



Barack Obamas tale ved Copenhagen Democracy Summit

Taler

Barack Obama
Fhv. præsident og medstifter
af The Obama Foundation

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Thank you. Thank you. Well, thank you, Sahra-Josephine, for that introduction, and the extraordinary work that you are doing. And I want to thank my old friend, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, for hosting me and our extraordinary Obama Foundation leaders here today. It is wonderful to see all of you and I'm confident that there have been extraordinary discussions that have been taking place since this conference began.

As we meet, Ukraine obviously weighs heavily on our hearts and minds. We've all witnessed the terrible suffering in a war that recalls Europe's darkest history. But we have also witnessed the Ukrainian peoples' heroic resistance to Russian aggression. They've united to defend not just their sovereignty, but their democratic identity, and their actions have rallied much of the world behind the values of self-determination and human dignity. It's inspiring.

Because of the courage and because of this solidarity on display, Vladimir Putin is failing to achieve his aims inside of Ukraine and beyond. NATO has stepped up and has grown stronger. Finland and Sweden are seeking swift accession. Countries have welcomed displaced Ukrainians with open arms. Meanwhile, Russia is cut off from resources and revenue, and many of its best and brightest have left, a blow to its present, but also to its future.

So we should take heart from Ukrainian resolve and from renewed transatlantic solidarity, and I know that's been discussed at this conference. These are signs of hope amidst despair. But make no mistake: this war is far from over. The costs will continue to mount. The course of events, as Anders and I discussed before we came out, are hard to predict. And our support for Ukraine must remain strong, steadfast and sustained until this conflict reaches a resolution.

Now, while Ukraine properly commands our immediate attention, it's also important to recognize that Putin's lawlessness is not happening in isolation. As I'm sure previous speakers have noted, on every continent, we are seeing democratic backsliding. On every continent, emboldened autocrats are ramping up oppression, they're targeting minority groups, they're often flouting international law. Just as disturbing, within democracies, populist appeals grounded in fear and bigotry and resentment, have elevated leaders who, once they're in office, have sought to systematically undermine democratic institutions and entrench themselves in power. In my own country, the forces that unleashed mob violence on our Capitol are still churning out misinformation and conspiracy theories.

For those of us who fervently believe in the ideals of democracy, the question is: How do we respond?

If nothing else, recent events should shake us out of complacency. There was a trend after the fall of the Berlin Wall, a sense that history was inevitably going to usher in a democratic world. Well, we've been reminded that democratic practice, democracy is neither inevitable nor self-executing. Most of recorded history is a chronicle of violence, and ignorance, and conflict; of strong nations subjugating weak nations, of groups using tribe, or race, or gender, or religion to justify dominion over others, to grant land and territory and resources. Sometimes they do it just because they can. Democracy, by contrast, has for most of human history been the anomaly. And in a relatively small period of time, in fits and starts. Through revolution, struggle, and sacrifice, democracy took hold in a few places, and then began in fits and starts, to spread, elsewhere in the globe. That expansion has helped contain some of humanity's baser impulses. But those instincts, those impulses were never eliminated, nor were the old structures of privilege and exploitation that they produced.

So the point is, if we want democracy to flourish, we will have to fight for it, we will have to nurture it, we will have to demonstrate its value, again and again, in improving the lives of ordinary people. And we will also have to be willing to look squarely at the shortcomings of our own democracies, not the ideal, but the reality of our own democracies. Only then will we be able to tell a better story of what democracy can be, and must be, in this rapidly changing world.

Now, for some of us, certainly those attending this conference, particularly those of you with gray hair like me, the virtues of democracy may seem obvious. For those generations scarred by successive World Wars, it was clear where dictatorship and master race theories and religious intolerance, and rampant nationalism could lead, because we'd seen it here in Europe and elsewhere in the world, with bombed out cities and broken lives, as many as sixty million dead worldwide during World War II, Auschwitz, Stalin's gulags. For the Allies who emerged victorious, the goal was to prevent a repeat of such tragic history. So they built institutions to check unbridled power and to protect civil society and to foster pluralism. And they realized, well, if we're going to fight this battle, maybe we have to fix some of the things in our own democracies and make them more representative, make our hypocrisy, the gap between our words and our deeds, less obvious. Internationally they erected a multilateral system to reinforce international norms, recognize universal rights, and encourage the peaceful resolution of disputes.

