

## **NATO: Defense on a Foundation of Political Values**

Pilsen Talks II presentation by  
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I'm honored to have been included in this celebration of a time when Americans made a positive difference in the lives of those who had been oppressed.

It should remind us all, from previous generations to our successor generations, that the most important thing of value shared by the Czech and American peoples is a love for democracy.

It's the unifier of our countries and of the NATO alliance.

Perhaps it is important in these times to be clear that I'm talking about liberal democracy with individual liberty and equality under the rule of law.

In the cases of both the Czech and American peoples, that love is home-grown.

We Americans declared our independence from a colonial ruler and created a system of government.

The founding document – our constitution – has for over two centuries guided us along a democratic path.

A civil war almost tore our nation apart in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

We defended our democracy against foreign challenges during WWI; against the Axis powers in WWII; and against the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

Your ancestors prepared the way for independence and democracy in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. President Masaryk and others gave birth to the Czechoslovak democracy at the end of the First World War.

Then, twice, your independent democracy was stolen from you. First by Nazi Germany and then by the Soviet Union. You gave it new life at the end of the Cold War.

I was fortunate in the 1990s, as the top NATO expert for the US Congress, to play a small part in support of your desire to join the West.

At that time, I worked with the United States Senate – the senior body of our Congress – as it considered whether it should give its advice and consent to admit the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland to NATO.

The judgment that I provided for Congress early in the 1990s was very clear.

In my report to Congress I asked: "How can the existing members of Western institutions, who have throughout the Cold War touted the western system, now deny participation in that system to countries that choose democracy, attempt to convert to free market economic systems, respect human rights, and pursue peaceful relations with their neighbors?"

Today, both our democracies are threatened by spreading illiberalism embraced by radical right populists.

This noxious tide is threatening to swamp the liberal democracy that you worked so hard to build over the past 30 years, and the one that we have nurtured since our founding.

The fact is that European and American illiberalism feed on each other.

As one commentator [Juliette Legendre] has suggested, “From its inception, the American alt[ernative]-right has been drawing its ideological, rhetorical, and tactical inspiration from European far-right thought and movements.”

The European far right celebrated Donald Trump’s electoral victory in the United States. They defined him as their North American political ally.

France’s Marine le Pen, for example, said that “a great movement across the world” including the UK’s vote to leave the European Union and Trump’s US election victory, heralded the dawn of a new world order.

I must say that Madame le Pen’s “new world order” is quite different from the one that US President George H. W. Bush called for at the end of the Cold War.

President Bush called for an international system “where diverse nations are drawn together in common cause to achieve the universal aspirations of mankind -- peace and security, freedom, and the rule of law.”

In contrast to this inclusive approach, Marine le Pen and other rightwing populist leaders look for a future that includes only those of certain races, religions, and sexual preferences.

Before I say more about the external threats, let me explain what I think we are trying, and need, to defend.

The “West” that is under attack is an idea, or rather a basket of ideas.

That basket includes the values of liberal democracy, individual freedom, human rights, tolerance and equality under the rule of law.

It is informed by, but not defined by, distinctions of race, culture, religion, language, nationalism, wealth or other traits that can divide rather than unite human beings.

This is different from the West that President Trump referred to in Warsaw last year as constituting “the bonds of culture, faith and tradition that make us who we are.”

Trump’s formulation threatens to close the door of the West to those of different cultures, faiths and traditions who, while differing in many ways, nonetheless accept and practice Western values.

The liberal democratic concept of the West has been shaped largely since the end of World War II. But the history is much deeper and fraught with the challenges of change.

This “West” traces its roots to the birthplace of democracy in Greece some 8,000 years ago.

One of our NATO allies, Iceland, had its first parliament in the 10<sup>th</sup> century.

The period of Enlightenment – a movement among European intellectuals some 200 years ago – advanced the concept dramatically, with its advocacy of relying on reason and rationalism rather than tradition, tribalism and religion to govern human relations.

It celebrated science, facts and the promotion of religious tolerance, and governments based on constitutionalism with separation of church and state.

To understand the idea of the West today, it's important to recall that, even in recent historical periods, the West has not always represented the best that people can be.

