

Address to Seton Hall University

By Lech Walesa

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much; but I would sooner hope to receive similar applause when I finish. Now, you have set a high challenge for me. How should I earn similar applause when you say farewell to me? You have actually made my situation very hard to begin with, but, revolutionaries always have to face such situations.

Eminences, dear fathers, ladies and gentlemen, dear young people. I come from a country that is not very big, located in the middle of Europe. Many of you might even wonder, having seen some pictures, what they mean. You saw some people shouting here, you saw some people striking there. You might ask yourselves, is this the way to produce bread? So let me explain to you briefly why we actually acted in this way. I only speak about this in order to help you to better understand the challenges of this moment, of today.

The struggle that you have just seen has led us to the situation in which the United States has become the only superpower in the world. For 50 years, we were used to the idea that there were two antagonistic blocs in the world, and the situation was such that we could anticipate certain outcomes. We could foresee the future events because the structures were known to us. Today, however, we have a totally different situation. It is a new situation, and the role of the United States is completely different too.

There are no doubts, whatsoever, that you are the military leader of the world. There are no doubts, whatsoever, that you are economic leaders of the world. But, are you equally the political leader of the world? I have the right to say such things straightforwardly, especially here. After all, this university gave me an honorary doctoral degree. Therefore, listen to what I have to say; though, do not take what I am saying as showing off my wisdom. On the contrary, I do not even know whether the things I am saying are right. The only thing I can do now is to share my insights and perspectives with you, and you, being the superpower, will have the responsibility to choose the best perspectives in order to be the true leader to the world.

Lech Walesa, former President of Poland and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, visited Seton Hall University on December 1, 2005.

Well, ladies and gentlemen, there are places around the globe that somehow experience more than other places, and my homeland happens to be such a location. People who happen to be living in such places, due to that kind of experience, have learned to anticipate, better than others, the threats and opportunities of the world.

The difficulties that Poland has faced resulted from the fact that we have two powerful neighbors, the Russians and the Germans. As you may well know, they are two nations that enjoy military tourism, and they visit and revisit one another from time to time. Of course, in the older times, when the technology was quite low, they would travel by horse-driven carts, and naturally would take the shortest way, that is, across Poland, across my country. Once they entered Poland, they would realize that it is really a beautiful country, so they would decide to stay. Most recently, after the Second World War, we ended up in the zone of influence of the Soviets. We had been involved in the fighting along all the possible fronts of the Second World War, and we had shed almost all our blood during this war. So by the end of it, we had hardly any strength to oppose the installment of the Soviets. Some senior citizens may recall it; younger ones can see it in history books.

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We, the Polish people, had tried to warn the world before the outbreak of the Second World War, actually suggesting that perhaps we should anticipate the German attack. And how did the world reply to us? Well, we heard, it is merely a local conflict—we are not going to die for that. The world did remember the Polish warning once the war actually reached London and Paris, but it was too late at that point. At the end of the Second World War, we were trying to tell the powerful of the world that Stalin was tricking them, that half of the globe would end up in the embrace of the communist system. And how did the world reply to us then? It replied by breaking off diplomatic relations with the Polish legal government in exile, and establishing relations with the government that Stalin imposed on Poland. Actually Stalin himself, once he had succeeded in subduing Poland, loved to say that the communist system fit Poland like a horse saddle would fit a pig.

It took us fifty years of struggle in order to improve the errors that were committed at the end of the Second World War. At first, in 1940s and 1950s, we tried to oppose communism with arms; however, with the Soviet support, any such attempt was suppressed with bloodshed. In the 1960s and 1970s, we tried to oppose communism through strikes and protests in the street. We would fight, you know, in separate social groups—sometimes they were students revolting, then there were workers revolting—however, all such attempts were continuously suppressed.