As imperfect as these institutions were, most people during this period understood, to paraphrase Churchill, that democracy beat the alternatives. Two cheers for democracy. The notion was that democracy might not prevent every foolish war, but it made them less likely. Democracy might not end poverty and racism, but it could make things better. And, in fact, progress was real. But it was also incomplete.

That was a long time ago. I'm now 60, and it happened before I was around. Most of the people alive on the earth today don't have that as a reference point.

Today, abstract appeals about democracy won't persuade the jobless youth on the outskirts of Paris, may not persuade families in Northern England struggling to pay the bills, or the displaced workers in the former factory towns of the American Midwest. And they barely register with the hundreds of millions of people trapped in poverty around the world.

A few weeks ago, I met with some young leaders who'd just completed one of our Obama Foundation programs. We were in New York City. One of the participants was a remarkable young African who built an organization that expands educational opportunities for underserved youth, and he asked me a question. He said, "President Obama, how do I answer my peers who argue that democracy in our country has failed to deliver? Everywhere, we see corruption,

poverty, a lack of progress, despite election after election. When my peers look at China,” he said, “they see a model of orderly advancement and material improvement in peoples’ lives. So even if it means restrictions on some freedoms, isn’t that worth the trade-offs?”

Instinctively, I pointed out that the same system in China that his friends were praising now had let millions die of starvation and produced the chaos of the Cultural Revolution. I told the young man that he was too young to remember what life was like in his own country, before democracy came, that there had been a brutal civil war that also resulted in the death of millions, chronic corruption and then strife under subsequent military regimes. So I told him, “You need to broaden your lens,” and he listened politely. What was he going to do? Maybe he was even moved by my arguments, but you could tell he didn’t think his peers would be, at least not until those arguments were accompanied by measurable changes in their lives, where they live, in the here and now, not by reference to what happened 30 or 40 or 50 years ago.

I’m convinced some version of this conversation is taking place right now in every country and on every continent. I’m also convinced that, for us to win that contest of ideas between those of us who believe in democracy and those who are convinced that older ways of doing business are better, in that contest of ideas, it won’t be enough to just say what we’re against. We have to describe clearly what we are for. It won’t be enough to reaffirm a creaky status quo, to just put a new coat of paint on the existing order, because the fact is, that order has been shaken at its foundations by globalization, financial crisis and social media, by rising inequality and mass migration, and climate change and a multi-polar world. If we are going to fortify democracy, if democracy is going to thrive and not just survive in a few pockets on the map, we are going to have to rebuild our democracies and our institutions, so they work better for more people for this new age.

Now, I’m not here to offer a ten-point plan. I’m no longer running for office. (Laughter.) Also, I don’t have all the answers. Mainly I’m not here to offer a ten-point plan because I want you to hear from some of the young leaders we work with. (Cheers, applause.) This is their friends and support group. (Laughter.) I thought we were going to drink later. (Laughter.) Did you guys get an early start? (Laughter.) What I do want to do, though, before I bring them out, is I want to just spend a few minutes sketching, in very broad strokes,

some of the work that I believe lies ahead.

To begin with, we need to be clear that democracy is about more than elections. Most of us understand this, but I think we really have to continually focus in on this because we have seen, time and again, how the machinery of elections can be twisted to serve the interests of despots.

I believe a genuine democracy must be rooted in the core principle that all persons, regardless of their race, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, physical capacity, economic status — all persons have an inviolable dignity and worth, and that they are entitled to a say in how they are governed and deserve equal treatment in the eyes of the law. That to me is a core principle of democracy. (Applause.)

There was a time — and the reason that it's important for us to say this is because there was a time, a long time — when countries could claim to be model democracies, despite the fact that they maintained effective caste systems, racial caste systems, religious caste systems, gender caste systems. They treated people differently, but they said, “Oh, we're model democracies.”

No more. No democracy is perfect, and injustice is embedded in every society, we can acknowledge that, but any system of government that calls itself a democracy, while codifying injustice, violates the very essence of the word.

That's a core principle at the center of the democratic project, and this core principle has to be operationalized, yes, through free and fair elections, but also through institutions that guarantee basic rights like the freedom of speech and assembly and the ability to practice one's faith.

It needs institutions that ensure the equal administration of justice and promote transparency and establish a process to resolve differences and transfer power peacefully. That's what we mean by true democracy, a system in which “We the People” includes all, and not just some, citizens. Now, within that, the particulars of any nation's constitution, political process, administrative machinery may vary based on custom or tradition, but I believe that the pursuit of the deeper value must be our North Star.