We must remind ourselves that colonialism and robber barons were still features of Western civilization not many decades ago.

But we can credibly argue that the West developed some of the most powerful paradigms for human decency – individual liberty, human rights, and so on – and that the West can be defined as synonymous with these values.

However, we continue to struggle against ideas that oppose these Western values, as demonstrated by recent political developments on both sides of the Atlantic.

This contemporary illiberal challenge did not appear completely out of the blue, and there is no single explanation for rising skepticism about liberal democracy.

A combination of factors has produced a general sense of malaise.

The Great Recession, which started in 2008, left millions of Americans and Europeans without jobs and in debt.

While the job market has recovered, real wages have not, and a significant number of European and American voters believe that the system and its leaders have let them down.

Another factor is concern that refugees, driven from their homes by conflicts in the Middle East, will not only bring violent terrorist attacks to Western states but will also threaten economic well-being, particularly of those who are already suffering the most from the residual impacts of the Great Recession.

Some people – encouraged by radical right populists – have come to believe that the processes of European integration, expanding international trade, and globalism are undermining the way of life of average citizens.

This perception is aggravated by the fact that the share of wealth in Western democracies held by the most wealthy “one percent” continues to grow.

Some are concerned that governance appears to be moving further and further away from local and individual control, whether due to EU regulations in Europe or Washington bureaucracy in the United States.

On both sides of the Atlantic, there is growing concern that governmental decisions affecting the daily life of the average person were being made far from home. Rules and regulations were increasingly disconnected from the needs of the common man and woman.

Finally, the pace of life and development of technology have moved faster than the ability of many citizens to adjust to or even comprehend.

This has made more people feel disenfranchised and disadvantaged.

In these respects, our liberal democracies and its leaders fail the people.

These failures provide fertile ground for both foreign meddling and domestic demagoguery.

As a result, extremist political movements throughout Europe, and in the United States, are finding greater public resonance for their attacks on Western unity, and even on the validity of a Western identity.

In my new book (*Transatlantic traumas: Has illiberalism brought the West to the brink of collapse?*) I argue that an unholy alliance of Russia, the Islamic State, and far-right Western politicians and political movements is threatening democracies in the West.

The radical right populists play off fears created by the Islamic State and cooperate both openly and clandestinely with Russia.

They seek to move Western democracies away from a political system that is based on the rule of law, and toward more autocratic and centralized forms of government.

The irony, of course, is that such politicians claim to represent the common man, while projecting themselves as the only answer to the issues that trouble the average citizen. They then seek to eliminate constraints on their power, including a free press and an independent judiciary.

In my judgment, the West needs a political strategy to respond to this challenge.

The threats posed by Islamist terror and Russian aggression present themselves in very different ways.

They have one thing in common: both seek to create political and economic chaos in the West.

They seek to undermine Western economic, political, and security systems and, in the extreme, to create a new world order in which Western values no longer rule.

In a time of transatlantic traumas, both threats have worked diligently and with some success.

Islamist terrorism has already changed the way of life in the West.

This includes forcing the much more pervasive security measures encountered almost everywhere in our societies.

It includes the divisions produced when attempting to deal with overwhelming flows of refugees from the war-torn Middle East.

The terrorism and refugee issues added a fear factor to the debate that led to the destabilizing British decision to leave the European Union.

Donald Trump used fear of Islamist terrorism to motivate supporters for his election to the presidency.

Covert Russian action, meanwhile, continues to disrupt American democracy and perhaps even affected the outcome of the 2016 presidential elections.

Besides the Russian and Islamist threats, other storms have been building on several home fronts in the West.

A surge in radical right populism gave new life to a variety of political parties and candidates that have played on otherwise legitimate popular fears and concerns.

They advocate simplistic approaches that challenge the assumptions of established Western liberal democracy.

How can you identify radical right illiberal politicians?

Here are some guidelines. In general, they

- stir fears of immigrants;
- promise “strong” leadership, undermining institutions and free press, and the rule of law;
- oppose or question both NATO and the EU;
- cynically use appeals to religion;
- admire Russian President Putin’s leadership style.

These radical right “populist” politicians are using our democratic systems and practices to try to turn them in illiberal directions.

