

Remarks at a White House Symposium on Eastern Europe

July 6, 1989

Please be seated, and let me just welcome you to the White House for what we consider a very important get-together. Now, this Sunday, as you know, I'm going to sail forth on Air Force One heading for Warsaw, going to a couple of stops in Poland and then to Hungary. And this is an extraordinary time in east-central Europe, a time, that you know better than I, I'm sure, of unprecedented change and, I'd say, unparalleled opportunity in East-West affairs. Certainly, I view it as a time of unparalleled opportunity for the United States, with our interest in Poland and our interest in Hungary as it is.

And Poland -- we've just witnessed the freest elections in the postwar era and then the creation of this freely elected Senate in which candidates backed by Solidarnosc swept -- what was it, 99 out of the 100 seats. Under the terms of the roundtable agreement, these developments mark a true new beginning in the political affairs of Poland. And they hold promise for the transfer of Poland towards democracy, national self-determination.

Hungary also is on the path to democratic reform. The pattern is different. Really, they've been out front on the economic side of Eastern European countries, but the changes there are just as fundamental, equally as promising. And as the Communist Party undertakes a profound reappraisal of its role in Hungary, the outlines of a multiparty system -- genuine political pluralism -- are taking shape. The Hungarian economy, already the most open in Eastern Europe, is moving toward a free market, toward rejoining the whole world economy.

So, these are historic times. And what's at stake is not just movement towards economic and political liberalization in Poland and Hungary but the prospect of ending the postwar division of Europe. And Poland and Hungary -- yes, they're leading the way, but they face enormous economic and political problems. And they need our support in their efforts if they are to succeed. Simply showing our sympathy and our encouragement is not enough. We cannot solve all the problems that the Poles and Hungarians face, but we've got to be actively engaged. And we need to hold out the promise of an alternative future for central and Eastern Europe, a peaceful transition that should be our goal, a peaceful transition to a democratic future. And we need to back up that promise with some practical assistance.

So, in just a few days, I'm going to be speaking to the people of Poland and Hungary about what more the United States and other Western governments can do to help. But my message to you today is simply this: The movement toward democracy takes more than governments alone. Democracy's great strength lies in its private and public institutions, the institutions that you all -- almost to a man and a woman -- represent. What you do can make the difference for democracy in Hungary and Poland; it's what you do. And I've asked you here because all of you can help open avenues of cooperation between East and West.

And I call on the American business community to encourage the movement toward free markets by working with private sector enterprises in Hungary and Poland. Private enterprise has been the engine of economic growth in the United States, and it can be the key to prosperity in Poland and Hungary. So, help it thrive. And I call on those of you in the educational community and with these private foundations to expand our exchanges with Hungary and Poland. Open the lines of communication between American universities and the great centers of learning in Budapest and Warsaw or Krakow, and let's learn from each other.

I want to see workers in Hungary, as well as those in Poland, benefit from the support of American trade unions. American labor and Solidarnosc have forged a strong relationship, a great chapter in the history of international labor. But there's more work to do, and it will be vitally important to the successful transformation of Poland and Hungary.

Together, right in this room, there is a cross-section of the institutions that make democracy work and that give meaning, really, if you will, to the word "democracy." You're freedom in action, and you can help others along the path to freedom and democracy.

And so, in a few minutes you're going to hear from members of my administration, from some of the leading experts on Eastern Europe. And I'm going to be in real trouble for this, but in addition to the leaders here -- Carla, our very able USTR, and Brent Scowcroft -- I think he comes on at the end of all this -- and our other leaders here -- the top spokesman for the NSC, top spokesman for the State Department, we have a top spokesman for the OPIC sitting in the front row, Mr. Fred Zeder. But in addition to those who will be speaking as part of the administration, I do want to thank Zbig Brzezinski, who has earned his spurs in this national security arena, served with great distinction, and I understand he has agreed to share a few thoughts with you. So, when Bob and Larry and Carla and Brent and Fred get through, you'll have interspersed a nonofficial, but a man who knows an awful lot about what he is going to talk to you about.

So, I'm looking forward to this trip. I hope you'll find the next couple of hours exciting. And as I look back and sit [sit back and look] at the world and we see the difficulties in China, we see emerging opportunities in the Soviet Union. I think, with the Soviet Union, the focus quickly gets to Eastern Europe. And the feeling that many of you have as Hungarian-Americans or Polish-Americans must really be going through some sensational vibrations these days, because there is great opportunity. And our administration wants to be a part of the answer.

And so, I go to Europe not trying to complicate things for Mr. Gorbachev or try to seek advantage one way or the other. We're going there because we believe in reform and democracy and private markets and the ideas that have worked to help elevate the standards of living for people all over the world.

So, we need your help. We appreciate your interest in coming here. And I will try to represent the heartbeat of those in the room with great spirit when I go to Hungary and Poland. Thank you all very, very much for coming today. Thank you.

Note: The President spoke at 3:23 p.m. in Room 450 at the Old Executive Office Building. In his remarks, he referred to Brent Scowcroft, Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs; Zbigniew Brzezinski, author and former Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs (1977 - 1981); Robert D. Blackwill, Special Assistant to the President for European and Soviet Affairs; Lawrence S. Eagleburger, Deputy Secretary of State; and Carla A. Hills, U.S. Trade Representative.