

## **The United States, Poland, and the Free World**

It is an honor to be in Gdansk, a city which gave rise to the Solidarity movement that in 1980 and 1989 helped bring down the subjugation of Poland that began on September 1, 1939.

[Lech Walesa is part of that generation born in the shadow of World War and Yalta, the era of a divided Europe and the Soviet Empire. He was a leader of that Polish generation that helped bring down Yalta Europe.] I was part of that same American generation that supported Polish freedom during Soviet times and after, as Poles tried to build free market democracy and succeeded in spectacular fashion. We Americans knew, some of us at any rate, the failures of American policy that had contributed to the catastrophe of 1939 and to Yalta. We were determined to do what we could to reverse what seemed like history's verdict for Poland and Central Europe. After 1989, Poles and Americans set out to build an undivided Europe whole, free, and at peace. Together and with many others, we succeeded though not, as we hoped, for all time.

Today's generation must contend with the same adversaries that my and previous generations faced in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: tyrants who rule through force and fear and seek to subjugate other nations. Hopefully, this current generation will not repeat the mistakes of old. But we all must be wary. In the United States, some want to return to failed policies of the past: fortress America, isolationism, a rejection of the principles of the free world in favor of mere power, greed, and even empire.

The story of the US and Poland is a story of a common struggle for freedom and a common understanding that our respective national causes, our respective patriotisms, were and remain bound with the larger, universal cause of freedom, the cause of what we used to call the free world.

Tadeusz Kosciuszko understood that the cause of American freedom was connected to the cause of Polish freedom. The American Declaration of Independence – whose 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary we mark this year – grew from the principle that sovereignty is limited; that the sovereign must respect certain inalienable rights that flow from the self-evident truth that all men are created equal. Because King George III of England did not respect these rights, he had no right of rule over America. When Kosciuszko fought for Poland's independence against the armies of Tsarina Katherine, he fought both for the nations of the Commonwealth and for the principle of freedom enshrined in the Constitution of the Third of May. Kosciuszko went further than the Americans in his dedication to equality. He

objected to slavery, the great American hypocrisy. As I understand it, he also would have gone further in offering more rights to all of Poland's people.

For all the empire building on the North American continent, Americans, especially after the Civil War that ended slavery, came to understand that America's role in the world should bring together the national interest with the universal principles of freedom.

In 1918, the United States set out a Grand Strategy, embodied in President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points. This came just as America wielded its new power to achieve victory in the First World War, and as Poland and other nations of Central and Eastern Europe were poised to gain or regain their independence. That new American strategy advocated a rules-based world, with sovereignty based on consent of the governed. It included support for Poland's independence, based on its principles of self-determination rather than empire. This was a strategy for a free world, perhaps the world's first such strategy, a strategy not based on idealism alone but on a canny appreciation that the logic of empire would give way and that a free world strategy to replace it would be more sustainable, better for the world and, at the same time, good for America.

The United States did not long adhere to its new strategy. Wilson was too far ahead of American opinion. Instead, the U.S. withdrew from European security, a grievous mistake that contributed to the catastrophe of WWII. But the power of that free world strategy remained. America returned to it. After 1945, the United States put this strategy to work in the part of Europe that was still open to it.

The United States helped rebuild Western Europe. It generally contained Soviet power and stabilized U.S.-Soviet relations, including through arms control.

In strategy, you should never forget what you set out to achieve. But for a time, Americans did forget. By the 1970s, Americans fell into a resigned acceptance of Europe's division. We convinced ourselves that we must be "realistic" about the results of WWII: that the division of Europe was permanent. Henry Kissinger and Richard Nixon held that view. So did much of the U.S. foreign policy establishment. But Zbigniew Brzezinski and Ronald Reagan did not. They believed in the power of freedom, especially in the power of patriotism linked to universal values. Kissinger reflected the view of the great European conservative Metternich. Brzezinski, my professor over 50 years ago, echoed Kosciuszko's belief in the power of freedom. He and Reagan put their backs into support of Solidarity. So did George H. W. Bush.

After 1989, the United States put its renewed free world strategy to work throughout Europe, extending the institutions of the free world – including NATO - as far as the values

of Europe extended and as our power allowed. President Bill Clinton did not come to support NATO enlargement easily. It took effort. Poland helped. A lot.

The first call I heard for NATO's enlargement was from Radek Sikorski in 1992, when he was a Deputy Minister of Defense in the Olszewski government. In 1993, the editorial staff at "Gazeta Wyborcza," – holding rather different political views – also urged me to take up NATO enlargement – the next big task to secure freedom in Europe, as they and Radek Sikorski put it - when I returned to Washington in 1993 to join the NSC staff under President Bill Clinton.

