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The Enduring Power of Reagan’s Westminster Address

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In his compendium of *Great Speeches in History*, William Safire wrote that Ronald Reagan’s Westminster Address was included in the collection because it’s an example of “presidential oratory with prophetic power.” The address, which was delivered in the British Parliament on June 8, 1982, was certainly prophetic. Speaking not long after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, when Moscow’s power seemed to be inexorably on the rise, Reagan boldly declared that the Soviet Union faced “a great revolutionary crisis.” Its protracted economic decline, he said, was rooted in the nature of the communist system that denied people the freedom necessary for economic progress in the modern world. Calling the dimensions of the communist failure “astounding,” he famously predicted that Marxism-Leninism would end up “on the ash heap of history.”

Reagan was indeed correct in his prediction. Before the decade was over, communism had collapsed in Central Europe, and the Soviet Union then imploded two years later. But the Westminster Address was much more than presidential oratory with prophetic power. It was also a democracy manifesto that proclaimed the coming global triumph of liberty and human dignity.

Reagan laid out in the speech what he called “a plan and a hope for the long run.” He said that as “the end of a bloody century” approached, the world had reached “a turning point,” and it had become possible to think of a new era of expanded freedom. To help bring about such a transformation, he proposed launching “a global campaign for freedom” that would strengthen the prospects for democracy and world peace.

Safire said that “a great speech is made for a high purpose – to inspire, to ennoble, to instruct, to rally, to lead.” The Westminster Address did all of those things with exceptional power and eloquence. Remarkably, the Address continues to serve that high purpose today. It has enduring relevance because it evokes fundamental American values and connects them to a vision of America’s transformative role in the world. As a result, the core principles it embodies can still inform and guide how we respond to difficult international challenges almost four decades later, and in a profoundly altered political and international context.

The current global situation is starkly different from the optimistic vision of the inexorable progress of democracy that Reagan projected in the Westminster Address. The political scientist Larry Diamond has written that democracy is in the throes of a global “recession” (*Journal of Democracy*, January, 2015). In 2017, democracy advocates from around the world

issued a statement called The Prague Appeal for Democratic Renewal that opens with the dire declaration that “Liberal democracy is under threat, and all who cherish it must come to its defense.”

Democracy is threatened by authoritarian regimes like those in China, Russia, and Iran that have intensified repression at home and are projecting their power internationally with increased confidence and belligerence. Other countries like Turkey, Venezuela, Thailand, and the Philippines that were once stable democracies have become increasingly authoritarian and unreceptive to international efforts to strengthen democratic accountability. Even long-established Western democracies have been plagued by the rise of illiberal and nationalist political movements and parties. One measure of the new crisis of democracy is that political and civil rights in the world have declined for 13 consecutive years, according to the latest Freedom House survey.

The Westminster Address doesn't offer a roadmap for dealing with a crisis of this magnitude. But there are five ways that the Address continues to inspire, instruct, and inform contemporary efforts to renew democracy.

The first is that the Westminster Address remains the foundational document for efforts to aid democracy internationally. In the part of the speech that is most often quoted, Reagan said, “The objective I propose is quite simple to state: to foster the infrastructure of democracy, the system of a free press, unions, political parties, universities, which allows a people to choose their own way, to develop their own culture, to reconcile their differences through peaceful means.” It's hard to remember how revolutionary the idea of promoting democracy was in the early 1980s when these words were spoken. At the time, the foreign-policy debate was dominated by two camps - the realists, who focused exclusively on geopolitical and economic interests as well as interstate bargains; and the human rights advocates, who sought to advance moral norms that transcended state interests. Democracy promotion didn't preclude attention to such issues, but it shifted the focus to empowering people at the grassroots and challenging communist regimes ideologically. For the realists, this was irrelevant if not reckless, while human-rights campaigners worried that it politicized the defense of moral norms.

But Reagan's proposal quickly took hold, sparking the growth of programs to assist people around the world who are fighting to build democratic societies. The speech also provided the political and intellectual arguments to support such work and the core principles to guide its effective implementation.

The immediate policy objective of the Westminster Address was the creation of a new institution to advance democracy, and that objective was achieved with the establishment in 1983 of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and its four associated party, labor, and business institutes. The NED was a controversial new idea in its early years, but its budget has grown tenfold since then – from \$18 million to \$180 million - and it now supports programs in more than 90 countries, manages a renowned research center on democracy and a global network of activists called the World Movement for Democracy, and publishes the *Journal of Democracy*. In addition, democracy assistance is now a large and well-funded field of international activity. Nongovernmental democracy foundations like NED have been established in Great Britain and

other democratic countries, and many governments also provide democracy support as a component of development assistance. Even large multilateral bodies like the United Nations and the European Union now provide funding for programs that strengthen government accountability, the rule of law, and free elections.