Basing ourselves on our previous failures, we found a concept that we thought would allow us an effective struggle. Do not forget, it was demonstrated to us, all the time, that we stood no chance to liberate our country. There were 200,000 Soviet soldiers based on the Polish territory alone, based there permanently; another million Soviet soldiers in the neighboring countries, and nuclear missiles all around. Those who were a little bit sensible, realizing the circumstances, would postpone their struggle for independence, for freedom, for some later and better days. At that time, we had the opportunity to discuss the situation with the many powerful people of the world—presidents, prime ministers, royalty—and we were trying to tell them that we were totally fed up with the oppression of the Soviets; that we wanted to free ourselves from it. We tried to tell them that we were convinced enough to win, to get rid of that oppression, that we would win. And the powerful people of the world, when they heard us, would enter that information into their computers. They naturally added the information about the number of tanks, the number of soldiers, and the interests involved; and the wiser the computer, the quicker it answered: no chance whatsoever—at the risk of a world war. Being so discouraged, we felt helpless and actually gave up any efforts. So much so that, you know, in the twenty years I had been involved in my dissident activity, I had managed to recruit ten people out of a 40 million person Polish nation. You would find other similar dissident centers in Poland in the number of five or ten people at most, not more; and even fewer of such dissident circles in other communist countries, or in some of them, none.

At that point, something incredible happened. Do you realize, that at this point, we were coming to the end of the second millennium of Christianity? Just when the world felt totally helpless, we were given the gift of a pope who was a Pole, and a year after he was elected pope, this Pole came over to Poland. All of the world looked with much astonishment at Poland, a communist country, asking themselves, “what is happening there?” Almost all of the Polish people participated with enthusiasm in the meetings with the pope. Even the communists and the secret police learned how to cross themselves. Of course, they would not say the proper words, but they would go like 1-2-3-4-5. At least they would cross themselves.

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A year after the pope’s departure from Poland, I was able to recruit, out of the 10 original people, 10 million people. I did not suddenly become any wiser, nor did I become any richer within that year, but what happened was that the Holy Father awoke the nation. Let us make one point clear. The Holy Father did not encourage us to fight or to struggle; he did not encourage us to get involved in any conspiracy. The point was, the words he said were so convincing that each of us had to reflect about our own self. At the same time, we also had the opportunity to look around

and see how many of us there were, and what happened was that those awakened nations let themselves be led downstream, through strikes and negotiations, to freedom.

The Soviets, realizing the situation, simply panicked. They also noticed that the Pope was immortal—he was shot at, but not killed. They realized that more and more nations were awaking. At that time, one of the big Soviet leaders remembered that there was some minor political activist, somewhere in Siberia, who when having a bit of vodka would talk quietly, so as not to be overheard, that communism needed remodeling. Certainly, he would not have said it openly when sober, because he would have been too afraid. So, he was brought over to Moscow and appointed first secretary of the Communist Party. This secretary, seeing communism falling to pieces, decided that he would propose *perestroika* and *glasnost*.

All of us who were involved in the struggle against communism knew perfectly well that communism was not a reformable system. We encouraged his remodeling, because we knew that if he touched the foundations of the whole construction, it would collapse on his head. This is exactly what happened. He failed in every attempt that he did. Neither did he reform communism, nor did he reform the Soviet Union, nor did he reform the Warsaw Pact—a total failure. But that is exactly where his success is. I am telling you about this so that you will not be discouraged with any failures in your life. If you mean well, and if you head in the right direction, even with your failures, you can end up with a Nobel Prize.

Of course, things were not so smooth and easy. At one point, this poor secretary got tired and decided to go on holiday. His deputy president, Yanayev, and his prime minister let the army and the tanks into the streets in order to prevent the collapse of communism. However, once again, we were extremely lucky. There happened to be yet another Russian man, who climbed on a tank, gave a very good speech, and managed to stop the soldiers and the tanks. Well, even today we have not decided whether he did it sober or drunk, because his name was Boris Yeltsin. So if any of you wanted to attribute precise credit to all of the factors that contributed to the final success, we should admit that more than 50 percent of the credit should go to the Holy Father and 30 percent to Solidarity and Lech Walesa. Of course, I could have attributed more to myself, but I want to be on good terms with the one up there.

