

Remarks of Madeleine K. Albright (As prepared for delivery)
NDI Transatlantic Dialogue: Strengthening Cooperation on Democracy Support
Washington, DC, June 28, 2010

I am pleased to see friends from both sides of the Atlantic – and I very much look forward to our discussion. I am also honored to be joined on our opening panel by two of my fellow co-chairs.

President Jerzy Buzek is a veteran of the Solidarity movement, a former prime minister of Poland, and currently head of the European Parliament. He is one of the true champions of 21st century democracy, and a person supremely well-qualified to lead our discussions.

Former U.S. Representative Vin Weber is a person with whom I have collaborated on several projects that had a small “d” democratic theme. Vin and I have found that, contrary to the popular impression, bipartisanship is not a four letter word. We don’t always agree about the little things, but we see eye-to-eye on the big stuff – especially the importance of democracy and the value of effective partnership between the United States and the EU.

The fourth co-chair of our dialogue is Javier Solana – who has held just about every important position in Europe except goal keeper for the World Cup. Because of his son’s wedding, Mr. Solana could not be with us this morning, but we look forward to his active engagement as this project goes forward.

This morning, I would like to summarize why I think this gathering of friends is so vital and also so timely. The primary reason, to be blunt, is that the decade just past was not a particularly good one for democracy. The democratic momentum that had gathered in the years following the Cold War is less in evidence than it was.

Instead of euphoria, we hear complaints that democracy has failed to deliver on its promise; that freedom is only suited to certain parts of the world; that democratic institutions are too readily manipulated; and that active support for democracy is – depending on your point of view -- either naïvely idealistic or hypocritical.

The bottom line is that supporting democracy today is a complicated proposition. This makes it a good time for democracy’s best friends to talk frankly about what is working and what is not – and to consider how we might more effectively combine our efforts on democracy’s behalf.

This task is made more difficult by its context -- a very busy world. To impress decision-makers, we must first get their attention. And we know that leaders on both sides of the Atlantic are confronted today by a host of urgent problems.

These include the international economic crisis, the worrisome situation in Afghanistan, the complexities of Iraq, the danger posed by Al Qaeda, the challenge of nuclear proliferation, the Gordian Knot in the Middle East, and such pressing global dilemmas as climate change, poverty and genocide.

If we are honest with ourselves, we must admit that when presidents and prime ministers sit down to ponder these issues – support for democracy may not even enter into the discussion.

Or if it does, democracy may actually be seen as a barrier to progress.

This is because our leaders often have to work with undemocratic governments; because democracy is inherently unpredictable; and because diplomats sometimes find it easier to deal with dictators who can make quick decisions than with democrats who are accountable to coalition partners, parliamentary committees, voters, and the press.

All this creates a temptation to put support for democracy on the diplomatic back burner until all of these other problems melt away. Fortunately, most of us learned when very young that some temptations should be resisted. Support for democracy may be complicated and frustrating – but it is also necessary.

Since the end of World War II, democracy has provided nothing less than the foundation for Euro-Atlantic solidarity, the ideological counterpart to the Berlin Wall, the rallying point for reuniting Europe, and the theme music in our collective message to the world. Put all that on the back burner, and there's not much left to the meal.

But simply pointing this out is not enough. Democracy cannot regain its momentum through lip service alone. Our job is to make dynamic and unapologetic support for democracy as practical an instrument of foreign policy as possible.

That is what our trans-Atlantic dialogue is all about. At this early point in the process, I do not pretend to have all the answers, but I would like to offer a short list of opening thoughts.

The first is that effective support for democracy begins at home. The United States and the EU can speak credibly on behalf of democracy only if we are able to continue demonstrating the economic and political success of that system within our own countries. This means that we must be true to our principles and disciplined and creative in carrying them out.

Second, we must take full advantage of our own experience. In the past quarter century, democratic change has come to literally dozens of countries in Europe, Asia, Latin America, and Africa.

In some cases, the process has been smooth; in others, it has been plagued by false starts, broken promises and conflict. Over time, we have learned that the second election in any country is more critical than the first; that the role of civil society is vital; that democracy requires a full range of healthy institutions; and that not every leader who claims to believe in democracy actually means it. To succeed in the future, we must apply these lessons from the past.

Third, we must win the battle of ideas. Unlike during the Cold War, hardly anyone today suggests that democracy will ultimately collapse. But there are many who believe it is doomed to stall. In this view, democracy is like a club that only some countries are qualified to join.

Others nations, it is felt, lack the necessary democratic tradition, or the required level of development, or a sufficient degree of ethnic cohesiveness. The argument seems to imply that the only places suitable for democracy are those that already have it.

Now I consider myself both a realist and an idealist. And I believe that, to have a positive impact on public policy, supporters of democracy must respond to the world as it is. But that does not mean that we are obliged to leave the world as we find it.

The whole point of democracy is to enable people, through their own energy and intelligence, to build a future better than the past. So, as supporters of democracy, we need to do a better job of reminding our contemporaries of what freedom can achieve. We must make the case that democracy is not the enemy of order, but rather an essential building block of the kind of social and political stability that lasts.

We must point out that democracy is a generator of economic productivity and development, because prosperity comes from innovation which is the byproduct of free thought. And we must show that democracy is a contributor to civil and international peace.

With few exceptions, the sources of tension and conflict in the world today can be traced to countries where political freedom is either entirely absent or under siege.

In short, it is our job to convince policymakers that democracy belongs in the forefront of their thinking -- because there is nothing more pragmatic or realistic than supporting democratic aspirations and institutions across the globe.

Of course, in so doing, we must also recognize that showing support for democracy is not the responsibility of governments alone. As the sponsors of this dialogue reflect, the process of building and maintaining democracy is something to which we can all contribute -- as individuals, as representatives of official and nongovernmental institutions, and as partners across the Atlantic.

Thank you very much.