The rapid growth of democracy assistance, along with the support of democracy promotion as a goal of U.S. foreign policy by both the Democratic administration of Bill Clinton and the Republican administration of George W. Bush, inevitably provoked a backlash by authoritarian governments and their apologists. One line of attack was advanced in the 1990s by Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Kwan Yew, who argued that "Asian Values" were inconsistent with democracy, which was a Western idea with no indigenous roots in Asia. Another line of attack emerged after the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004, when Russia's President Vladimir Putin charged that democracy assistance was really a policy of regime change with the goal of instigating "colored revolutions" in Russia and other authoritarian countries unfriendly to the U.S.

These self-serving arguments were refuted by events that reinforced Reagan's conviction that "democracy is not the sole prerogative of a lucky few, but the inalienable and universal right of all human beings." Years before Lee Kwan Yew pronounced his doctrine on the inconsistency between democracy and Asian values, millions of ordinary citizens in South Korea had brought down the military dictatorship of Chun Doo-hwan in the June Democracy Uprising of 1987. Before the end of that year, a new constitution guaranteeing basic democratic freedoms was approved in a national referendum and elections were held to choose a new president. A democratic transition in Taiwan soon followed with the election of Lee Teng-hui in 1996, and just two years later the *Reformasi* movement in Indonesia brought about the fall of the authoritarian Suharto regime and initiated a successful process of transition that also led to the establishment of an independent and democratic government in East Timor.

Less progress was made in Russia, where Putin used the argument of defending Russian sovereignty against U.S. democracy assistance to consolidate his political control and to repress civil society organizations and independent media. But the Russian democracy movement has shown impressive resilience. Mass protests were held in 2011-12 in opposition to Putin's return to the presidency; youth rallies took place in 100 cities across Russia in 2017 to protest massive corruption; and mass marches of remembrance were held throughout the country in February 2019 on the fourth anniversary of the murder of the martyred democracy leader Boris Nemtsov. The fact that many thousands of Russians have defied Putin's threats and continued to demand basic rights and accountable government is further proof that Reagan was correct when he said that "man's instinctive desire for freedom and self-determination surfaces again and again."

Reagan's vision stressing the power and dynamism of indigenous democratic actors also has had implications for the work of democracy assistance that he called for in his address. As the field expanded in the decades after 1989, the programs became increasingly bureaucratized and were often driven more by the priorities of the large donor agencies than by the needs and goals of the grassroots democracy activists and organizations whom Reagan extolled in his Address.

[A new report](#) assessing the effectiveness of European programs makes the distinction between what it calls top-down and bottom-up approaches to democracy assistance. The top-down approach supports the reform of the judiciary or other public institutions in a technocratic way and often in partnership with governments that may be only superficially committed to democratic reform. The alternative bottom-up approach responds to and seeks to empower local activists to tackle the immediate challenges they face, and to develop the capacity to pressure for reform and institutional accountability. The report recommends a “substantial strengthening of the bottom-up instruments” such as the European Endowment for Democracy, an independent arms-length organization modeled on NED that the report says has been more effective than large government programs in aiding democracy in often hostile political environments.

In effect, the report corroborates Reagan’s view that the work of aiding democracy should empower people by responding to their needs and building upon their capacity and vision. He said that “the renewed strength of the democratic movement” should be “*complemented* [emphasis added] by a global campaign for freedom,” meaning that the courage and commitment of frontline activists, and not the campaign, should be the driving factor. Such an approach is based upon the idea that democratic development is not something that can be exported, which is how some people mistakenly think of democracy assistance, but is an organic process of growth and democratic learning through which people develop the capacity over the long term to promote reform and institutional accountability. It’s not just more effective than a top-down approach of social engineering, but also more cost-effective, since it doesn’t rely on paying large numbers of outside – and expensive - technical specialists.

The second way the Westminster Address continues to inspire and instruct is that it offers a hopeful vision of democracy’s future, something that is especially needed during the present period of democratic recession and pessimism.

