

Remarks at a Dinner for Former Members of the Office of Strategic Services

May 29, 1986

Well, I'm delighted to be here tonight, and of course I'm greatly honored. I appreciated it very much -- the one note that you did read. I happen to be in complete agreement with one citizen of the United Kingdom who approached me -- we didn't know each other at the time of the economic summit in London -- and he said to me, "Margaret Thatcher is the greatest man in England." [Laughter] By the way, I asked if this dinner was going to be black tie and was told, "No, trenchcoat." [Laughter] And then I asked Bill Casey where the dinner was going to be. And he said, "Leave the White House, go to 17th and K, and wait for the phone to ring." [Laughter]

But seriously, it is a great honor to receive this award from all of you. But it seems to me we have this award-giving a little backward tonight. I can't think of a more distinguished gathering than this one, nor can I think of any group whose accomplishments and devotion to country makes them more worthy of accolades and praise. And yet it's precisely that praise and those accolades that you decided to forgo when you chose a twilight war, a secret profession, a profession where praise and thanks can only come from history and not from your contemporaries. And it's because secrecy has been your business that you all know how vital it is to your nation's safety and freedom's survival.

"The necessity of procuring good intelligence is apparent and need not be further urged," General Washington wrote to one of his colonels in 1777. "All that remains for me to add is that you keep the whole matter as secret as possible. For upon secrecy success depends in most enterprises of the kind, and for want of it they are generally defeated, however well planned and promising." Well, even then, Washington seems to sense that this business of secrecy does not come easily to us Americans. We're rightly regarded as a candid and open people who pride ourselves on our free society. And yet our secret services, our spies and intelligence agencies -- from Nathan Hale to Midway, from OSS to CIA -- have not written just a striking, stirring chapter in our history but have often provided the key to victory in war and the preservation of our freedom during an uneasy peace.

And that's why I'm delighted to be here tonight. None of America's intelligence agents have inspired and protected their nation more than the men and women of the OSS. I cannot attempt to recount tonight the individual deeds. Bill Donovan, for example, what a remarkable man he was -- a member of the "Fighting 69th" in the First World War, a winner of the Congressional Medal of Honor, a one-man intelligence service in the thirties and forties, an American legend. And then there was the dedication and heroism of so many other OSS officers, from guerrilla leaders like Jim Kellis, Joe Alsop, and Carl Eifler to the strategists and planners like Dick Helms, Ned Putzel, and Bill Casey. All of this has been spoken of now in the many volumes about the secret war you waged 40 years ago.

So, tonight I join you to honor the memory of Bill Donovan and all the veterans of OSS, those who heard no bugles and received no medals, but who struggled and sacrificed so that freedom might endure. Let me say to each of you tonight what the American people would have said 40 years ago had they known your story. Let me say to each of you tonight what every living American would say if he or she had the chance: We honor you. We salute you. We thank you for a job well done. And yet it's not enough just to thank or salute you for the past, because Bill Donovan's and the OSS's contributions have continued in the postwar era. For more than half of the CIA's existence, that agency's leadership has been in the hands of OSS veterans -- the names are Dulles, Helms, Colby, and Casey. And so, too, I know each of you has continued to work for the cause of freedom since the end of World War II and especially the preservation of America's intelligence capability. You know better than most how important that capability is.

I think all of us can feel grateful that in the last few years that capability has seen a renaissance; indeed, the revitalization of an intelligence community is among the things we celebrate here tonight. And, yes, it's true this administration has given unstinting support to that effort. And let me assure you, that will continue. And while there are many who have made a vital contribution to that effort, I think all of you know who the linchpin is. A few years ago in his book, "Piercing the Reich," Joseph Persico described a young OSS officer. "A man," he said, "with boundless energy and competence. A man with an analytical mind, tenacious will, and a capacity to generate high morale among his staff. He delegated authority easily to trusted subordinates and set a simple standard -- results." In every job he's held in government ever since, as Under Secretary of State, Chairman of the SEC, and now as DCI, that OSS officer has, by the end of his tenure, left even his harshest critics singing his praises. His name is Bill Casey. He has been your leader, he's our leader and good friend and surely one of the heroes of America's fight for freedom in the postwar era.

So, tonight, Bill Casey, your President and the veterans of the OSS salute you. And in saluting Bill Casey, we salute all those past and present who carry on the twilight war against totalitarianism. In your citation you speak of this administration's commitment to a forward strategy for freedom. And sometimes the question has been asked: What do we mean by this? Is this a return to John Foster Dulles? Are we preaching rollbacks? So the evidence -- got ahead of myself there. I would say to you, the phrasing of the question itself is wrong, for it contains an assumption there that the march of communism is something unavoidable, that those who stand in its way are trying to throw back the forces of history.

Well, look around the world today. More than 90 percent of the people of Latin America are living in democratic nations or nations moving toward democracy -- a striking change from only a few years ago.

Many Asian and European countries are rejecting statism, moving toward the free market and democratic institutions. And then there is the revolution among the intellectuals, where statist and totalitarian ideology is now passe. And we're seeing anti-Communist insurgencies in many parts of the world. So the evidence is there; freedom is on the march. Our forward strategy for freedom means simply that we recognize this: that freedom today is a gathering tide, one that will soon engulf even the driest desert patches of totalitarian rule.

The truth is this: "The march of providence is so slow and our desire so impassioned," Robert E. Lee said once, "the work of progress so immense and our means of aiding it so feeble, the life of humanity is so long, that of the individual so brief, that we often see only the ebb of the advancing wave and are thus discouraged. It is history that teaches us to hope." Well, as we look at secret events in the light of postwar history, we can see that hope everywhere we look and turn. And it's not just us alone. Think how those must feel who only a few years ago despised us for what they saw as our weakness and staked their fortune on our doom. I think in particular of one man who is a symbol of much that was wrong with our world. How uneasy must be the Moscow nights of Kim Philby as he sees the new will, vigor, and energy of the West, and especially the renaissance of our intelligence services. How he and others like him must realize that it was those they betrayed who are on the winning side after all.

We pray God that it will be so, that the struggle against totalitarianism will end in freedom's triumph, perhaps even in our own lifetime. But whether we see that day or not, we're confident that it will come. And when it does arrive, historians will look back to moments like this and to people like you, to the veterans of the OSS, and say as the ancients said of their heroes: Here were the brave, and here their place of honor.

Thank you, and God bless you.

Note: The President spoke at 6:50 p.m. in the International Ballroom at the Washington Hilton Hotel after receiving the William Donovan Award in recognition of his service to the country. William J. Casey was Director of Central Intelligence.

<http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1986/52986c.htm>