Lech Walesa, along with Vaclav Havel, pushed Clinton hard and repeatedly to open NATO's doors to the newly-free Europeans. They made the case that the U.S. had but a short window to act while Russia seemed more benign and was weaker. Their most powerful argument – the argument that worked with Clinton – was the free world argument: that the U.S. could not build a free, post-Cold War order or a united Europe by extending into the future the old dividing line of Yalta, the line of the Iron Curtain. Foreign Minister Andrzej Olechowski and Polish Ambassador in Washington Jerzy Kozminski made that case repeatedly and well. The Poles, free at last, became co-authors of the free world strategy in those years.

It was not easy. Those in the American foreign policy community who had dismissed the chances of democracy in Poland in 1989 also tended to oppose NATO enlargement. Their arguments were based on the need to respect a Russian sphere of influence in Europe or, at least, respect Russian sensitivities about losing its empire in Europe. Those of us who supported NATO enlargement succeeded, with Poland's help. By the mid-1990s, when the Washington debate about NATO enlargement was at its height, Poland was delivering all good news: stable democracy and rapid economic growth. That was political capital, political gold, for those of us making the case that now was the moment to undo Yalta Europe in favor of free world Europe.

President George W. Bush also embraced that free world strategy. His first trip to Europe in 2001 included a visit to Warsaw, where he made the big speech of that trip. Bush presented his version of the U.S. free world strategy, in Poland, with (I may now reveal) input and advice from Poles such as Jerzy Kozminski. Bush then personally decided and convinced NATO to invite the three Baltic Countries and four other Central and East Europeans at NATO's 2002 Prague Summit.

A generation has passed since, and during that time Europe enjoyed its longest period of general peace since Roman times, along with unprecedented prosperity and democracy, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, with Poland the outstanding example. Poland was a poor country in 1989. It no longer is.

Many Americans thought that our work to build a united, free Europe was done.

We were wrong. The 20<sup>th</sup> century's deadly combination – aggressive dictators and inward looking, disengaged democracies – is back. Russia seeks to conquer Ukraine as the next step in rebuilding Empire. If it succeeds, it will not stop there. Europe is under threat and, as before, East Central Europe is the most vulnerable part of Europe.

The U.S. was slow to see the gathering storm.

President Clinton understood that Russia could fail in its Western aspirations and return to repression at home and aggression abroad. Clinton designed NATO enlargement partly as a hedge against that possibility. He also tried his best to support Russia's brief attempt at democratic transformation under President Boris Yeltsin. That experiment failed. Presidents Bush, Obama, and Biden all tried to work with Putin's Russia, without sacrificing America's free world strategy, and with diminishing expectations each time.

All failed. So did European leaders, especially French President Macron and German Chancellor Merkel, who invested a lot in relations with Putin's Russia. They failed because, ultimately, Putin's conditions for good or even stable relations with the West were those that no Western leader, at least so far, could accept: a free hand for Russian repression at home and Russian aggression against its neighbors.

Putin had accepted NATO's enlargement in 2002 to the Baltics and four others (Slovakia, Slovenia, Romania, and Bulgaria). Putin recoiled, however, at the Color Revolutions: Georgia's Rose Revolution in 2003 and Ukraine's Orange Revolution in 2004-5.

Putin believed that these pro-Western, pro-democracy movements had been orchestrated by the U.S. They had not; the U.S. did not see them coming and scrambled to respond. At the time of the Color Revolutions, the Bush administration still sought to maintain constructive ties with Putin's Russia, despite its deepening authoritarianism at home.

Putin's speech in February 2007 at the Munich Security Conference was seen at the time, rightly in retrospect, as his break with the West. But the Bush administration initially tried to play down Putin's speech.

Still, President Bush continued his effort to enlarge the circle of the West. With support from the UK and Poland, he pushed hard for NATO to offer "Membership Action Plans" to Ukraine and Georgia at the April 2008 Bucharest Summit. This effort failed, famously, due to opposition from the French and especially German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

That failure might have satisfied Putin, who was in Bucharest for the next day's NATO-Russia Summit. Instead, however, Putin responded with a speech that laid a territorial claim to Ukraine's Crimea province. Putin's remarks alarmed me, and alarmed Polish national security advisor Mariusz Handzlik, sitting next to me during Putin's speech. We both knew what that Kremlin threat meant. But the Bush Administration as a whole did not take Putin's threat against Ukraine seriously.

Putin seemed to take NATO's division over Georgia and Ukraine, and the lack of a strong U.S. response to his threat against Ukraine, as opportunity.

Four months later, Putin invaded Georgia. Polish President Lech Kaczynski warned from Tbilisi that Kremlin ambitions would not stop there.