Reagan was not unaware of the grave threats to democracy. He said that “optimism comes less easily today,” at the end of “a bloody century” when “democracy’s enemies have refined their instruments of repression.” He was also speaking at a moment when there was widespread concern about the prospects for democracy at home and abroad. The U.S. was still reeling from the defeat in Vietnam, the Solidarity movement had just been suppressed in Poland, and the Soviet Union had invaded Afghanistan. Not long before Reagan spoke at Westminster, President Jimmy Carter had said that a “crisis of confidence” in America threatened the country’s “social and political fabric,” and Daniel Patrick Moynihan had declared on the occasion of the nation’s bicentennial in 1976 that democracy “is where the world was, not where it is going.”

Nonetheless, Reagan countered the voices of pessimism with a remarkably hopeful vision of the future. He said that “optimism is in order, because day by day democracy is proving itself to be a not-at-all-fragile flower.” He went so far as to proclaim that “around the world today the democratic revolution is gathering new strength.” Though Reagan was speaking at the very early stages of what Samuel H. Huntington was later to call “the third wave of democratization,” no one at the time could have foreseen the dramatic changes that lay ahead. According to Freedom House, the number of free countries in the world increased from 52 to 88 in the 15 years following Reagan’s 1982 Westminster Address, and the number of electoral democracies climbed to 125 by 2005, almost two-thirds of the world’s countries. This really was “the

democratic revolution” that Reagan had foreseen – the greatest and most rapid expansion of democracy in human history.

It’s very unlikely that we’re now at the threshold of a fourth wave of democratization. The negative trends of authoritarian resurgence, political backsliding, illiberal nationalism, and democratic malaise show no signs of weakening. Moreover, as Huntington wrote in *Democracy’s Third Wave*, the political, cultural, and economic obstacles to democracy in the world’s remaining authoritarian countries in the Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa, and East Asia are formidable. Nonetheless, it’s significant that despite all the obstacles and setbacks, democracy has continued to make important incremental gains in a number of countries.

In 2018, for example, surprising breakthroughs were achieved in Ethiopia, Armenia, and Malaysia, all countries with considerable influence in their respective regions. Ethiopia, which is the second most populous country in Africa with a terrible history of tyranny and repression, experienced a rapid and historic liberalization after Abiy Ahmed became prime minister on April 2, 2018. He immediately released thousands of political prisoners, opened up democratic space for civil society, freed the media, liberalized the state-driven and deeply indebted economy, and even made peace with Eritrea. To be sure, Ethiopia faces formidable challenges, with inflation at more than 15% and nearly three million people having been forced to flee their homes as a result of fighting among some of the country’s eighty different ethnic groups. But the progress so far has been breathtaking, and a successful democratic transition in Ethiopia could have ripple effects far beyond the country’s borders.

Armenia also experienced its own “Velvet Revolution” after street protests last April swept from office a corrupt and autocratic president who wanted to manipulate the constitution to retain power. In subsequent elections held in December, the party alliance of new Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan won 70% of the vote, setting the stage for building accountable and effective government ministries, reforming the judicial system, and strengthening the media as a critical watchdog over government performance. The change was so dramatic that *The Economist* selected Armenia as its Country of the Year in 2018, meaning that it had improved more in the past 12 months than any other country.

In Malaysia, the change came about as the result of an electoral revolution on May 9 that ousted a kleptocratic prime minister and his entrenched ruling party. The transition in Malaysia remains uncertain, with 93-year old former Prime Minister Mahathir bin Mohamad still holding power and seemingly reluctant to transfer power, as he had pledged during the election, to his coalition partner Anwar Ibrahim, a former political prisoner and a devoted advocate of reform and economic inclusion. Still, a transition has started, with “the delicious spectacle,” as *The Economist* put it, “of police removing big boxes of cash, jewelry and designer handbags” from the home of the ousted leader Najib Razak’s home and a high-level committee appointed with the task of investigating the massive [1Malaysia Development Berhad \(1MDB\)](#) embezzlement scandal that had sparked public outrage.

Significantly, the changes in these three countries appear to be part of a larger trend consisting of popular uprisings against corrupt and abusive autocratic regimes. [One study](#) has noted that there have been corruption-driven leadership changes in more than 10 percent of the world’s

governments over the past five years. These changes included the ouster of President Jacob Zuma in South Africa as a result of the courageous efforts by the Public Protector Thuli Madonsela to expose government corruption in two explosive reports. Occurring almost at the same moment with these dramatic changes in South Africa, Ethiopia, Armenia, and Malaysia were local elections in Tunisia that the moderate Islamist leader Rached Ghannouchi, in his keynote address to the Dakar assembly of the World Movement for Democracy, called “a landmark moment in Tunisia’s history and the realization of the promise of the Arab Spring.” As Reagan said, “democracy is not a fragile flower.”

