

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

I hear such comments I know I must be on to something. At the very least I'm encouraged to continue questioning conventional wisdom. For there are worse things to be called than a dreamer.

So let me tell you of another dream I have, as achievable as my much-maligned forecast about the collapse of the Soviet Union. It's a dream I have long had, and I have seen a glimmer of its fulfillment in recent days. Just as the world's democracies banded together to advance the cause of freedom in the face of totalitarianism, might we not now unite to impose civilized standards of behavior on those who flout every measure of human decency? Are we not nearing a point in world history where civilized nations can in unison stand-up to the most immoral and deadly excesses against humanity, such as those now defacing Somalia and Bosnia? Already we have seen the potential for such action in the unprecedented coalition against Saddam Hussein, in the pivotal role played by multi-national U.N. peacekeeping forces in troublespots around the globe, and in the historic actions being taken by the U.N. this week. I heartily endorse these measure and I applaud their efforts.

If we are to fulfill the hope that the fall of communism has presented us, the world's democracies must enforce stricter humanitarian standards of international conduct. Is this not a moral cause and a great undertaking as profound as the struggle against totalitarianism?

What I propose then, is nothing less than a humanitarian velvet glove backed by a steel fist of military force. Let me elaborate. Consider that cauldron of hatred that was once Yugoslavia. What is being done to the people of Bosnia-Herzegovina shreds every definition of human decency and morality. "Ethnic cleansing" is a hateful euphemism for an evil we've seen before in Europe. Concentration camps are an atrocity I did not expect to witness again on European soil. Quite frankly, the average American is perplexed, to put it mildly, that such abominations can occur in Yugoslavia while a Europe, moving toward union, refrains from action.

While the term "sphere of influence" has fallen into disfavor, it is an inescapable fact that Bosnia is within Europe's sphere of conscience. I've seen estimates that across this continent and the former U.S.S.R., the potential exists for anywhere from five to twenty other Yugoslavias to erupt in ethnic bloodshed. As one observer put it, after looking at the facts that contribute to such tensions, "why should they not happen?"

But there is an antidote to chaos, and a structure for humanitarian intervention already in place. Its name is NATO. Forty-five years after it was founded as a bulwark against Soviet expansionism, NATO must again be made relevant to european peacekeeping. It must re-invent itself to deal with the kind of inhumane situations we now see along the Adriatic. As my fellow conservative, former U.N. Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick has pointed out -- NATO forces are present; they are trained; they are available and they are armed. Yet, they are also tragically, inactive.

Is NATO's current posture toward Bosnia so very different from that of the policeman who won't cross the street to stop a murder because it's not in his jurisdiction? But Europe was supposed to be NATO's jurisdiction. The U.N. has voted that humanitarian assistance to civilian populations may be delivered through all necessary means. NATO has those means. NATO is the means.

When it comes to the ordeal of Yugoslavia, I agree with Ambassador Kirkpatrick and Former Prime Minister Thatcher. The Serbs must be given an ultimatum to cease the shelling of civilian populations and lift their deadly siege. They must be told not to further threaten the Yugoslav region of Kosovo -- an action likely to enlarge the conflict to Albania, Greece, Bulgaria and Turkey. The consequence of ignoring the ultimatum is this: "sharply focused bombing" against Serbian military supplies and targets. To do less is to silently acquiesce to wholesale slaughter. Our multi-lateral organizations must declare ethnic cleansing and the slaughter of civilians by military forces totally unacceptable. And we must be prepared to put weapons behind our words. We must extend NATO protections and the NATO framework to those who desire to be part of our alliance. Room must be made in NATO for the democracies of central and eastern Europe, beginning with Poland and not excluding bloodied refugees from the tinpot tyranny called "Greater Serbia." It is not only the Balkans that can be saved from perpetual conflict, so can other regions torn by ethnic or political violence.

An African recipient of the Nobel Prize has asked, why does the world ignore ethnic cleansing in Africa? And he is right -- African genocide is no less a crime against humanity than mass murder in the heart of Europe. Yet that is exactly what is happening today in Somalia and Sudan. The photos coming out of Africa are all but incomprehensible. In Sudan, 700,000 people have been killed and another three to four million driven from their homes as warring factions battle. According to one relief official, "I have never seen anything like it. If you left the town of Bornow, you would be walking on the bones of the dead." As reported by yet another journalist, thousands of innocent people began a desperate migration last month, walking south in search of food, pausing to eat grass and leaves, drinking from mud puddles in the road.

In Somalia, there is no government and no political structure. The U.N. Estimates 300,000 people have already died in the man-made famine, with two million more in danger of starvation. Tons of food fills warehouses in Mogadishu while countless people starve because it's not safe for relief workers to make deliveries. In short, famine has become a weapon of war. Yet no government has the right to eradicate its peoples. No regime has the right to drive out its own citizens.

Facing conditions of absolute inhumanity such as those which now exist in Sudan and Somalia, does not the world have a moral responsibility to act? To choose the right to passage, to impose minimum order and provide sanctuaries of relief? In parts of Africa today, mankind is an endangered species. Have we come to the point where we must set up human preserves as we have for rhinos and elephants? If so, then let us do it, and do it now.

Last year, largely in reaction to Iraq's murderous treatment of the Kurds, the U.N. changed the mandate of its world food program, enabling it to operate without the consent of host governments. I believe that precedent bears repeating, albeit on an even larger scale in sub-Sahara Africa. I believe it is not only right, but morally imperative, that the U.N. militarily intervene in Somalia.