By those standards, some democracies are doing better than others. Collectively,

we're all falling short. To build stronger democracies and beat back this trend towards authoritarianism, we will all need to raise our game, and I'd suggest we focus on four broad areas.

Number one, for democracy to flourish, we need to develop models for a more inclusive and sustainable capitalism.

I believe in market economies, not just because they're more efficient and more innovative than other systems, so far devised, but because, when properly structured, they're compatible with freedom. Scandinavian countries including Denmark demonstrate that.

But I also believe that the version of capitalism that has come to dominate the global economy has also come to corrode democracy. When you have trillions of dollars move around the globe, in the blink of an eye, outside the control of any sovereign country, far-flung mega companies operating beyond the reach of national regulation or oversight or tax collection, without regard for their impact on local communities or workers, and unconstrained by any values other than their quarterly shareholder report, that's a lot of power outside of democracy.

We have to acknowledge, economically, this globalization has made products cheaper, increased interdependence, it has helped drive rapid development in some countries, most notably China. But it has also driven income inequality to levels not seen in generations. In wealthy countries, it's amplified the loss of bargaining power for workers, it's stunted wage growth, it's reduced the status of workers, maybe for all but a narrow band of people in the knowledge professions.

For some poorer countries, the shift towards automation and relentless foreign competition has actually made it harder to develop viable local industry and expand a fledgling middle class, and there's been a constant brain drain of educated and skilled workers.

And while China has emerged as a big winner in the globalization sweepstakes, using export-driven strategies to lift a huge swath of its population out of poverty, it's come at the price of increased, steady repression and control of its people, and a more aggressive nationalism on the world stage, especially as

growth slows and the Chinese government may find it harder to meet peoples' rising expectations.

Now, these aren't conditions where democracy is likely to thrive. When people feel economically insecure, when they feel the game is rigged, anger mounts, resentment builds. When democratic governments can't respond to these frustrations, partly because they don't have control, over the tax revenues or the regulatory capacity to deal with the major players in the economy, people grow cynical towards their leaders and the political system that produced them.

When the gap between rich and poor widens, further and further, then fellow citizens share fewer experiences. The rich people are behind the gate somewhere, and the poor people are outside, and their kids are not going to school together, and they're not feeling invested in each other. Well, people feel fewer obligations, and social trust declines.

And in the absence of solidarity, people are more likely to turn to populist appeals from strongmen who offer someone to blame, whether it's immigrants or minorities or foreign powers or shadowy elites or opposition parties or even democracy itself.

So if we want to strengthen our democracies, we have to pay attention to economics, and we need to make the global economy more responsive to workers, families, communities, and representative governments. Some of this work on labor protections or corporate governance, on tax policies that reduce inequality, and investment where it's needed, some of that will happen at a local or national level.

Other strategies, like ending global tax avoidance and combating kleptocracy, require international cooperation. But our objectives should be clear: reducing the wealth gap, expanding middle classes, restoring peoples' sense of control over their own livelihoods, making private companies more accountable. We want them to make a profit, but also more accountable for the common good. That's number one.

Number two, we need to revitalize our political institutions so that peoples believe that participation is worth the effort.

In too many democracies, politics feels like a distant and increasingly irrelevant enterprise. Some of that is by design, by the way. In my own country, for example, we have what's called a filibuster rule in the United States Senate that has effectively made it almost impossible for either party, even when they have a majority, to get anything substantial through the Senate and passed and signed into law.

At a certain point, people start wondering, why bother?

We have governments making it too hard to vote, a lot of governments who make it difficult to see why your vote matters. The powerful seem to have more access. They act with impunity. Over time, the people and their elected representatives break down.

So every democracy has to take basic steps to restore confidence that democracy is working the way it's supposed to, like protecting the right to vote, ensuring that vote is counted equally and transparently, holding the powerful to account when they bend the rules or break the law, ending the scourge of dark money that so often corrupts our politics.

More than that, democracies need to redesign governments so that they can deliver better results. In some cases, that means stripping away bureaucracy and red tape, even when it's well-intentioned, which makes government unable to move on major initiatives. In the United States right now, building infrastructure, like mass transit or road projects or an airport, it costs like two or three times more than it does here in Europe! And in some cases, it means pushing more decision-making to the local and regional level, so we can road test new ideas to solve problems and build bridges between those in power and the people that they're supposed to represent, an issue here in Europe that has to be paid attention to. The bottom line is that people care about democratic process, but they also want results.