The third way that the Westminster Address can inform contemporary efforts is that it reminds us that even the most formidable authoritarian systems have great and possibly even fatal vulnerabilities. “Any system is inherently unstable,” Reagan said, “that has no peaceful means to legitimize its leaders. In such cases, the very repressiveness of the state ultimately drives people to resist it...” While the Westminster Address was focused on the Soviet Union, Reagan was very explicit in emphasizing that his words had universal relevance. “It would be cultural condescension, or worse,” he said, “to say that any people prefer dictatorship to democracy.” When he predicted that the march of freedom would leave Marxism-Leninism on “the ash-heap of history,” he was careful to add that this is where “it has left other tyrannies which stifle the freedom and muzzle the self-expression of the people.”

The authoritarian resurgence of recent years and the resilience of the dictatorships in Cuba, China, and other countries do not contradict Reagan’s belief in democratic universalism and the inherent instability of dictatorial systems. Even in this relatively gloomy period, none of today’s authoritarian strongmen sits securely on his throne. Putin and other strongmen repeatedly warn about the danger of foreign-instigated “color revolutions.” This is an implicit admission that they fear the test of a real election that they might lose, knowing that the trigger for a color revolution would be an attempt to reverse an unacceptable result, as happened with the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004. The many repressive measures taken by authoritarian regimes – among them the crackdown on civil society, the passage of harsh NGO laws, the repression of independent media, and the attempt to bring cyberspace under government control – also show that they lack popular support and know that their rule would not survive a process of free and fair political competition.

Many of these regimes today are experiencing grave and, in some cases, systemic crises. The most obvious example is Venezuela, where the economy has imploded and millions of desperate people have fled to neighboring countries. More than 50 governments have recognized opposition leader Juan Guaido as the country’s legitimate president, while gangs of paramilitary thugs and thousands of Cubans embedded in the Venezuelan army continue to prop up the abysmal regime of dictator Nicolas Maduro. Cuba, which “is now facing its worst economic crisis since the 1990s,” according to [Carmelo Mesa-Lago](#), fears that its own survival could be endangered by the fall of Maduro, which is why it is doing whatever it can to keep him in power. Similarly endangered is the Ortega regime in Nicaragua, which has used massive force in an effort to suppress a popular uprising that erupted in April 2018.

The Islamist regime in Iran is yet another dictatorship whose survival is being threatened by economic failure and popular uprising. Since the end of 2017, hundreds of thousands of people

across the country have protested against worsening economic conditions, even as the regime has spent vast resources on foreign adventures in Syria and Lebanon and on subsidizing state-controlled Islamist institutions. Unlike the Green Revolution in 2009, which was concentrated in Teheran, the current protests have spread to more rural parts of the country and to cities like Qom and Mashhad that traditionally have been strongholds of the Revolutionary Guards. An indication of the regime's instability was [a recent article](#) published by the Revolutionary Guard's news agency Tasnim, titled "Is the Islamic Republic on the brink of collapse?" The article included an interview with Mohammad Reza Tadjik, a prominent sociologist and deputy at the Intelligence Ministry, who said that Iran is "in a traumatic situation," caused by corruption, mismanagement, and wrong-headed strategies. "Iranian society is breaking up," Tadjik said, "in a state where the past is dying and the future cannot arise, including the capacity for reform."

There has also been a revival of political unrest in the Middle East, where massive street protests have ousted Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika as well as Sudanese leader Omar al-Bashir, leading in Sudan to an agreement between leaders of the military and the protest movement to establish a new civilian government. Elsewhere in the Middle East, youth have marched for jobs and an end to corruption in Jordan. In Morocco, thousands of teachers and their supporters have marched on Rabat demanding better pay and benefits, while demonstrations in the northern Rif region have broken out demanding an end to marginalization and government neglect. The dictatorial regimes in Egypt and Saudi Arabia have used brutal repression to keep the lid on social protest, yet *The Washington Post* observed recently that these countries "are not looking stable" as they squander public resources on wasteful projects, like a new capital in Egypt costing a reported \$45 billion, and neglect the growing resentment of swelling youth populations. Almost a decade after the abortive Arab Spring, the potential for rebellion against repressive and unaccountable rulers in the Middle East is as great as ever.