But that is only the beginning of what must be done. We must work toward a standing U.N. force -- an army of conscience -- that is fully equipped and prepared to carve out human sanctuaries through force if necessary. Now that the nations of the U.N. have

committed themselves to medical and food relief, they should also commit the resources and above all the will to deliver those supplies, regardless of roaming bandits or tinhorn dictators who would thwart the international consensus. Such a course is not without risk. Clearly governments that contribute troops to such efforts face the possibility of casualties. But I can think of no more honorable mission for a soldier or his country. Indeed, I believe every soldier would eagerly volunteer to undertake so noble a duty.

Ladies and gentlemen, everyone in this room wishes for the day when tyrants are no more. We all wish for a world in which military adventures are confined to the imagined ramparts of childhood. We wish for a time when every nation is free to develop its own resources and realize its own possibilities, unmindful of threats from abroad. But it is a sad, undeniable fact of modern life that wishes are no substitute for national will. And wishful thinking only encourages the tyrants for whom human rights are as easily trampled as protesters in a city square.

It is a fashionable assertion in these troubled times that nations must focus on economic, not military strength. Over the long run, it is true, no nation can remain militarily strong while economically exhausted. But I would remind you that defeats on the battlefield occur in the short run. As the tragedies of Bosnia, Somalia and Sudan demonstrate all too well, power still matters. More precisely, economic power is not a replacement for military power. Lest we forget, Kuwait's economic wealth did not protect it from the predatory Saddam Hussein; quite the opposite. Nor was the Iraqi dictator finally driven from Kuwait because his G.N.P. was smaller than that of the U.S., Britain or Japan. It is not the industrial productivity of democracies that is feared by the armed bandits of Somalia but the kill rates of their gunships.

As long as military power remains a necessary fact of modern existence, then we should use it as a humanitarian tool. At the same time I believe that we should rely more on multilateral institutions -- such as NATO, the U.N. And other organizations -- to sanction the reasoned and concerted use of the power available. And to strengthen the United Nations, I would strongly urge the admission of Japan and Germany as permanent members of the Security Council. These are superpowers, both economically and in their domestic influence, and it makes no sense to exclude them from the highest councils of international peacekeeping.

I did not always value international organizations and for good reason, they were if you pardon the expression, nothing more than "debating societies". Their sole purpose seemed to be to blame the U.S. for the world's ills. In the past the divided world of the Cold War paralyzed global organizations. It was virtually impossible to achieve global cooperation on most subjects. But with the end of the Cold War, the U.N. was also liberated. With the fall of the Soviet Union, obstruction has been replaced by more cooperation. And with it, the noble vision of the U.N.'s founders is now closer to realization.

Another area of pressing humanitarian concern that can unify us once again, is the need to stop the spread of nuclear weapons. With what we have seen in Bosnia, does anyone think that nuclear weapons would go unused if they were available? The Heritage Foundation has noted that, as central authority collapses in the former Soviet Union, nuclear technology experts and perhaps nuclear weapons themselves will be sold to the highest bidder.

In response, we must increase efforts to assist the Commonwealth of Independent States in identifying, transporting, storing and destroying nuclear weapons. This should include sending technical advisors to the C.I.S., devoting intelligence resources, to tracking ex-Soviet technology, scientists and weapons inside and outside C.I.S. borders. And again, for the sake of humanity, we must be willing to undertake military action and covert operations to prevent the spread of nuclear knowledge and weapons to terrorists and hostile states. It would be the gravest of tragedies if the good deed of reducing the nuclear arsenals of the superpowers allowed those same weapons to fall into the hands of fanatics.

It was the British historian Arnold Toynbee who defined life as a voyage of discovery and not a safe harbor. How true. After a lifetime spanning most of this tumultuous century, my voyage is drawing to a close. It has been an extraordinary trip by any standard. With my own eyes I have witnessed the birth of communism and the death of communism. I have seen the rise and fall of Nazi tyranny, the subsequent Cold War and the nuclear nightmare that for fifty years haunted the dreams of children everywhere. During that time my generation defeated totalitarianism, and more recently we have begun to destroy the weapons of mass destruction. As a result your world is poised for better tomorrows. What will you do on your journey? As I see it, you have the opportunity to set and enforce international standards of civilized behavior. Does that sound unrealistic? It is not any larger a challenge than what my generation confronted. In any event, it is part of the great legacy of Oxford that rings down through the centuries -- the power to effect change when it is needed and the wisdom to resist change when it is unwise.

Because I believe in you and in your ability to influence a world worth influencing, I cannot leave this place without repeating some words from T.S. Eliot: "Old men ought to be explorers," he wrote, before adding, "not farewell, but fare forward, voyager."

My fondest hope is that your generation's voyage will be as momentous in peace as mine has been heroic in war. At the height of World War II, Sir Winston Churchill reminded Britons that, "These are not dark days; these are great days -- the greatest days our country has ever lived; and we must all thank God that we have been allowed, each of us according to our stations, to play a part in making these days memorable in the history of our race."

My young friends, I hope with all my heart that your days will be great, not on the battlefield, but in the science labs, the operating rooms, performing arts halls and wherever empires of the mind can be assembled. I hope that you will each make your presence felt in the world. And that you will collectively make your contribution to the age-old battle for individual freedom and human dignity. Do not forget those who suffer under tyranny and violence. Do not abandon them to the evils of totalitarian rule or democratic neglect. For the freedom we celebrate is not the freedom to starve, or the freedom to languish in a long, starless night of the soul. This, at least, is something that should be beyond debate. Your cause awaits.

Thank you for inviting me here today and God bless you all.

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