



RADIO FREE EUROPE/RADIO LIBERTY

TOWN HALL MEETING

**GUEST SPEAKER:
CONDOLEEZZA RICE,
UNITED STATES SECRETARY OF STATE**

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SECRETARY CONDOLEEZZA RICE: Thank you so much. Thank you, and thank you for that wonderful introduction, and thank you for the work you do, Jeff. I'm really just delighted to have a chance to stop by and to thank each and every one of you for what you do on the frontlines of freedom, and you are on the frontlines of freedom. It is completely fitting that we stand in this building, the old Communist Party Parliament, to talk about Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, and Freedom.

Who would have thought 20 years ago or 30 years ago, or certainly at the time when World War II ended and Czechoslovakia in 1948 was the last of the free countries of Eastern Europe to fall under communist rule – who would have thought that in 2008 we would sit in the Communist Party Parliament gathered as the people who make Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty what it is. But it's fitting because of course it is very much because of what your predecessors did in Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty that indeed 2008 is so different from 1948.

I'm a specialist, or I was a specialist on the old Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, and I know that for so many people behind what was called at the time the Iron Curtain, Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty were their virtual passport out of tyranny and into freedom. They might have had to sit in the corner of a room maybe by candlelight to listen fearfully to Radio Free Europe, but they knew that in doing so, they were putting a stake in the ground that they were free men and women. They might have been physically in bondage, but their minds and their hearts and their spirits were free.

And that's why liberty can never be crushed, because it doesn't exist in the halls of government; it exists in people's hearts and in people's souls because the deepest longing of any human being is simply to be able to enjoy the blessings of liberty. And I'm so proud to represent the United States of America, a country that has always stood for the very simple proposition that no man, woman, or child deserves to live in tyranny for the very simple proposition that our creator made us all to be free.

So liberty and freedom can be delayed but never denied. And so as we stand here and we think about that proud history of Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, you now are a part of its proud present and proud future. And its proud present and its proud future is to take those same very basic ideas that every man, woman, and child should be free, can be free, must be free, and to speak them loudly for people in Baghdad, and in Kabul to speak them loudly for people in Tehran, to speak them loudly for people all over the world.

And you do so knowing that when people say to you, is it possible that Iraqis will learn to live together across their sects can they make their new democratic institutions work, you know that the answer to that is yes. When people say to you, but Afghanistan, it's such a poor country; so many people are illiterate. Is it possible for democracy to work in such a place, you know that the answer is yes because you know that the one great drama of history is that freedom doesn't fail. It may take time, but it doesn't fail.

So as we stand here in this Communist Party building, think back to those who might have stood here in 1948 or 1949, and they would never have dreamed that would still – that it would instead be the secretary of state of the United States addressing Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty personnel in 2008. What seemed in impossible now, in retrospect, just seems inevitable. And the same will be the case that at some time in your new building another American secretary of state, or maybe an Iraqi foreign minister, or an Afghan, or an Iranian will stand and talk about freedom.

I know that the struggle has been hard. I know that you have lost colleagues and friends. They have been gunned down, they have been kidnapped because the price of freedom is often great. But the benefit of freedom is always worth it. It isn't easy; it doesn't come all in a flash because not only do I remember the people today of Afghanistan or Iraq, or the people of the '40s, of Prague, or Warsaw, but I also remember that even our own country, born as it was to great principles to form a more perfect union – not a perfect union, but a more perfect union – that our Founding Fathers – and we were lucky with our Founding Fathers – founded a country in the United States of America that was not a perfect democracy. You see, in 1789, Mr. Jefferson's Constitution made my ancestors three-fifths of a man in order to bring a compromise so that the United States of America could come into being. Our great American democracy had a birth defect called slavery.