Third, we need to spend more time and energy building a democratic culture.

Those of us who promote democracy, we're often progressive. We focus a lot on policy. We see politics and governance as pluralistic negotiation between competing rational, self-interested actors. That's not what moves people in the world. Emotions matter. Stories matter. People care about meaning and

purpose and belonging and status. And in this age of uncertainty and polarization, we've seen the loss of many of the stabilizing foundations in peoples' lives, whether its neighborhoods that are disrupted or religious, cultural or civic organizations that are atrophying. Often, it's authoritarian leaders who understand this, and those of us who believe in democracy struggle to catch up. We avoid what in the United States we call "culture wars" because we want to focus on tax policy. But those emotions are powerful and they're legitimate. Purpose, meaning, connection. Those things do matter.

Now, I want to be clear, I have little sympathy for reactionaries who cynically condemn identity politics or cancel culture when really all they're doing is trying to preserve existing privileges, or excuse entrenched injustice or bigotry. I mean, the original identity politics is racism and sexism and homophobia, and that's nothing if not identity politics, and it's done a lot more harm than some tweet from an aggrieved Liberal.

But what is also true is that, if we're going to strengthen democracy, if we want to encourage pluralism and civility and self-governance, we have to embrace and restore a language of mutual respect that speaks to peoples' need for belonging, that they care about the traditions they come from, they care about the places they come from. They want to feel proud about who they are. And that's easier to do in homogeneous countries; it's harder to do as countries become more diverse.

So my point is, a big part of strengthening democracy is not just about politics and policy; it is about culture. And we have to embrace that. We have to expand the civic education that we provide our children and give them practice to live in a democracy. We have to create organizations that give them experience in working with people who are different, and exercise their civic muscles. We need to create platforms that encourage a willingness that nudge people and incentivize people to extend good faith to those who are not like themselves, or don't think like themselves, a politics that is inclusive rather than exclusive. This is both ethically sound and a practical necessity, something that leaders Gandhi, and King, and Mandela understood. There's a reason why Nelson Mandela really focused on South African rugby, when he was released. He was sending a signal to those who had imprisoned him for 27 years, that I'm not here to take away your traditions and your identity, as long as you make sure they are compatible with my dignity and respect for my people. (Applause.)

We need to find ways to build that kind of solidarity and forge connections with people, so that they don't push us away. That doesn't mean we have to indulge traditions that don't live up to our core principles of equality and human dignity, but it does mean that we need to use language that affirms the best of existing national, religious, and culture and ethnic traditions, rather than make arguments that make people feel like they have to abandon all aspects of their past. We can reckon with our darker histories without asking people to reject their own identities. Indeed, progress is about doing the work of perfecting our unions, not repudiating the possibility of a union.

Finally, as we do all these things, we have to take steps to detoxify our discourse, particularly the scourge of disinformation and conspiracy theories, and hate online that has polluted our political discourse.

Now, I spoke about at length about this at Stanford University, in the spring, but I'll just reinforce a few key points. Technology companies have to accept a degree of democratic oversight and accountability. Profit can't be the only driver for platforms who have acquired power once reserved for nation-states. And while no human endeavor can eliminate human fallibility, we can actually make these things better. These technologies and platforms were made by human beings; human beings can make them work better.

I look forward to doing more work in the months to come to lift up and put forth new ideas around technology and the other areas that I just mentioned, because these are the areas where we all have to do better. It's going to determine the fate of our democracies, whether they stick, whether they get stronger, or whether they continue to get weaker.

But, although I'm ready to volunteer and sign up, and work with existing groups and organizations that are focused in these areas, I want to underscore — I'm probably not going to be the main driver of solutions at this stage, nor are many of us in this room, who already — I won't say are passed our primes, but we have gone through — run through positions of power. Because we need to build democracy for the future, not the past.

And what gives me hope is the promise and potential of the next generation of leaders who are coming up, young people who understand that the future of

democracy, and in fact, the very planet that we live on, hangs in the balance. These young people are ready to do the work, and many of them are already deeply engaged in the project of rebuilding our democracies.

That's who Michelle and I are supporting at our foundation, and that is why I'm so glad to be joined by just a small sampling of our extraordinary Obama Foundation leaders from all across Europe, who gathered here today. If you can all please welcome, Tudor, Federica and Selvi. Come on up.

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