ADDRESS TO THE TRILATERAL COMMISSION

Lech Walesa

Whenever we think about history, we realize how true it is that we belong to a very special generation. We do not only witness the beginning of a new century, of a new millennium, but also the beginning of a new era. Our generation managed, without much fight, to level a lot of divisions. And we have made up for all the losses after the Second World War. But at the same time, we initiated a new era and new threats.

Poland has just entered the European Union and we observe that in Europe and elsewhere, too, new challenges have emerged. As you may know, I am a man of political practice and whenever I look at today, whenever I look at tomorrow, I always have this special perspective. And I manage to anticipate certain things thanks to my practical approach, things that actually come true. And this is not so much the matter of prophecy, but this results from the fact that there are places around the world where people kind of experience more than others, and Poland just happens to be such a place. This is an individual experience of individual people, but also a collective experience of the Nation. Thanks to this experience such people are kind of able to anticipate certain events. Some older of us here maybe remember, some younger people may check this and verify in history books, Poland had tried to warn the world long before the Second World War, but at that point the world did not listen to us and did not want to listen to us. We were told: “This is merely a local conflict,” “We are not going to die for Gdansk”. And it was only once the war actually reached London and Paris that the world remembered the Polish warning. We were the only Nation after the Second World War trying to warn the world again and saying that Stalin was tricking the whole world, that he was “installing” Communism in Europe. What happened was that the West just broke off diplomatic relations with the Polish official government in exile and established diplomatic relations the Stalin-imposed government. All this was caused by our difficult geographical location. This location between Germany and Russia in the old perspective was a curse. As you may know, the Russians and the Germans enjoy socializing, visiting and revisiting one another. When on the way they cross Poland, they look around, they see that it is a beautiful country and they decide to stay on for longer. The last of those stays happened after the Second World War when the Soviets stayed on for more than 50 years.

I am trying to recall history only to draw your attention to what we are now saying about the present. And this is what we are saying: this generation has started up a new era. The old era can be referred to as the era of land, territory—in the past we would fight for territory, for a better piece of land, for everything that was in soil, that is why we struggled, that is why we shifted borders. And the point was that we were satisfied with a very low consumption, whereas the 21st century takes us over to this new era that I call the era of technology, of information, of globalization, of the Internet. In this new era with the products of intellect you can purchase everything that is in soil. We consume more of the products of our intellect and with them we can purchase everything that is in soil. However, the real tragedy that we are facing, the real challenge is the fact that we have started a new era but with the old way of thinking, with the old structures and with the old frameworks.

Today, we are left with one superpower only: the United States. Yet, we don’t know what should be its positions. We know that it is a very effective superpower when it comes to defending its interests and sometimes, on the way, it can also defend the interests of the others, too. On the other hand, we have the
United Nations which has the empowerments of all the world, however, it is an ineffective institution and a similar thing can be said about the European Union. And I think that the majority of the countries today think along such lines: the Germans think: European Union for the Germans, France thinks: European Union for the French, Poland thinks: European Union for Poland. And that is why I would like to appeal to you. Actually, you are not obliged to be doing anything with your position, with the position that you take, but if we make a common effort to change our general way of thinking, our general approach, we could achieve something.

A revolution can be carried kind of overnight, with one decree. The legal system can be transformed during on term of the Parliament, but the hardest thing is to transform and change mentalities. For this you require a few generations.

No other generation before us had had such an opportunity as we are faced with as long as we adapt the structures and the institutions to the challenges of our times. The Western capitalist system seemed to function perfectly well as long as there were borders in the world, when there was competition with the Communist block. And now, when there is no longer such a competition with the Communist block, we can see all the defaults, all the defects of the capitalist system.

Since I have been able to anticipate many things quite justly before, I would like to tell you one thing now and I am quite convinced that I am right. The democratic and economic systems that have taken the shape which we witness today will not stand up to the 21st century and its challenges. And I think that with the fact that new countries, former Communist countries, have enlarged the European Union, and with their experience we can improve the existing system. Actually, this is the hope that gives me some optimism for the future. My optimism also results from the confidence that since this generation has achieved so much, it will also be successful in achieving a little bit more.

I have mentioned a few topics to you, but actually this was a bit to provoke you in order to make you join in the discussion, because I think that these times require particularly that we combine our efforts, that we act in common, that we discuss things. Since I had this great opportunity of having you, such a wonderful audience, such distinguished people as Dr. Kissinger and Dr. Brzezinski, I would also like to benefit from this meeting. That will result from our discussion, which I am hoping for, because we were supposed to have a kind of a two-stage meeting here. I was to have a short introduction—just for a few minutes, and then we were supposed to have a discussion following. So I have spent my few minutes on the introduction, only very few minutes. I was certainly briefer than Castro who generally delivers a four-hour speech. Thank you very much for your attention and I think we will have the opportunity to discuss all the topics when we meet again.

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* Otto Lambsdorff:

President Walesa, I never had the opportunity, the privilege, and the honor to meet you personally. I would like to take the opportunity of tonight to say this: German unification started at Lenin shipyard and was due to your courage and the courage of Solidarnosc. And I would like to express my deepest gratitude.

Lech Walesa:

Thank you. I think this is a nice thing to say, especially from a neighbor from the West. However, you need to realize that all that happened was actually a chain of events and all of us participated in that chain.
In Gdansk in 1980 we managed to force Brezhnev and his companions to agree to free Trade Unions and it actually became a ‘wheel’ that was turning in the reverse way in a huge machinery. All the other wheels were turning leftwards in that very engine, however ours was turning to the right. Of course, the only way out was that either all the remaining wheels would continue to turn to the left and the engine would destroy the single wheel; or vice versa, the wheel turning to the right will destroy the entire engine. Actually, an attempt to destroy our wheel was taken with the martial law. This attempt failed. Our ‘little’ wheel destroyed the whole engine.

The truth is that the major obstacles on the way were eliminated in Gdansk and then all the others followed and did their job. The Germans brought the Berlin Wall down, the Czechs had their Velvet Revolution, but it was only possible once the bear had lost its teeth in Poland. Actually, the year 1990 meant that we forced Gorbachev to surrender. This capitulation was advantageous to both parties and that is why it turned out to be successful. Had we not had this official surrender, I suppose Russia could have ceased to exist and this would have implied a lot of trouble. This official capitulation, surrender, saved Russia and actually turned Gorbachev into a hero. The time will show whether it was all worthwhile.

Concluding remarks:

Since we are this very special generation we must really make the effort to fight in all strength to pave a straightforward path to this victory that we won, so that our children and grandchildren do not say in the future: “You have achieved so much and you only needed to arrange it properly and give it a straightforward way. You failed, you were not there.” They might reproach us by saying: “Hey, listen Dad, listen Granddad, where were you? Why did you not commit yourself? And why did you not contribute to achieving it finally? Why did you not search for solutions? Why did you consider dinner more important than discussions?”!

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