

Senator Joe Lieberman (ID-CT) addressed the Conference on Democracy and Security in Prague, Czech Republic on June 4, 2007. Below is the full text of the speech, as delivered:

"Thank you so much for that kind introduction, Natan. I cannot tell you how grateful I am for all of your work, and the work of Vaclav Havel and Jose Maria Aznar, to bring together the remarkable group of individuals who are assembled in this room, these fighters for freedom, from around the globe.

I know that many of you traveled here at great personal risk and in the face of great obstacles. It is a privilege and an honor for me to stand with you.

The existence of this conference is itself a testament to the transformative power of the ideals that have brought us together, to the power of brave people of principle to change history. Who would have dreamed two decades ago that democratic dissidents from all over the world would be able to gather in Prague, at the invitation of men who were themselves prisoners of the totalitarian regime that had long ruled this half of Europe, and that many assumed would do so forever. Instead, today, Stalin and Brezhnev are in the dustbin of history, and Havel and Sharansky survive and flourish!

The freedom fighters from all around the world who are gathered here today follow in the heroic footsteps of Havel and Sharansky, these two great men who are now taking the candles they lit in the darkest days of communist dictatorship and giving them to you to carry in your struggles against repression and tyranny.

We do not doubt for a moment that your struggles are the struggles of heroes.

You show fearlessness in the face of regimes built on fear. You find the courage of your convictions to follow the consequences of your convictions.

That is why dictators and despots fear you—because you have chosen not to fear them.

The choice to confront tyranny is not an easy one. Indeed, you know better than most how difficult it can be for freedom to triumph over fear, for democracy to replace dictatorship. You also know the suffering and setbacks that are part of the march toward freedom, as well as how cruel and tenacious the forces of totalitarianism can be in resisting its advance.

But you also know the miraculous expansion of freedom that we have witnessed over the past thirty years, as democracy has spread to regions and countries where many doubted it could ever take root.

And you know that in your often lonely, always difficult quest, you are on the right side of history—and I am here to tell you that the United States of America must and will stand by your side as well.

It is America's responsibility and purpose as a nation to do so, inscribed for posterity

by our founders, who proclaimed that the rights to life and liberty are the endowments of our Creator to every individual human being.

I recognize that are those in the United States today who question the wisdom of a commitment to freedom in our foreign policy, who claim it is naive, even dangerous. In particular, I know there are those who will argue that everything that will be said and done at this conference can be refuted by a single word: Iraq.

There are voices who will claim that the violence we now see in that country disproves the case for democracy and demonstrates that some people are not ready for the freedoms we enjoy elsewhere in the world. They will say that America's foreign policy should be less principled and more pragmatic, less focused on honoring eternal, universal values and more focused on satisfying shifting national interests.

These arguments are gravely mistaken. They misunderstand fundamentally what is happening in Iraq, and they derive precisely the wrong lessons from our experience there. Even more importantly, they profoundly misunderstand America—our ideals, our identity, our very soul as a nation.

I have just spent the past ten days traveling in the Middle East, including in Iraq. I met with Arab leaders across the region as well as our military commanders and diplomats there. I also had the privilege of walking the streets of Baghdad and Ramadi with the brave American soldiers who are risking their lives to defend the freedom and safety of the people living there.

In the course of this trip, one thing has emerged clear to me.

What is happening in the Middle East today is not simply a battle between the United States and its enemies in one particular country, but a much larger struggle between freedom and fear, in which Iraq happens to be the central front. On the one side of this conflict are the latest in a long line of totalitarians, a loose alliance of terrorists and tyrants every bit as fanatical as the fascists and communists with whom they share a hatred of America and the values for which it stands.

Terrorism is their preferred weapon, but it is not their ultimate aim. Their vision is far more ambitious and terrifying: a vision of hatred and conquest, in which billions of people fall under a jihadist jackboot of vicious and repressive rule.

On the other side of this fight are the overwhelming majority of Arabs and Muslims—a largely silenced majority of people whom I am convinced desire most of all a better life for themselves and for their children, people who like any of us would choose freedom over fear, hope over hatred, justice over tyranny, if given the chance.

The outcome of the struggle in Iraq will go a long way towards determining whether our future in Europe, and America, and throughout much of the world belongs to these totalitarians, or to democrats who seek the consent and consensus of the governed.

Iraq is about the survival and success of the very ideal of freedom not only in Iraq, but in Iran, and Syria, and the rest of that region, and in a very real way, in the rest of the world.

There are some in America today who acknowledge the stakes at play in Iraq, but who then claim that the war there has been too costly, the burden too great, for us to continue to shoulder it. They claim that they support democracy, but just not in Iraq, just not right now.

The truth of the matter, however, is that freedom is not divisible. You cannot claim to support the spread of democracy, but profess ambivalence about its fate in Iraq.

On the contrary, we have a responsibility to support the forces of freedom not only when it is easy, but when it is hard. Here in Prague, especially, we should remember what happens when the democratic world does not stand united, when its leaders decide that there are places and peoples whose freedom is not worth defending, and abandon them to the forces of tyranny.

Today, the choice we face is not simply whether we support the advance of democracy in the abstract, but at what cost we are willing to fight for it.

Each of you has an especially important role to play in helping the rest of us—and America in particular—rise to this challenge. Dictators, after all, depend not only on the fear of their victims, but on the indifference of outsiders, and it is the unique power of dissidents to break that spell of indifference.

The fact of Soviet tyranny was known to the world long before we first heard the names of Vaclav Havel and Natan Sharansky and Andrei Sakharov, but it was the heroism of these men in the face of Soviet injustice that kindled our moral imagination to see the sufferings of millions more.

From their example, we know that a single human face can tear down the faceless inhumanity of an entire system. We know that every dissident has the potential to change history, because history is made not by abstract, inexorable forces, but by human beings like yourselves.

And so I say to those in America who insist our foreign policy should be narrowly focused on the pursuit of stability, not freedom, who argue pragmatism and principle are opposing values, and that benign dictatorship is preferable to the disorder of democracy:

Look around this room at the faces of the freedom fighters who are here. Look at the faces of the dissidents—and you will have to conclude that you are wrong.

There is no such thing as benign dictatorship, and to be a genuine realist today, there is no choice but to heed the call of freedom—for as Natan Sharansky has written, the advance of democracy is the only guarantor of national and international security.

We have been blessed throughout American history with leaders who have recognized these powerful truths. A generation ago, it was Ronald Reagan and Senator Scoop Jackson who came to the side of the dissidents in their fight against Soviet totalitarianism. Today, as well, we are fortunate to have a president, George W. Bush, who has given voice to the cause of freedom fighters from Iraq to North Korea to Cuba to Iran and beyond.

And he is not alone. Many in Congress of both parties, including myself, are determined to ensure that America's freedom agenda advanced under President Bush continues long after he leaves office.

I hope that each of you consider this meeting as the beginning of a partnership for freedom, and I invite each of you to contact me and my office whenever you need our help.

History and the heroes in this room tell me that the future does not belong to despots and dictators. It belongs to a labor activist from Teheran, to a journalist from Moscow, to a blogger to Cairo, to a human rights advocate from North Korea, and to countless others whose names are not yet known, but which will someday be inscribed alongside those of Havel and Sharansky and Sakharov in the kingdom of conscience and courage to which all freedom fighters belong.

May God bless all of you, and give you strength and success in your endeavor, which is the greatest of all human endeavors—the pursuit of freedom. Thank you."