And so when the United States of America talks about freedom around the world, it does so not from arrogance, it does so not from false pride, it does so not because we believe we are perfect but because we know that human institutions are quite imperfect, but that what is and what must be always kept in sight is the great principles that must guide them: liberty, freedom, the right to speak as you wish, the right to worship as you would, the right to educate your boys and girls, the right to be free from the arbitrary knock of the secret police at night. These are

basics that every human being wants and shares, and that's what you're giving them a chance to do.

So when you speak to places that are not yet free, remember, you are their virtual passport; you are their liberation as men and women who seek and deserve freedom. Thank you.

(Applause.)

MR. GEDMIN: Madam Secretary, thank you very much. And the secretary has kindly consented to take a question or two. Irina, please, from our Russian Service.

IRINA LAGUNINA: Irina Lagunina, Russian Service. Madam Secretary, thank you for your kind words, but we are journalists. So two events coincided at the first meeting of Presidents Bush and Medvedev in Japan where they discussed, among other things, the missile defense system in Europe, and you signing agreements with Czech Republic. How will it affect the ability of the U.S. and Russian leaders to resolve the most controversial issues for Russia like missile defense itself and NATO enlargement? Thank you.

SEC. RICE: Thank you. Well, Secretary Gates and I were twice in Moscow to discuss missile defense with the Russians. And we made the following argument: That the threats that we face are common threats. They are threats from Iranian missiles; they are threats from potentially North Korean missiles. The United States and Russia are not enemies any longer. And so this missile defense system is aimed at those threats, at the new threats of the 21st century, not at the Russian nuclear deterrent.

I think we got the Russian's attention. I'm not quite sure that they are still sold on the concept. But I do believe that we have opened up a window for cooperation between Russia and the United States on missile defense. There is much that we can do together, and we are having discussions about that. I think they've come to understand. It hasn't been easy, given that it is the Czech Republic, given that it is Poland that we're talking about. They've come to understand, nonetheless, that this is not somehow aimed at them. We have said that there should be confidence-building measures so that Russia can know that these sites are not going to be aimed in any way at Russia.

So I'm still hopeful that Russia, accepting the need for missile defense, which I think it is beginning to see, will take a cooperative way of moving this forward. As to NATO enlargement, it is never going to be – I don't care who is president of Russia – it's never going to be an "acceptable," quote, unquote, for a Russian leader to agree that NATO should enlarge. But of course, it is a decision for the alliance, not for Russia. And what we've tried to convince Russia is that NATO is no threat to it; quite the opposite. NATO has been friendly to Russia. There is a NATO-Russia council. And the extension of democracies on Russia's border should not be a threat to it. We have good discussions. Russia and the United States continue to cooperate across a wide range of issues. And so I really do believe that we can work our way through these thorny difficulties.

MR. GEDMIN: Kenan.

KENAN ALIYEV: Madam Secretary, welcome to Prague and it's a pleasure meeting you. I'm the director of Azerbaijani Service and my question is, you know, you said liberty can never be crushed and freedom doesn't fail. And this is the message our institution, our organization is sending to the region every day because this organization is all about freedom and freedom of information.

But what we see in the region, particularly in Azerbaijan, in Central Asia, in Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Armenia, that freedom is being crushed and it's failing. And in these countries, the autocrats or dictators which possess a lot of oil and gas, they act with impunity in many ways. What is your message to those countries? And what is your answer to critics who say that because of the U.S. energy policy in the region, democracy is backsliding in Central Asia? Thank you.

SEC. RICE: Thank you. Well, the first thing would be a message to the leaders of those countries and then a message to the people of those countries. The message to the leaders of those countries is that they will never fully develop their potential if they will not allow their people the creativity and the innovation that comes from freedom. They simply won't.

And so, they may have shorter-term gains or even medium-term gains by their great oil wealth and their ability therefore to be somewhat resistant to outside pressure for change, but they will never be fully a part of the international community. They will never be fully a part of the modern world with systems that belong in the 18th century. And I think that has to be the message to those leaders.