The Bush team now realized that their "dual track" approach - working with Russia while bringing more newly-free countries into a wider Europe - would not hold. The Russo-Georgian War marked the first attempt by Putin to restore by force Russian dominance over countries that emerged from the Russian and Soviet empires.

In a September 2008 speech, Rice made a stark assessment of Russia's war against Georgia. But the Bush team had no time left to develop a new policy. The Obama team, starting in January 2009, assumed that Bush had been too hard on Putin and sought, famously, to "reset" relations with Russia.

The Obama team was content with the status quo in Europe. Almost immediately, Poles from across its divided politics, started warning that Obama was failing to recognize the growing danger from Russia. The Poles, again, were right.

Obama's approach to Russia could have worked if the status quo was sustainable. But Ukraine's aspirations for freedom and prosperity clashed with Putin's ambitions.

Under Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich, Ukraine was neutral and no longer pursued NATO membership. But the EU was popular among Ukrainians who were tired of corruption and economic stagnation. They looked to Europe for a better future. Yanukovich promised to negotiate a modest "Association Agreement" (not membership) with the EU. That might have satisfied Ukrainian public opinion.

But, under Kremlin pressure, in the fall of 2013 Yanukovich rescinded his promise to sign the deal. Protests erupted in Kyiv on Maidan Square. Yanukovich, again under Putin's pressure, used force to quell them. They grew. In February 2014 Yanukovich fled the country.

Putin invaded Crimea within days, fulfilling his threat from 2008. Putin's second war of imperial restoration had begun.

Obama's reaction was mixed: his team allowed sanctions against Russia to go forward but would not provide Ukraine with arms to defend itself. Obama's team believed that arms to Ukraine would only escalate the situation. I and others in the administration tried to argue otherwise but we lost. Obama would not engage in direct diplomacy to reach a settlement, offloading that job to the French and Germans, who failed.

The Obama team, to its credit, did reverse the U.S. military drawdown from Europe that started in the early 2000s: The U.S. deployed a combat brigade to Poland (on rotational basis) and led NATO to deploy battalions to the Baltic countries, and to Poland and Romania.

The Trump I team that came after continued sanctions and offered Ukraine modest military support, but its signals to Russia were mixed, even more than Obama's.

Biden drew much of his strategic thinking from the Kennedy Administration: like Kennedy, Biden believed in the free world; also, like Kennedy, he worried about escalation with the Kremlin. In 2021, President Joe Biden's team sought "stable and predictable" relations with Russia, a modest goal.

Putin responded by preparing a full invasion of Ukraine. The Biden team reacted with greater strength and, in effective fashion, warned Ukraine and the world and prepared powerful, new economic sanctions.

When Russia launched its full-scale war against Ukraine in February 2022, the Biden team provided Ukraine with arms and tactical intelligence, both critical, but they hesitated to provide more sophisticated arms, moving up the arms ladder only slowly. While the Biden team's initial sanctions against Russia were strong and effective, it hesitated to move against Russian oil revenue that could have delivered a major blow to Russia's economy.

The Biden team did, however, like Obama, increase U.S. military presence in Poland, Romania, and the Baltic states, indicating that it was prepared to defend NATO territory.

The second Trump administration has behaved with far less consistency.

To its credit, it went further than the Biden team to push for a settlement. Trump has, at his best moments, suggested the outline of a settlement that could work: a ceasefire roughly in place plus security for Ukraine, with Europe in the lead and the U.S. in a critical back-up role. The details of such security arrangements have been worked out, though not finalized, thanks in part to the participation of the U.S. SACEUR General Alexis Grynkewich.

But the Trump team, despite priding itself on its ability to pressure other countries, has not put its back into achieving its own declared policy objectives in Ukraine. The Trump team has weakened sanctions enforcement and until last fall had not introduced new economic pressure against Russia despite multiple targets. Its sanctions against Lukoil and Rosneft – introduced last fall - were strong and effective. But the U.S. administration has lifted sanctions on Russian oil sales due to the war with Iran, as Russia's economy was showing more signs of stress. The Trump administration has nearly stopped granting arms to Ukraine, agreeing only to sell them, even resisting spending funds that Congress has appropriated.

Worse, Trump has sent mixed signals about U.S. commitment to help Ukraine, claiming that Ukraine is losing, has “no cards,” and should bow to Russian demands. At the same time, Trump has returned to his attacks on NATO, casting doubt on U.S. willingness to defend its NATO allies.

Putin, aware of all this, continues to insist on victory, including Ukraine’s surrender of all the Donbas, as his condition for a ceasefire. He has expanded Russia’s aggression to target NATO countries, including sabotage, attacks on infrastructure, overflights, and drone incursions.

