

Remarks on Signing the Human Rights and Day of Prayer for Poland Proclamations

December 10, 1982

I have before me, as I'm sure you know, two documents that speak to freedom, and especially to Polish freedom. And their contents, particularly at this time -- because Monday marks the first anniversary of the repression of Polish freedom by the military government there. And this repression, carried out under intense Soviet pressure and using tactics of brute force and intimidation, has sparked anger and sadness throughout the world.

No people were more saddened and more angered than those who share with the Polish people close and enduring ties of blood, tradition, and affection -- the people of the United States of America. Before the tragic crackdown by the military authorities, the American people watched with approval and growing excitement the democratic gains that were won by Solidarity. We observed with awe and admiration the courage of political [Polish] workers as they sought to reclaim the right to self-government and their nation's ancient heritage of liberty. All this they did peacefully, without shedding one drop of blood.

These days of light and hope are over, and the cold night of repression has descended on Poland. But despite the threats, the provocations, and the imprisonments, the spirit of independence and resistance to tyranny, a spirit that's characterized the Polish people for more than a thousand years, still burns brightly in Poland today. It is the fervent hope of the American people that that spirit will again, someday soon, enjoy full expression. It is the fervent hope of the American people that the Warsaw authorities will realize -- and sooner, rather than later -- that continued repression can only prolong the political alienation and economic stagnation that characterizes Poland today.

In recent months we've seen partial steps taken toward this recognition by the Warsaw authorities -- Lech Walesa and a number of other internees released. We welcomed the release of these people, and of course, we hope that the Polish Government will take other actions necessary to genuinely transform the existing climate of repression in their country.

In introducing sanctions against Poland last December I noted that those sanctions were reversible, and this remains the case. But I cannot and will not remove the sanctions until the Polish Government shows with its actions that it intends to live up to the obligations it assumed when it signed the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Helsinki Final Act.

Reports reach us that further steps in this direction may be taken by the Polish Government in the coming weeks and months. I will stress today the United States is prepared to respond to genuine liberalizing actions by the Polish Government. Any such actions will be the subject of careful discussions with our allies. And I repeat, if the Polish Government introduces meaningful liberalizing measures, we will take equally significant and concrete actions of our own. However, it will require the end of martial law, the release of political prisoners, and the beginning of dialog with truly representative forces of the Polish nation, such as the church and the freely formed trade unions, to make it possible for us to lift all the sanctions.

The United States can only respond to deeds, however, and not to words. We're not interested in token or meaningless acts that do nothing to fundamentally change the situation in Poland today -- or to replace one form of repression with another.

As I've often said, the United States Government and its people are deeply concerned about the plight of the Polish people. We will continue to supply humanitarian aid to them through such voluntary and private relief agencies as the Catholic Relief Services and CARE. Furthermore, as I stated last December 23d, if the Polish Government will honor the commitments it has made to human rights, we in America will gladly do our share to help the shattered Polish economy, just as we helped the countries of Europe after both World Wars.

As a further sign of affection and solidarity felt by the American people toward the Polish people, I am signing today these two proclamations. The first is a Bill of Rights, Human Rights Day proclamation that takes particular note of the current tragedy of Polish freedom and reminds Americans and millions of people all over the world the fate of freedom in Poland affects the fate of freedom everywhere. Through the proclamation, we remember today the Polish people, the millions of others who struggle against the brute force of despotism, and all those who seek freedom and self-rule.

Our nation was conceived in liberty, and we have always understood that the fate of our own freedom is tied to the fate of freedom in the world. The flourishing of liberty, democracy, and constitutional government is the goal of this administration as it is the greatest wish of Americans and that Americans have for all peoples of the world. We pray that we'll all come to enjoy what we consider our greatest treasure -- freedom.

Second, I'm signing a proclamation asking Americans to join together Sunday in solidarity with the Polish people and to pray for ultimate success in their quest for freedom.

Lech Walesa long ago spoke of the wheat that grows on the stones, of how freedom sometimes grows from repression, how repression only serves to strengthen the determination of those who live in the darkness of tyranny to someday be free, and the ideals and heroism exemplified by the Polish people and the members of Solidarity. The world has seen splendid affirmation of the desire for human freedom that springs from deep religious faith.

On Sunday, let us pray with confidence -- confidence that wheat will someday grow on the stones in Poland and the other suffering lands under the brutal repression of today will be remembered only as a prelude to times of freedom and peace and independence. This Sunday let us remember the cause of freedom, and let us, with the Polish people and all oppressed peoples everywhere, remind ourselves of the words of Isaiah, ``They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings as eagles. They shall run and not be weary."

And I shall now sign these proclamations.

[The President signed the proclamations.]

And I understand that someone is placing a cross of flowers on Kosciusko's monument in commemoration of the first anniversary of martial law. And I know that -- [inaudible].

[At this point, the President presented 11-year-old Basia Piasecki with flowers to place at the monument. Members of the audience then sang the Polish song ``May You Live 100 Years."]

I have said this before -- you know, I didn't realize until just a few years ago, but when I did realize it, I was filled with mixed emotions and a feeling of challenge that we have to meet -- that our own national anthem is the only one I know that ends with a question, ``Does that banner still wave o'er the land of the free and the home of the brave?" We must always be able to answer that question affirmatively.

Note: The President spoke at 9:40 a.m. in the East Room at the White House. Attending the ceremony were Polish Americans and Members of Congress.

<http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1982/121082a.htm>