To the people, I would say that they're – the United States has continued to fund and work with civil society: to invite students to the United States, to try and bridge with people and to help civil society be within itself a vehicle for pressure on the governments to start to loosen the reins. It won't come all at once. In some places, it may come quite slowly. But if you look at a place like Turkmenistan, there is a small opening – this is not Niyazov in power in Turkmenistan any longer. And so we will continue to press both from the bottom up and from the top down.

And you never know when the breakthrough is going to come. And so these leaders need to be preparing for the day when people will succeed in getting their liberty. And what you can do is, little by little, encourage free press. What you do through Radio Free Europe is a part of that. I continue to say, freedom will not fail. It takes a while sometimes, but it will not fail.

Yes, one last question.

MR. GEDMIN: One last question. We're going to go where the mike – pardon me, but we simply have to go to where the microphone is, Alexander Lukashuk from Belarus.

SEC. RICE: Belarus, speaking of it.

ALEXANDER LUKASHUK: Thank you. Dr. Rice, I would like to ask a question on behalf of our laziness. We know that tonight our programming – there will be people in prisons in Belarus who listen to our shortwave broadcasts. A year ago, you said, you called Belarus the last dictatorship in Europe. On your watch, the U.S.-Belarusian relations are perhaps at a

historic low. There are economic sanctions, visa ban. There is no ambassador. There are only five diplomats working in Minsk. The embassy was on the brink of closure.

But, still, diplomatic ties have not been severed. What stopped it? And, if so, does it mean there is hope for improving relations with official Minsk and, if so, how? Thank you.

SEC. RICE: Yes. Well, I'll be very clear. What stopped it was that I did not want to take down the American flag in Belarus. That's what stopped it. I think that the American flag continuing to fly in Minsk is an important signal that the United States is going to stand by those who are going to continue to struggle for freedom. I know that in a place like Belarus it's difficult. I know that the Lukashenko regime is brutal. I know that it is sometimes efficient in its brutality toward its enemies and the opposition.

It was embarrassed by the last election because it was very interesting; Lukashenko didn't get 99 percent of the vote. And I think that those demonstrations need to continue to happen. And we're going to continue to work with the opposition through NGOs. I've met with those people myself. There are other countries that are doing great work. The Lithuanians, with whom I spoke just a few days ago, of course have a university where Belarusians are increasingly going to school. The polls are very active and the Czechs here in Prague, very active on Belarus' behalf. And so, I think we can continue to bring pressure through the kinds of measures that you mentioned and I think we can continue also to work with non-governmental organizations to try to help them be more organized and more effective in what they're doing.

We need also the help of the European Union. We work very hard with them on issues concerning Belarus. But, again, it sometimes takes time and then, sometimes, it seems incredibly sudden, that all of a sudden, something starts to shift and the sands underneath change. Now, I was the White House Soviet specialist at the end of the Cold War. I went to work for George H.W. Bush, the president's father, in February of 1989. And you could not have told me in February of 1989 that by February of 1991 there would be no Warsaw Pact, Soviet power would be effectively out of Eastern Europe, there would be a unified Germany, and that by February of 1992, there would be no Soviet Union. You could not have dreamed such.

And so, as difficult as it is, I think what we need to do and what you do with your broadcasts every day is you keep alive that hope and that flame of freedom until the time comes that it can fully express itself. And what we know in human history is it does come to express itself. It isn't defeated. It does come into being. And you keep it alive each and every day in people who listen to you. And if any of us ever start to despair that somehow there is a system or there are leaders or rulers or dictators who are smart enough – somehow, someway – to permanently and completely crush freedom, then those people who depend on that light and that sense that freedom continues to shine, we're going to abandon them.

And so, I try very hard when I speak to people who are still living in tyranny not to say to them, expect a breakthrough tomorrow. That would be unfair. But to tell them that their hopes to be free are not misplaced because one never knows. And you continue to lay those seeds and you continue to lay that foundation so that, when the time comes, there are people who are ready and able to take advantage of it. Thank you.

(Applause.) - (END)