable progress? You can help guide Moldova, Georgia, Ukraine along the path of lasting stability and prosperity. It's your time to lead. Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus can benefit from your personal experiences. The E.U. Eastern Partnership Initiative is a good example of how you can energize the effort. And we will partner with you in working to fulfill the promise of 1989. But your leadership needs to be bold and your voices loud.

There's an old Romanian proverb: "The cheapest article is advice. The most valuable is a good example." You are the "good example." Twenty years ago, the people of Central Europe took the world history that they inherited, and willed it in a new direction toward greater freedom, justice, and fairness. The odds were stacked against you. We know from history that destroying old oppressive regimes is a great deal easier than building new flourishing democracies. But you've delivered on

the promise of your revolution. You are now in the position to help others do the same.

Speaking to our Congress 20 winters ago, Vaclav Havel pointed to a special sense of empathy and imagination the people of Central Europe share. Years of subjugation, he said, "have given us, however unintentionally, something positive: a special capacity to look somewhat further than someone who has not undergone this bitter experience." He went on to say: "A person who cannot move and live a normal life because he is pinned under a boulder has more time to think about hopes than someone who is not trapped in this way." He was right.

Now you have the freedom to act on those hopes, and you are. And I believe together we can turn that hope that we shared into a history we can be proud of. This is the moment. You students, if we are smart, brave, and lucky will be able to tell your grandchildren you were present at the creation of a new Europe, a new security, a new era of peace, because you were bold enough to seize that moment. Be like those in '89. Be bold. Exercise your leadership. You have a history, and you have a tradition. You can make a gigantic difference. And we'll stand with you.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for listening. And may God bless America and all of our allies. And may God protect all of our troops who are in harm's way. Thank you very, very much. It's been an honor to be here. (Applause.)

END