As you well know, in Hungary, President Viktor Orbán even praises the advantages of “illiberal democracy,” in which everyone gets a vote but not really much choice.

We have seen this phenomenon spread over almost all of Europe.

It has captured Turkey, where President Erdoğan’s policies have been steadily eroding democratic protections.

Erdoğan has limited freedom of the press, sought to undermine the independent judiciary, and has worked toward establishing a truly “illiberal” political system.

The troubling internal divisions—within and among Western states— that are all too obvious, could combine with the external threats to form a perfect storm.

That storm could blow away transatlantic unity and, with it, the definition and reality of “the West.”

### **How to respond?**

How can we best defend liberal Western democracies against today’s threats?

First, let me note that these struggles are going on in other regions of the world as well as in the transatlantic area.

I'm not addressing those challenges in Latin America and Asia and elsewhere, because I believe that the key battles for liberal democracy will be lost or won in the Euro-Atlantic area.

That said, how can Czechs and Americans who believe in democracy, individual liberty and equality under the rule of law, how can you and I, fight and win against the illiberal tide and its foreign sources of support?

Failure to deal successfully with the challenges to Western values could have a devastating impact on security cooperation among NATO and EU states.

But most of the necessary steps are not to be found in the realm of security policy.

I think our answers must emerge from political, economic, and financial system reforms.

If these reforms succeed, popular support for defense spending and measures to strengthen counterterrorism will come as a derivative product because people will see that "the West" and its values are worth defending.

Now, I know that all this is "easier said than done."

But the potential cost of failure could be regression into some sort of contemporary "dark ages" dominated by authoritarian regimes supported by the wealthiest individuals and corporate interests, in which Putinism could become the norm rather than the exception.

Today, our challenge is to improve the West's democratic systems and institutions while providing sufficiently strong defenses against external threats.

These two tasks have in many ways become thoroughly interwoven.

Russia seeks to use our open democratic systems to influence electoral outcomes to favor its interests while the Islamic State and similar groups use the freedoms presented by liberal democratic systems to engage in attacks against those systems.

As French President Macron recently told the US Congress,

*"It is a critical moment. If we do not act with urgency as a global community, I am convinced that the international institutions, including the United Nations and NATO, will no longer be able to exercise their mandate and stabilizing influence. We would then inevitably and severely undermine the liberal order we built after World War II.*

*Other powers, with a stronger strategy and ambition, will then fill the void we would leave empty.*

*Other powers will not hesitate one second to advocate their own model, to shape the 21st century world order."*

Defense of the West will require revitalization of the political center in the Czech, American and other Western democracies.

Political extremes can fire up electorates, but the political center is where the hard work is done and results are produced.

In Western democracies, most outcomes that benefit the people and are consistent with liberal democratic values are best shaped and implemented around the center of the political spectrum.

The process almost always requires compromise among contending ideas and political interests, but it does not need to be a “status quo” outcome.

In fact, the threats and challenges I have discussed today suggest that we need an open mind concerning changes that may be required in policies to reinvigorate the West and the application of its values.

In some Western political systems – the US one, for example – it would be radical simply for the two major parties to work toward bipartisan solutions to the nation’s problems.

American and European political centers must become forces for constructive change and then demonstrate the will to make it happen.

We Atlanticists must act as the centrist populists of the West—those who subscribe to Western values and work together to defend them.

Our goal should be:

First, to deter, where possible, and fight where required, external threats to the Western community of nations; and

Second, to reinvigorate liberal democracy with centrist approaches that are principled but sufficiently radical to bring constructive change and pragmatically responsive solutions to the needs of average citizens.

The American and European political centers must become positive forces for constructive change, and then demonstrate the will to make it happen.

If Winston Churchill were with us today, I’m sure he would confirm that this “imperfect” Western system is nonetheless better than any of the alternatives.

Those of us who believe in liberal democracy need to work hard to preserve and energize the West for the benefit of future generations on both sides of the Atlantic.

We must support those who choose freedom over tyranny, true democracy over illiberalism, and the rule of law over autocracy.

*Thank you for your attention.*

*I am honored to have been invited to Pilsen to share my thoughts with you.*

*I look forward to your questions and comments during the panel discussion.*