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Secretary Clinton's Keynote Address at the Atlantic Council Gala Dinner
Hillary Clinton

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SECRETARY CLINTON: I have the great and high honor today to accept this freedom award on behalf of the American people, some of whose names are already in the history books, but many of whom will never be known to history.

But because of their steadfastness, because of their conviction about freedom and the hope that it would be, once again, alive and well throughout all of Europe, and particularly in Germany, they supported the policies of successive presidents of both parties, they voted for people who believed strongly in the importance of the Transatlantic Alliance, they paid taxes year after year after year to support our defense of Europe, the NATO Alliance, and to give a tangible and very clear message, that the people of the United States wanted to see a strong and vibrant Germany and Europe.

And there is no better place for this award or this moment than right here in Berlin, a city where some of the greatest victories in the 20th century occurred, and a city that, today, embodies the strength of our democracies and what we have achieved together. So, I gratefully accept this on behalf of all of those Americans.

And I thank the Atlantic Council and Fred, thank you for your coverage of this part of the world over many years, and your leadership of this council, and Alan Spence, as well, for co-hosting this evening, the presidents of both Estonia and Latvia, who sit here today representing two nations that were considered captives.

And, on a personal note, when I was in high school, I was part of an organization that, in our own way, as high school students, tried to speak out for freedom of those who were in the Baltics and elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe. We would often host events at the school, or at our public library of those who had escaped, to hear their stories, to remind ourselves, to remind all Americans what was at stake, and to put a personal face on what seemed to be a faceless and terrible oppression.

So, thank you. And thank you for taking this time on the eve of the occasion tomorrow to look back, to remember, to convey the emotion and commitment that so many of you who have already spoken have demonstrated clearly, in order to pass it on to that next generation and the one after that.

I am delighted to be joined by members of the United States Presidential Delegation who have come to represent the United States on this historic occasion. We have already heard from most of them: our ambassador, Phil Murphy; our former national security advisors, Dr. Brzezinski and Lt. Gen. Scowcroft; and Craig Kennedy, president of the German Marshall Fund.

And, of course, as Henry Kissinger said, we are in a federation. And we do understand the challenges and difficulties that each of us has faced, and not only are facing today, but whoever holds these positions of National Security Advisor or Secretary of State will face, new challenges. But that is part of the responsibility that we, together, have assumed.

And I want to personally express my appreciation to the Vice Chancellor and the Foreign Minister. We had our first meeting just a few days ago in Washington, where I was very pleased to host Guido. And tomorrow he will host me for a working lunch. The emotion that his remarks conveyed, the story of going to Berlin with his father, will stay with me. And I look forward to working with you on so many of the important challenges we face today.

This award comes in a year of anniversaries -- the one we celebrate tomorrow, the night 20 years ago when history broke through concrete and barbed wire and brought liberty to millions across this continent, but that's not the only milestone that should be remembered.

Sixty-five summers ago, allied troops landed in Europe with the goal of liberating Berlin. And in 1949, 60 years ago, we formed the NATO Alliance, and completed the largest humanitarian airlift in history, well over a quarter million flights, to sustain West Berlin during the Soviet blockade. And, Admiral, thank you for accepting the award on behalf of not only those who serve today, but most importantly, those who have served in years past, in a continuous chain of commitment.

The Americans and their allies who fought to liberate this city in the Second World War, the farmers and airmen who helped to feed Berlin's people and fuel its homes, and the soldiers who stood guard for generations to preserve the peace, all did so with the hope that someday Berlin might stand at the center of a free, peaceful, prosperous, reunified Germany in a free, peaceful, prosperous, unified Europe.

But there wasn't anything inevitable about it. And there is nothing that we can take for granted about that history. The circumstances that surround us today are a culmination of an effort by Europeans and Americans that spanned generations. And, yes, the end to the Berlin Wall was an iconic moment. It was an hour when the hopes and prayers and sacrifice of millions came together in an unwavering exclamation of freedom. But it did not begin with the mistake of a flustered Communist spokesman in East Berlin, or even the peaceful masses that took to the street that evening. It had been building over years.