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Ladies and gentlemen, I brought this historical part up in order to tell you about our perspective on today's world. There are certain things that we see. The first of them is that this is a very special generation. Not only do we witness in our lifetime the beginning of a new century and of a new millennium, but also, we are witnessing the beginning of a new era. From the era of divisions, borders, and hostility, we are passing into an era of intellect, information, and globalization. No other generation

before us faced such an opportunity. To meet such an opportunity for peace, prosperity, and equal opportunity requires that we notice that the institutional framework that we have in today's world is unfit for the new era. We even require a re-definition, a more precise definition, of the position of the only superpower that we have in today's world, that is the United States. We must also notice that the United Nations, an institution of great merit, does not actually serve its purpose in today's world.

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We also need to notice other things, for example, in the sphere of the economy. This economic system worked in a factious world, as long as we were confined within the borders of particular countries in antagonistic blocs. Today, however, we need to observe that less than 10 percent of mankind has in their pockets more than 90 percent of the wealth of the globe. As for the democratic principles, we need to observe that, as long as we have counted one individual, one vote, whoever managed to group more individuals won any election. However, when we enter the globalized world, many different institutional structures, both American and European, will be joined by China. The Chinese, being starved for democracy, will naturally insist on having votes or referenda on any decision. Can you think that you might win any referendum or vote against the Chinese? Imagine that at one point they decide that Europe should join China, for example. They can vote it over. Once again, questions of this kind are also your responsibility, the responsibility of the superpower. So the alternatives in this respect are either we reform the democratic principles, or every family has at least 30 children.

So as you see, ladies and gentlemen, there are so many open questions, questions regarding the shape of the structures we establish within the context of the global world. Europe, for example, proposed a constitution. It has not been adopted as yet, which is just as well. What was the European proposal in this constitution? Very simple. Freedom of the individual, freedom of association of any type, economic freedom, no subsidies whatsoever, meaning that the free market will deal with everything. It also decided that questions of values, and of God, should be restricted to the private sphere of the individual. It seems like an appealing concept, but the last appealing one of the old era.

It is unfit for the new one, because the higher the civilization, the higher the technological progress; the bigger the territory, the more badly we need values. Let us raise and educate an individual of conscious, and I mean in every sphere—a union activist, a politician, a capitalist owner. We can give you two examples of what might happen when we only base ourselves on freedom. One of the examples can be seen in the Ukraine.

I was there last year helping them solve the problems during the Orange

Revolution. What did I see when I was there? People had the freedom, the liberty, to elect the president; they had the freedom to elect the members of the Parliament. They simply did not want to get involved. They would not participate in the elections. They would not organize themselves in political parties. What happened then was that an oligarchy took over power in Ukraine and would not share it with anyone. I suppose this is an inevitable end to any solution if we just base ourselves on freedoms. If such a thing happens, how will democracy respond; how will it react? In this respect, we can cite the example of Poland.

If we see any distortion of our public life, we propose parliamentary commissions. So I imagine that if we have a life of this kind, we will have nothing but commissions. One superior commission over another commission, investigating into a commission, which is investigating into yet another commission. These commissions will contribute to more chaos, actually, than they will clarify things. Those commissions will just consume all our taxpayer money, but will hardly improve anything, and I foresee the final outcome in twenty years. We would need at least five police officers controlling each individual, making sure that this individual does not go astray, or get involved in the wrong political activities or makes sure this individual pays taxes, et cetera. On the other hand, an individual of conscience, that is a very cheap means of control and very, very effective.

Well, ladies and gentlemen, the final word is yours; you are the superpower, and the world wants you to remain the superpower. That is why you will have the decisive voice in resolving many things; that is, what should be the grounds on which we establish any structure in this new world. If you resist, if you do not want to be the superpower, why do you not share this position with Poland? We will try to cope with the responsibility. Well, here I would like to conclude with my encouraging and provocative remarks. I am not certain I chose the right topics, but I hope it was insightful. Thank you.