

OXFORD UNION SOCIETY

Address
by
Ronald Reagan

Fortieth President of the United States

"Democracy's Next Battle"

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Mr. President, Honorable Members of the Oxford Union Society:

I am delighted to be here with you this morning. Heck, at my age I'm delighted to be anywhere. Over the years, I have known many distinguished alumni of this fine university -- one in particular, became a trusted ally and dear friend to me. I'm speaking of Margaret Thatcher, of course.

In my long and fulfilling life, I have enjoyed more than my share of honors -- few of which can match the experience of standing at this podium, speaking to this distinguished audience. There are many reasons I accepted your kind invitation to speak today. For one thing, it gives me the chance to perhaps meet a future president of the United States. More flattering still, however, is the opportunity to be part of this Union's long, celebrated and occasionally ferocious tradition of intellectual swordplay.

Needless to say, I enjoy the cut and thrust of public debate. Although, I must say, after watching a few such spirited encounters during the recent campaign in my own country, I was reminded of the newspaper columnist who compared political debates to stock car races -- no one really cares who wins; they just want to see the crashes. Well, America survived the debates and a former Oxford student won the presidency. So I congratulate you all.

In the words of Benjamin Disraeli, "a university should be a place of light, of liberty, and of learning." Long before my country existed, Oxford was all this and more. Here one develops a sense of self -- even while realizing that in the modern world, self alone is never enough. There must be a higher yearning equal to or surpassing the higher learning. A university is a place where ancient tradition thrives alongside the most revolutionary of ideas. Perhaps as no other institution, a university is simultaneously committed to the day before yesterday and the day after tomorrow.

Here, too, one soon learns that so long as books are kept open then minds can never be closed. And with that unceasing curiosity that distinguishes youth, Oxford's Union embodies the bracing clash of argument and the heroic struggles of ideas. Here the sharpest weapons are a razor-sharp wit and well-honed disdain for what we in America call "political correctness".

I consider it a tragedy that at some campuses in my own country, those who hold unfashionable ideas are hooted off the stage, or denied a forum in the first place. What a travesty of intellectual inquiry, what a perversion of the great chaotic, yet essential, marketplace of ideas that we call democracy. But then, I have always believed, at home and abroad, that the only cure for what ails democracy is -- more democracy.

The last major speech I gave in Great Britain focused on the toppling of that massive, creaking machine of oppression known as communism. And what a dry, rotted system it turned out to be. The fight against totalitarianism was a grand and noble cause, one that united the entire civilized world. Ironically, the end of communist tyranny has robbed much of the west of its uplifting, common purpose. In the aftermath of victory, we search, not for new enemies but for a renewed sense of mission. With the Soviet empire defeated, will we fall into petty, self-absorbed economic rivalries? Will we squander the moral capital of half a century? Will we turn inward, lulled by a dangerous complacency and the short-sighted view that the end of one Evil Empire means the

permanent banishment of evil in all its forms?

Among the many questions which cry out for our attention, none is more important than this: what will arise from the ashes of the old world order? Will it be a phoenix of freedom or a phoenix of fear? At the end of 1992 there appears no obvious answer. Indeed, if you look around the globe, the new world looks increasingly like one of disorder. According to a Russian institute, 160 border disputes rage in the former Soviet Union alone. If you can bear it, you might cast your glance toward the unspeakable horrors of Yugoslavia and Sudan. Confronted with such realities, we might well wonder if we are trading a single, monolithic threat to the world's peace for a host of smaller, yet no less deadly, flashpoints. Assume the latter to be true. Some might say that the west has no immediate interest in the volatile streets of Sarajevo or the arid wastelands of the Sudan.

Such an attitude only raises a second, morally unavoidable question: quite simply, are the current threats to human dignity any less destructive because they are confined to a relatively small geographic area? Or in many cases affect non-western peoples? Let us be frank. Evil still stalks the planet.

Its ideology may be nothing more than bloodlust; no program more complex than economic plunder or military aggrandizement. But it is evil all the same. And wherever there are forces that would destroy the human spirit and diminish human potential, they must be recognized and they must be countered.

My young friends, our work is not yet done. A great cause remains. Wherever we look in this momentous season of change, old oppressions are crumbling even as new possibilities struggle for acceptance. Everywhere free men and free markets are on the march -- from the Moscow City Council to the formerly one-party states of Africa. Yet the work of freedom is never done and the task of the peacemaker is never complete. We inhabit a time somewhat reminiscent of what Churchill called "the locust years" -- after World War I and the tense standoff that followed World War II. Twice in this century, the community of nations has grappled with the structure of peace. As a young man, I saw the tragedy of Woodrow Wilson as my country failed to seize the moment and Europe, shattered by war, unwittingly sowed the seeds of a still greater conflict to come.

Sixty years ago this winter, students debating in this very hall renounced the use of military force to repel the enemies of freedom. Winston Churchill, then deep in his wilderness years, provoked mocking laughter when he told Oxford students that rearmament was the unavoidable price of survival in a world overrun by dictators.

Time proved him right, at a cost of untold suffering. In the wake of the second World War, a resolute west stood up for individual freedom and stood up to those who would put the soul itself into bondage. It was, as a young John Kennedy said, a long twilight struggle in which we were engaged.

Standing before your parliament over a decade ago, I predicted that Marxism-Leninism would end up on the ash heap of history. For my pains I was called a dreamer and an ideologue, out-of-touch with reality. Some foreign affairs experts regarded me not unlike the way the German poet Heine described a certain ambassador, saying, "Ordinarily, he is insane, but he has lucid moments when he is only stupid." You know what? Whenever