Edward Gibbon, the great historian of the fall of Rome once observed that a "mighty state reared by the labors of successive ages could not be overturned by the misfortune of a single day." But I would add the accumulation of days, of days where people no longer could tolerate the oppression and the denial that they

had to live with, who could no longer stomach what they saw in those who pretended to lead them, built and built. So, with the destruction of the Berlin Wall, we witnessed the climax of a broader saga that had been playing out in Budapest and Bucharest and Bratislava and a thousand other communities across Europe.

In Poland, that son of a carpenter, who has already been honored, was elected prime minister of a free nation. For the Polish people, it was the end of a campaign for liberty that was marked by scores of protests and years of privation. And for an electrician from Gdańsk, it was the end of a journey that began when he climbed over a wall of the Lenin Shipyards to lead a strike that became Solidarity.

In the Baltic countries of Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania, a human chain comprised of one-fourth the population joined hands across their lands, and helped break the chains that held their nations captive. Tens of thousands gathered at Heroes' Square in Budapest to witness the reburial of Imre Nagy, a hero of the 1956 revolution.

And later that summer, Hungary's Communist leaders opened the border to refugees seeking freedom and, in the morning darkness of September 11th, allowed a vast army of East German automobiles to surge across the Hungarian frontier into Austria. The small cars filled with vacationers didn't have much in common with the armored battalions of the Warsaw Pact that had menaced generations of Western military planners. But their impact on history was as dramatic as any invasion. There was little use in a wall that you could walk around.

So, when capitals across the region, refugees from the East, found sanctuary in the embassies of West Germany, and when a dying government tried to end the exodus of its people by allowing a handful of them free passage to the West in a sealed train, the sight spawned an outcry for change. East Germans took to the streets of Leipzig in peaceful protests that affirmed, "Wir sind das Volk," or, "We are the People," which became, "We are One People," after the events of November 9th.

Then, only eight days after the destruction of the Wall, we watched students in Prague march and begin what became the Velvet Revolution that would bring Havel, a playwright, to the presidency. For a nation that had grasped for liberty in the spring of 1968, the transition to democracy couldn't come quickly enough.

There were many authors of the changes we witnessed in 1989. Some acted knowingly, like the Polish pope who resurrected a gospel of liberty. Others, like President Gorbachev, sought a break from a darker past. But in doing so, helped to break down the wall.

But again, I say these events were not inevitable. In January of 1989, East Germany's Communist leaders predicted that the Wall would still be standing in 50 or even 100 years. History could have gone another way. And, in some parts of the world, it did, and it has.

So, where do we stand now? As we commemorate that moment when history pierced concrete and concertina wire, we remember the troops who faced down war and kept the peace, the dissidents and activists who risked all they had to demand a free and better life, the millions of mothers and fathers,

workers and students who never lost faith that a system built on tyranny and oppression could and would be overcome.

So, we remember every citizen of every nation who helped preserve the world with the gift that we accept today. But that gift came with strings, as gifts often do. It came with the responsibility to advance the principles that were vindicated in this city 20 years ago. When the Wall came down, we could not know what the people of Europe would build in its place. And the Atlantic community confronted a cavalcade of crises and a crisis of confidence.

I well remember, following from afar, the debates over reunification: the cost, how it could be possibly accomplished. How would one ever integrate the industries, the militaries, the mindsets of peoples who had been divided by that wall? And the Euro-Atlantic coalition struggled to find policies worthy of the sacrifices made by the people of Central and Eastern Europe, and to help them build democracies on the rubble of a ruined system.

Now, ultimately and together, we achieved successes that would have been unthinkable on this night 20 years ago. And, as we welcomed the historic nations of Central Europe into NATO, and saw them become members of the European Union, the landscape of this continent was transformed.

But our history did not end the night the Wall came down. It began anew. And this matters not only to tens of millions of Europeans, and to the United States, but to people everywhere. How do we take this gift of freedom, this alliance of values, this commitment for a better future, and put it to work to meet the challenges of freedom today?

