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The Value of American Leadership in the 21st Century

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I did not choose the name of my talk by accident. I chose it with a purpose: Europe is witnessing an intensive debate about the significance of the Transatlantic Link, the presence of U.S. armed forces in Europe, and the self-reliance of the European Union from the United States.

I also chose my title because, like Europe, the United States is witnessing a new round of reflection about its role in the world, not only in connection with the ongoing presidential election campaign, but also about whether and by what means it shall partake in the responsibility for world security and for maintaining the World Order, as referred to by Henry Kissinger.

Back to the Roots

It is often pointed out that the modern, multi-polar world is too complicated for us to be able to successfully apply old approaches, that we cannot go on drawing only from our civilizational values, but we must conform to the fashionable multicultural view, that a global world requires a global identity.

I do not think that that is the right direction we should go. As T.G. Masaryk, our first President and a friend of President Woodrow Wilson, said, “States are maintained by those ideals which they were founded upon.”

No nation, no state, no civilization can survive if it abandons its basic values. This definitely is not the right way for us.

Talking Points

- The Czech Republic is now witnessing a sharp debate about the construction of the U.S. radar site for an anti-missile defense system. But this is not an issue of one radar installation. It primarily concerns an utterance of free will to defend ourselves.
- It was President Ronald Reagan who correctly defined, analyzed, and confronted the main threat of the Cold War. The times have since changed, and so has the threat. What has not changed is the need to correctly name that threat, analyze it, and face it.
- Our world is not safe, and it will be even less so as the attitude of complacency toward defense spreads across the Europe—the attitude that there is nothing threatening us, and if there is, than *someone else* should take care of our safety, someone from far away.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
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But what about the world? Could this be the right way for the world? Would the planet be a better place in which to live if both good and evil cease to be clearly defined moral categories? The categories which form, among others, the foundation of our Western Judeo-Christian civilization?

Would it not be better if the issue of what is good and what is evil was widely discussed across different cultures and between civilizations? Many a philosopher of influence insists we must, but I stand strong in disagreement.

As a citizen of the free world, I say no. Basic civil liberties are the values that I am not willing to give up, not even to “freely” debate.

As a father of four children, I say no. My children must always know what is good and what is bad, what is right and what is wrong, what is up and what is down.

As a politician, I say no. I say that without respect and enforcement of basic civic values any debate is void and populist and does not lead to any useful outcome.

I am not against an open dialogue across cultures and civilizations. On the contrary, the future of all mankind is endangered without such a dialogue. The dialogue must, however, focus on how and by what means we can together strengthen the good and weaken the evil—not on what actually constitutes good and evil. Such theorizing may be good for trendy salons, but is not appropriate for a responsible and pragmatic body politic.

I am convinced that all people are born with the same capacity to recognize good and evil. What is good for us is thus good for others, too. I am talking from my personal experience. We who have lived under Communism did not have different values than people in the free world. We simply could not apply them. We did not perceive the activity of the USA and other countries in the area of human rights as an interference into the sovereignty of our countries. We did not recognize the sovereignty of these tyrannical regimes. We wished for their defeat in the same way any free man wishes the defeat of an evil oppressor.

In the end, the reign of evil collapsed. Not because of reconciliation, not because of debates,

not because of the “theory of convergence” of both systems. The evil was destroyed because there were people on the good side who were determined to defend freedom by all available means. There is no compromise between good and evil. The world may be complicated, but the end solution to all basic issues remains black and white.

We do not need new basic values; we do not need a new definition of good and evil. On the contrary, we must interpret anew our values so that we can hold strong in a changing world. We must correctly identify the new threats and the new forms of evil in order to protect ourselves against them.

Old Threats, New Threats

During the course of the 20th century, the United States three times helped to save freedom in the world from the threats of militarism, Nazism, and Communism. In both World Wars, as well as through the Cold War, the determination and resolve of the United States of America played an indispensable role in the victory of the freedom forces, in the defense of security and the World Order.