The biggest test is China, where President Xi Jinping has claimed in his 2017 speech to the Communist Party's 19th Congress that China is "blazing a new trail" of authoritarian development that is "a new option" for countries seeking modernization. Xi hopes that the "surveillance state" that he is constructing, using the most advanced tools of facial-recognition technology and other digital tools to monitor and control the population, will enable China to avoid the kind of political opening that has occurred in almost every other middle-income autocracy that is not a petrostate. This is unlikely, according to Minxin Pei (*Journal of Democracy*, April 2016), because the four principal symptoms of decay in an autocratic regime are already far advanced in China: 1) The official communist ideology has completely atrophied; 2) the economy is growing at [the slowest rate in 30 years](#), eroding the regime's performance-based legitimacy and increasing its fears of social unrest; 3) official corruption is pervasive, by [the regime's own admission](#), and 4) unity within the party has collapsed as Xi has increasingly centralized power in his own hands (Susan L. Shirk, *Journal of Democracy*, April 2018).

Analyst Xi Chen has reported (*Journal of Democracy*, January 2013) that the \$95 billion the regime spent on internal security in 2011 exceeded its military budget, yet [protests](#) are spreading in China and the number of labor confrontations almost doubled to 1,700 in 2018. With the "sensitive anniversaries" of the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989 and the student protests of 1919 approaching, *The New York Times* reported that [Xi told party officials](#) that the regime

“faces major risks on all fronts and must batten down the hatches.” The Chinese regime’s deep anxiety confirms Reagan’s belief in the inherent instability of dictatorial political systems.

The fourth way the Westminster Address can guide us today is that it provides a framework for understanding why democratic political ideas and values must be part of a comprehensive U.S. policy for promoting national security and a stable and peaceful world order.

While Reagan believed that the United States and other democracies needed credible military power to counter the threat posed by totalitarianism, he also understood that preserving a balance of power was not enough to meet this challenge. “Our military strength is a prerequisite to peace,” he said at Westminster, “but let it be clear we maintain this strength in the hope it will never be used, for the ultimate determinant in the struggle that’s now going on in the world will not be bombs and rockets, but a test of wills and ideas, a trial of spiritual resolve, the values we hold, the beliefs we cherish, the ideals to which we are dedicated.” Like William Faulkner, who once said that “man will not merely endure: he will prevail” because of his indomitable spirit, Reagan understood the importance of democratic ideas in the contest between free societies and their opponents. He welcomed “the competition of ideas and values” and hoped that it could be conducted with the Soviet Union “on a peaceful and reciprocal basis.”

Many people believe that this competition had ended with the anti-communist revolutions of 1989 and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union, which brought an end to the Cold War. But the ideological struggle between liberal democracy and authoritarianism did not begin with the Cold War, nor did it end with the collapse of communism. The United States was a champion of liberal values and an opponent of authoritarianism from the moment it rebelled against Great Britain in 1776. It was a beacon of hope for 19th Century European liberals like Louis Kossuth and Giuseppe Mazzini, and it has continued to represent liberal values even after the fall of communism, when people fighting for democracy against the world’s many remaining authoritarian regimes have looked to the United States for political support and moral solidarity.

One of the people who immediately saw the new shape of global ideological competition after the Cold War was the political sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset, who wrote extensively about the idea of “American exceptionalism.” He noted in 1995 that “almost everywhere outside the older democracies, there is a democratic and an anti-democratic party, or to put it less elegantly, an American and an anti-American party. The global struggle is no longer linked to nuclear weapons or submarines, but it goes on.... America, having succeeded in the Cold War, must not abandon the field of battle in the continuing and far less costly struggle to build free societies for the twenty-first century and beyond.” (Seymour Martin Lipset, “Democratic Linkage and American Aid,” *The Washington Times*, June 11, 1995) More recently, following the global backlash against liberal democracy, Robert Kagan has written that “authoritarianism has emerged as the greatest challenge facing the liberal democratic world – a profound ideological, as well as strategic challenge...with strong nations such as China and Russia championing anti-liberalism as an alternative to a teetering liberal hegemony.” Reagan’s call at Westminster to affirm and promote democratic values has lost none of its relevance.