The new nations of a united Europe are our partners, standing with us in Afghanistan, patrolling waters against pirates, working to combat poverty, helping to prevent terrorism, promoting our common values. Today our battles may be different, and our nations remain imperfect vessels of democracy. But our objectives have not changed. And our work has certainly not ended.

So, we should look to the examples of the generations who brought us successfully through the 20th century, and once again, together, chart a clear and common course to safeguard our people and our planet, defeat violent extremists, and prevent nuclear proliferation, come together to cut carbon emissions and address climate change, increase our energy security -- an issue of special importance in this region that carries ramifications for the future of Europe and the world.

To expand freedom to more people, we cannot accept that freedom does not belong to all people. We cannot allow oppression, defined and justified by religion or tribe to replace that of ideology. We have a responsibility to address conditions everywhere that undermine the potential of boys and girls and men and women that sap human dignity and threaten global progress.

European countries have been leaders in addressing the economic and social development challenges of the world. We need to continue our work on an economic recovery, and we need to continue to promote

democracy and human rights beyond freedom's current frontiers, so that citizens everywhere are afforded the opportunity to pursue their dreams and live up to their own God-given potential.

When Chancellor Merkel came to Washington last week, she spoke eloquently about the walls of the last century, and the less visible but equally daunting walls we face today. These are walls between the present and the future, walls between modernity and nihilistic attitudes, walls that divide our common heart, that deny progress and opportunity to the many who yearn for both.

As one who came of age amid the barriers of oppression, Chancellor knows of what she speaks. But tomorrow, when she walks through the Brandenburg Gate, she will do so as a free daughter of Brandenburg, and the leader of an emancipated people. That moment should be a call to action, not just a commemoration of past actions. That call should spur us to continue our cooperation and to look for new ways that we can meet the challenges that freedom faces now.

We owe it to ourselves and to those who yearn for the same freedoms that are enjoyed and even taken for granted in Berlin today. And we need to form an even stronger partnership to bring down the walls of the 21st century, and to confront those who hide behind them: the suicide bombers; those who murder and maim girls whose only wish is to go to school; leaders who choose their own fortunes over the fortunes of their people.

In place of these new walls, we must renew the Transatlantic Alliance as a cornerstone of a global architecture of cooperation. When we come together to uphold the common good, there is no constellation of countries on earth that has greater strength. There is no wall we cannot topple. There is no truth we can be afraid of.

Now, as in the past, we know that the work ahead will not be quick, and it will certainly not be easy. But once again, we are called to take ownership of our future, and to affirm the principles and the sacrifice of the generations who helped us reach the milestone we commemorate. The ideals that drove Berliners to tear down that wall are no less relevant today. The freedoms championed that night are no less precious. And the rights and principles that brought us to this hour are no less deserving of our defense.

Now, some of us may not be here to celebrate the 50th anniversary. Although, if I were placing bets, I would bet on Henry.

But we must be confident that the men and women who gather on that occasion will look back on us as we look back now on them, on the generations that brought us through the Cold War, and eventually saw the blossoming of all that sacrifice during 1989.

So, let us resolve that when our actions are examined against that backdrop of history, our children and their children will be able to say that we served them well. Thank you very much.

(Applause.)

SPEAKER: As they are standing here and having their pictures taken, let me just say, Madame Secretary, thank you for that powerful and significant speech on this historic occasion. You talked about bringing down the walls of the 21st century and confronting those who stand behind them. You have carried the lessons of the past into the responsibilities of the future.

You now have standing beside you tonight's awardees, but you also have what Dr. Kissinger, the longest-serving member of the Atlantic Council Board, called "The Club," the club of national security advisors and foreign ministers who are looking out for the best of their countries and the best of the alliance, and the best of the world. We salute you all, and I declare the inaugural Atlantic Council of Freedom Awards concluded.

Hillary Clinton is the United States Secretary of State.