The American engagement in resolving world crises holds special meaning for Czech citizens. This year we are commemorating what we call the Year of Eight. Many significant historical events are tied to years ending with an eight—1918 was the founding of our modern state; 1938 saw the Nazi occupation; 1948 brought the Communist coup; and 1968 marked the Soviet invasion. Our destiny has always been significantly influenced by the fact of whether we were or we were not a part of a commonwealth of free nations alongside the United States.

What does the 21st century hold? What are the new threats? Shall the leadership of the United States be asserted again? Will it hold fast the values of the past century? And is the United States even prepared to play a leading role? These are the questions that I will try to briefly answer.

As early as two centuries ago, James Madison foresaw “a great struggle of the era” between liberalism and despotism. These words are still valid. In spite of the fact that many people predicted the end of history with the end of the Cold War and a defi-

nite victory of liberal democracy, no such thing happened. And thus we must remain ever ready to defend freedom and democracy.

It was President Ronald Reagan who correctly defined, analyzed, and confronted the main threat of the Cold War. The times have since changed, and so has the threat. What has not changed is the need to correctly name that threat, analyze it, and face it. It is that simple, that plain. Although there are many persons who try to convince us that “the whole issue is much, much more complicated,” they continue to insist that old approaches are valid no longer. And unfortunately, those many people believe that such a threat, which you cannot see — such as SS-20 rockets on the Red Square—simply does not exist.

With the end of the Cold War, the clearly defined enemy disappeared. Many people gave in to a false sense of security that the end of history had arrived and that no one or nothing could threaten liberal democracy. And even September 11, 2001, failed to wake many Europeans from this rosy dream—not even Madrid, not even London.

There is still a dominant feeling among the European public that the War on Terrorism is a result of the “paranoia” of the United States, that we are dealing here with criminals, but not with a fatal threat to our freedom, and even that the freedom is more threatened by anti-terrorist provisions.

It resembles a bit the situation in the 1930s, when many Western left-wing intellectuals did not see the threat of the Soviet Union. They did not see the gulags, they did not see the vast enslavement of people and mass murders, they did not perceive the hateful world-ruling ideology. Nevertheless, the threat was more than real.

Today’s threat has a different face, different players, and different methods. But it has the same final goal: to destroy human freedom. It is not by accident that the first targets were American interests. America was a beacon of freedom for the entire 20th century, the beacon for everyone who had to voyage on the turbulent waves of non-freedom. Destroy the lighthouse and ships will wreck; that is the terrorists’ strategy.

Defending Freedom

I shall not dwell more on the central significance of freedom for the Euro–Atlantic civilization. There have been others who said it better. But I want to specifically focus on the relationship between freedom and the will to defend freedom.

“He who gives up freedom for safety deserves neither,” said the American statesman, naturalist, diplomat, and philosopher Benjamin Franklin. I intend to prove this ever-valid statement with the example of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Defense System.

My country is now witnessing a very sharp debate about the construction of the U.S. radar site for an anti-missile defense system. But this is not an issue of one radar installation, and ten interceptors in Poland. It primarily concerns an exercise of free will to defend ourselves. In the end, Europe may survive without an anti-missile defense system. But our civilization will come to an end if we lack the will to defend ourselves.

Of course, the anti-missile umbrella has a practical military significance. The first one to realize this was Winston Churchill, who came up with the idea of an anti-rocket defense system as early as 1944 after the Nazis bombarded Great Britain with V-2 missiles. But it has three other more significant meanings: moral, geopolitical, and national.

The moral challenge is clear and simple: If we are not willing to accept in the interests of the defense of the Euro-Atlantic area such a trifle as the elements of a missile-defense system, then how shall we be able to face more difficult challenges that may come?

Our world is not safe. And it will be even less so as the attitude of complacency toward defense spreads across the Europe—the attitude that there is nothing threatening us, and if there is, than *someone else* should take care of our safety, someone from far away. That is a clear evidence of a diminishing will to defend freedom.