Russian aggression for the sake of empire has returned, just as Walesa and Havel warned Clinton. Putin may see opportunity in the return the return of isolationist, nationalist, inward-looking politics on both sides of the Atlantic but especially in the United States, in parts of Trump’s administration and parts of his wider political coalition that is skeptical about a free world strategy and would abandon Ukraine.

This policy turn has roots in American history. America’s isolationism in the 1920s and 1930s followed Americans’ perception of overreach and disillusionment after WWI. Similar views emerged after the frustrating wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the economic stresses of the 2009 Great Recession and the recession during COVID.

The Trump Administration – and the larger Trump World inside and outside government - is a loose coalition of often mutually-inconsistent groups that fight for influence.

Some are Reaganites prepared to support Ukraine and the cause of the free world. They have the support of the many Democrats who have rediscovered their inner Harry Truman.

Some are Asia firsters, recalling a variant of the isolationists of the 1930s who were indifferent to Europe but put priority on countering the Japanese threat then and China’s challenge now. For them, every dollar and weapon sent to Ukraine or devoted to NATO’s collective defense is a waste of resources that should be flowing to the Indo-Pacific.

Some in Trump World and beyond call themselves “restrainers,” by which they seem to mean that Ukraine properly belongs to Moscow’s sphere of influence and that the U.S. has no real strategic interests there. This group recalls the Nixon and Kissinger view: tacitly and sometimes openly, they seem to hold that East Central Europe or the Baltic countries rightly belong under Moscow’s influence.

Some in Trump World define America First as the exercise of power disconnected from values, as *machtspolitik*. They have no use for strategy based on principles or values, or

abstractions like freedom. But they do have respect for interests derived from business opportunities privileged access to raw materials, or they seek to consolidate a fortress North America, perhaps by annexing Greenland.

Trump's own convictions are hard to place. His rhetoric has reflected most of these groups as they swirl around the Oval Office vying for access and influence. But Trump seems most attached to strategy based on hard, immediate, material interests – owning land or resources. At the worst, President Trump has sometimes suggested that the U.S. will not respect its NATO Article 5 commitments. For such language I will make no excuse. But such expressions of attitude may not be the final word.

The swirl of policy options and seething debate in Washington brings frustration and the danger of bad strategic choices. But the worst is not yet written. When I was a policy practitioner, I did not ask myself whether I agreed with all the elements of this or that strategy coming from the political leadership that I served. I would instead consider how to work within a given strategic framework to attain a decent result roughly consistent with the core values of the American Republic as I understood them. Today, in the later phase of the Trump presidency and what may be the final years of the Trump era, I can discern a path ahead consistent with those values.

Most in Trump World and Trump himself have insisted that Europe do more to provide for its own defense. In this they are right. And they have won the argument. Key European countries have launched a long-delayed and urgently-needed rebuilding of their military strength, borne of a realization, at last, of the danger from the Kremlin. U.S. ambassador to NATO Matt Whittiker and Under Secretary of Defense Bridge Colby have both spoken of an effective NATO based on stronger European military capability and responsibility for its own defense.

Once again, Poland is in the lead both in its perception of the threat and in dealing with it. Poland has amassed political capital in Washington. It is well regarded both in Trump World, from the neo-Reaganites to the neo-isolationists, and among Democrats, many of whom have rediscovered their inner Harry Truman. As before, Poland may help Washington think through its strategic options.

The question for Poles and Americans who adhere to a free world strategy is where we want to be on the other side of whatever it is we are now going through. That goal seems clear enough; we should aim for a stronger transatlantic alliance, a stronger NATO, on the basis of a much stronger defense contribution from Europe and a commensurately greater

European voice. We should support Ukraine now, when its chances of halting the Russian invasion and weakening Russia through strategic attacks are greater than they have been in some years.

I believe that Poles – with what I understand are its parallel transatlantic and European strategies - can help us get there, working as Poles did in the 1990s with and on their American colleagues.

Poland is again on the frontier of war. This time, it is strong and part of the institutions of the free world.

The U.S. is wrestling once again with its responsibilities and which version of its interests to pursue: either the strategy of the free world from Wilson through Truman to Reagan; or something lesser that would reduce the U.S. to a mere grasping power jostling with Putin and Xi in a darker world.

America faces tests abroad and at home. Its free world strategy hangs in the balance. Yet, to quote Frederick Douglass, the escaped slave turned great abolitionist writer and orator, “I do not despair of the country.” One hundred years ago, on the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of American independence, millions of Poles signed a document thanking America for its role in advancing Polish freedom. Now, on the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of American independence, Poles are helping us find our way back to our best traditions.

Let us, Poles and Americans, learn from our failures and our many successes, and take inspiration from our first common effort, recalling the time when Tadeusz Kosciuszko, in the name of shared values and mutual freedom, helped save the American cause. For your freedom and ours indeed.