The fifth and final way that way that the Westminster Address can guide us today is that it provides a model of civic nationalism that is essential for the successful defense of liberal

democracy in the ideological and geopolitical battle against resurgent authoritarianism. Reagan demonstrated in the Westminister Address that there is no contradiction whatsoever between a proud American affirmation of liberal values and a commitment to democratic universalism. It was precisely because he believed that “democracy already flourishes in countries with very different cultures and historical experiences” that he wanted the United States, Great Britain, and other Western democracies to promote democratic values and institutions throughout the world. And he did so with immense patriotism and confidence. “Let us be shy no longer,” he proclaimed. “Let us go to our strength. Let us offer hope. Let us tell the world that a new age is not only possible but probable.”

No democratic leader today speaks with such confidence and conviction about the importance of democracy and human freedom. On the contrary, the United States and other Western democracies are suffering from a profound crisis of confidence that has three fundamental causes. The first is that democratic leaders and liberal intellectuals have been demoralized by the rise of populist and nationalist movements that have become a powerful and divisive force in many Western countries. Such movements are a reaction to the erosion of traditional religious, communal, and cultural institutions during a period of rapid political, technological, and social transformation. Many people feel that their identity is being threatened by cultural, generational, and demographic changes, and this has opened the way for populist political leaders who appeal to their anxieties. Kagan notes that since the “assault on traditional customs and beliefs has been launched” in the name of liberalism by what he calls advocates of “progressive liberalism,” the reaction has taken the form of an anti-liberal backlash.

The second cause of the crisis of confidence has been the rise of globalization and the bias against the nation-state of the intellectual and professional elites whose thinking dominates global institutions. According to economist [Dani Rodrik](#), their globalist mindset alienates ordinary citizens and is also analytically mistaken, since the critical economic decisions that affect their well-being are taken at the domestic and not the international level. The nation-state, he writes, is “the foundation of the capitalist order,” and the globalist mindset that weakens it will open “political paths for Right-wing populists to hijack patriotism for destructive ends.” Rodrik fears that the backlash could sweep away “not only our open global economy, but also our liberal, democratic order.”

The third cause of this crisis is the way the technological revolution and the rise of social media have affected politics in democratic societies. Writing about “The Threat of Postmodern Totalitarianism” in his introduction to a collection of articles in the *Journal of Democracy* (January 2019), Larry Diamond describes three ways that social media have a deleterious effect on democratic politics. The first is that it increases polarization by isolating different groups into their separate “social-media echo chambers.” It also undermines truth and civility, “two of the most precious requisites for sustainable democracy,” thereby degrading the culture of democracy which depends on citizens having “mutual tolerance, respect, and restraint.” And finally, it gives “wide scope to post hateful language, absurd rumors, and outrageous lies,” a tendency that has been encouraged by Russia and other malign foreign governments.

The critical question is how to preserve in democratic societies a liberal political center at a time of political polarization and a growing gulf between progressive elites that disparage

sovereignty, national identity, and traditional values in the name of global progress and universal values, and more conservative parts of the population that are drawn to political leaders who play upon their fears and encourage a reactive and malignant form of nationalism. This issue was addressed by a group of democratic intellectuals and activists who met in Prague in May 2017 and adopted the aforementioned [Prague Appeal for Democratic Renewal](#). The Appeal asserted that civic nationalism is not just compatible with liberal democracy but a necessary component of it. “While democracy embodies universal values,” the Appeal said, “it exists in a particular national context, what Vaclav Havel called the ‘intellectual, spiritual, and cultural traditions that breathe substance into it and give it meaning.’ Democratic citizenship, rooted in such traditions, needs to be strengthened, not allowed to atrophy in an era of globalization. National identity is too important to be left to the manipulation of despots and demagogic populists.”

The civic nationalism that this statement affirms is an essential feature of the Westminster Address and the spirit that Reagan brought to the issue of democratic internationalism. He affirmed a very powerful sense of identity when he asked, quoting Churchill rallying the British people against the Nazis, “What kind of a people do they think we are?” The answer, Reagan said, was “Free people, worthy of freedom and determined not only to remain so but to help others gain their freedom as well.”

We hear such words today as a faint echo from a distant and very different era. Yet they remain relevant at a time when new and very dangerous threats to liberal democracy have appeared. These threats are likely to grow in the years ahead, and at some point a leader will emerge who may once again feel the need to ask, “What kind of a people do they think we are?” When that time comes, the Westminster Address will offer a model of how to respond with eloquence and practical ideas, and with a vision that can rally people to the cause of human freedom.