Thus appears the beginning of the end of any civilization, no matter how great. It begins with the illusion that it is living in a golden age that nothing can disrupt. Even if it were true at the time, resignation concerning one’s defense would sooner or later

bring about disaster. I do not see any chance for Europe to escape this thousand-year-old axiom. We must show that we are willing to defend the Euro-Atlantic area, that we are ready and able to defend our values.

Fourteen European countries currently host bases of the U.S. Army, the U.S. Air Force, and the U.S. Navy. This is evidence of American leadership. The American military presence in Europe ensures that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) countries on both sides of the Atlantic will be equally defended against any conventional threats.

This military presence is a result of a strengthened will to provide defense after the two World Wars and the Cold War. That is why it was accepted, and appreciated, as evidenced by the complete absence of referenda, which we are now unfortunately asked to hold in regard to the radar site.

But there are even worse threats than the conventional ones in today's world. If NATO is to avoid splitting into first-class and second-class zones from the safety point of view, then Europe must be protected against ballistic rockets in the same way as the North American continent. Radar is thus like U.S. military bases, an expression of the will to defend, which reacts to a new threat.

In short, we must be ready to resume responsibility for collective defense within NATO. By this I am getting to the second meaning of the negotiations about the Anti-Ballistic Missile Defense System. It is a geopolitical decision, an affirmation of our allegiance to the Euro-Atlantic area.

Euro-Atlantic cooperation fills that "infinite space" between Germany and Russia, as General Wellington said. Owing to this cooperation, the Central European nations are no longer in a vacuum—a vacuum that has always been an object of interest of world powers to fill.

It is this geopolitical factor, and nothing else, which is the reason for Russia's protests against a radar site in the Czech Republic and the launch site in Poland. It must be clear to anyone who thinks at least a bit about it that these facilities do not represent any threat to Russia.

The Anti-Ballistic Missile Defense System is something significantly different from President

Reagan's "Star Wars" because the definition of the threat has changed. As long as the threat was represented by the Soviet Union, it was necessary to think about an extensive strategic system—hence the name SDI (Strategic Defense Initiative). In principle, it was part of a nuclear arsenal attack.

In comparison, today's Anti-Ballistic Missile Defense System represents a tactical system of defense against individual missiles. It starts from the same need to defend our values, and it is also a manifestation of American leadership, but it reacts to completely different defensive needs. The system's technical parameters are clear evidence that Russia is not and cannot be the intended focus of this initiative.

Russia is thus not threatened in any military sense. But it feels threatened in its newly found power politics. It sees a chance to bring confusion among the allies through harsh rhetoric, to succeed in a veto of the creation of the base, and ultimately to strengthen its position and weaken that of the Euro-Atlantic Alliance.

This is the game that is being played out—a game for leadership in Europe, certainly in Central Europe, which was integrated into NATO at a time when Russia was vacating its positions. Now that the European will for defense appears slackened, Russia senses a chance to reverse this process and send it into doubt.

But we do not want to belong again to the sphere of Russian influence. We do not want to belong to a group of countries that have to ask Russia for permission if they want to ensure their own defense. Having the anti-missile defense elements placed on our territory thus strengthens our strategic significance and geopolitical position.

Within NATO, we have at least an equal position with Russia. We will be happy to cooperate on many issues and definitely want to hold a dialogue. But we will decide on our internal affairs by ourselves. We do not want to put limits on our recently acquired freedom.

And this leads to my third point, the national significance of cooperation on the anti-missile base. Our nation regained real independence on June 30, 1991, when the last Soviet occupant left. When we

entered NATO on March 12, 1999, we became a part of an alliance that gives us guarantees to defend this independence and freedom.

Yes, if we give up freedom for safety, we lose both. We have had some sad experiences. Therefore, we know that our safety derives from our willingness to defend freedom, and not the other way around. Freedom does not lie in the simple awareness of necessity, as Karl Marx said. Freedom is not what is left over when the planners complete their work. We know too well why we refuse such leadership, which is primarily founded on military force and military needs.

It is characteristic that former Russian President Leonid Brezhnev, in 1968, was willing to discuss the ideological relief during the Prague Spring, but not the Soviet strike missiles in Brdy. The fear of losing the access point for military entrance into Western Europe was the main engine of invasion. It was more the issue of rockets than of ideology. It was the issue of having this area under military control.

It is historically significant for the Czech nation that this should never happen again, that we never become a puppet in the hands of foreign military interests. When I use the term American leadership, I do not mean a leadership in the sense of power, whether political or military. I mean ideational leadership founded on the sharing of common values that are freely declared on both sides of the Atlantic. In this we are equal: This is where the significance of the Transatlantic Link lies.

Transatlantic Link

The Transatlantic Link is a tie that invisibly connects followers of freedom on both sides of the ocean. Without its existence, Europe's safety would be greatly jeopardized. But the United States would find itself in isolation. Freedom is indivisible, and likewise the Euro-Atlantic civilization has meaning only as a unit, not as a set of prime factors.

The end of the Cold War cannot mean the weakening of the Transatlantic Link. I agree with Senator John McCain (R-AZ) that it is necessary to strengthen it, and I appreciate his words that the United States was not the only winner in the Cold War, but it was an achievement of the Transatlantic Link and the allies throughout the world.

The Transatlantic Link is far from being simply a military alliance. In the first place, it is an alliance of ideas. After World War II, the Transatlantic Link was not strengthened only by NATO, but also by the Marshall Plan and the Bretton Woods institutions. These are examples of American leadership at the level of values.

The Transatlantic Link shall also be strengthened by re-evaluation of American's visa policy. I greatly appreciate the contribution of The Heritage Foundation, which was among the first to realize that the current visa policy is not beneficial to the interests of the USA and impairs relationships with its allies. It partook in the formulation of its change and helped to put the relevant bill in the Congress. This activity was very beneficial for the Czech Republic and other countries, and I believe that it was highly beneficial for the United States itself.

The Transatlantic Link is not a one-way street. Europe needs American military presence as much as the United States needs the diplomatic support of the EU. We certainly share identical economical and safety interests.

The Transatlantic Link is also an axis that may form the foundation for interconnecting world democracies. Japanese ex-Prime Minister Taro Aso spoke about "the arch of freedom and prosperity" that spans across Asia. It is in our common interest to support the entrance of liberal democracy in this region.

This is a continuation of that story that began with going back to the roots. We need to maintain our identity and our values, which make us what we are. Only then shall we be able to defend freedom and face the threats of today's world. And in the process, we shall strengthen the tie of the Transatlantic Link. At the end we shall be able to build and strengthen the World Order based upon liberal democracies. We shall be able to continue in the main struggle of the era, the fight for liberalism against despotism.

Ever since its foundation, the American republic has seen itself as "the stronghold of the Holy light of freedom," as referred to by Thomas Jefferson, which would ignite the flame of prosperity throughout the world. This American perception I respect. And it is undoubtedly the loyalty to this heritage that gives

the United States the moral right to champion American leadership.

In spite of this, or maybe because of it, I must, as Czech Prime Minister, comment that my perception slightly differs. Individuals like the religious reformer Jan Hus, King George of Podbrady, and the Teacher of Nations, John Amos Comenius, formulated thoughts on freedom, international cooperation, and the right to self-determination long before the United States was established.

Today, we, together with the USA, actively participate in many missions that enforce these values

all over the world. Therefore, I perceive American leadership more as a role of a parliamentary spokesman who is seen and heard the most, but the actual leadership rests in the hands of the representatives as a whole.

Freedom is the most equal of all values. Freedom does not distinguish between small and large countries, between strong and weak, between cultures, religions and civilizations. Freedom either is or it is not. Let us all strive together to protect it.

—*The Honorable Mirek Topolánek is Prime Minister of the Czech Republic.*