

Administration of Barack Obama, 2011

The President's News Conference With Prime Minister Donald Tusk of Poland in Warsaw, Poland

May 28, 2011

Prime Minister Tusk. Mr. President, ladies and gentlemen, before the visit of President Barack Obama, I learned that Ralph Waldo Emerson was your favorite American thinker. And certainly at the time I tried to search for some association, some quotations, some connections. And out of all these ideas, the one that talks about enthusiasm—that nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm—it seems to be especially fit for our way of understanding the world.

When I was thinking about our understanding of the world, I'm thinking about both of us as people, but first of all, about our nations and about our states. I want to tell you that Poland today is the place where we have lots of enthusiasm. We have gone through the previous years, the difficult, critical years, also in the global dimension, with a faith in our own power, our strength. And it's faith and enthusiasm that allow us to overcome the difficulties. It is also the effect of our cooperation.

You Americans have invested in Poland. But you have invested also in the whole region and with lots of your enthusiasm. Some money too; some other types of assistance habitually works. But just as enthusiasm was needed to create the great Solidarity movement in Poland, it was also needed when, except for enthusiasm and freedom, we had nothing else in 1989. But people with the enthusiasm and freedom are enough when you have friends. You have invested in the region, and it works.

We talked, amongst others, about Enterprise Fund that brought so good results in Poland. But that investment was actually the investment in freedom and the related prosperity for 100 million people, because today we are speaking about Eastern Partnership, we are speaking about our cooperation that could help those nations and those people in the region that are waiting for their chance, their opportunity, and their freedom.

Mr. President, I want to say what we say in Poland quite often: It works. When friends are ready to help, when people have enthusiasm, and when there is freedom, then it really works.

And the fact that Poland today can speak with so much pride about ourselves on the eve of the Presidency in the European Union, that we were also able to show to Europe how to manage, how to operate also under the conditions of the financial crisis, it was possible, amongst others, thanks to the fact that we together have invested in our future with so much of American and Polish enthusiasm.

I want to tell you—and this is what we declared during our conversation—that our experience, the certainty that it worked, can be translated, and we can translate this. And we do this when we think about those nations whose leaders you met yesterday, but also those who are waiting for freedom and democracy for even longer. I am speaking here about the region of North Africa and some of the countries of the Middle East.

So I'm really very happy that together we were able to accept this ambitious project so that the experience resulting from Enterprise Fund and other experiences that Poles and Americans could implement together give to those who are waiting for such assistance.

I also would like to thank you very much for understanding and your kind approach to the idea of another stage of this cooperation, which is an innovation fund. And this is the idea which came into being during our conversation. Both of us think that there will be the follow-up of this innovation fund, which here in Poland will also give the results in the form of the modernity, new technologies, and human intellectual capital.

We have been already operating in this area. We have been spending dozens of millions zlotys for education of the most skillful managers at American universities, people of technical skills, engineers. And I think that it will also bring results for the future.

We have reconfirmed our solidarity also in the context of our joint operations in the most difficult places of the world. We spoke about Afghanistan. For Polish security, it is important that the memorandum on the presence of the American air detachment in Poland systematically, gradually is becoming a fact of life, and I would like to thank you very much for your readiness to finalize the project.

And shale gas, well, for obvious reason, it was an—a subject of important talks—and nuclear power. We agreed with President Obama that these undertakings, it's really an excellent area for Polish-American cooperation. And I am sure that it will bring good results. To the Polish people, American people, it will be both joint business and joint common energy security. And it will also be of use to a united Europe, this cooperation that will also give to Europe more stability in terms of energy.

I would like to thank you once again, Mr. President, and well, your visit has another help because your enthusiasm and your ability in the future is proverbial in the world, and we feel in Poland that you are one of us, thanks to the fact that we believe very strongly in our own strength and our future.

Thank you.

President Obama. Thank you very much, Mr. Prime Minister. Once again, I just want to thank you and the people of Poland for the extraordinary welcome that I've received since I arrived. And I have to tell you that my wife Michelle and the girls very much want to come back, because I've told them on the phone what a extraordinary country this is.

And you're right, in some ways I am part of Poland because I come from Chicago, and if you live in Chicago and you haven't become a little bit Polish, then something's wrong with you.

You know, Poland is one of our strongest and closest allies in the world and is a leader in Europe. And I believe that Poland's story demonstrates how a proud and determined and enthusiastic people can overcome extraordinary challenges and build a democracy that represents the great strength and character of this nation, while now serving as an example for Europe and the world.

During our conversations, we reaffirmed the strength of our alliance. Our alliance is rooted in shared history, shared values, deep ties among our people. Our alliance is cemented through NATO and the ironclad commitment that Article 5 of NATO represents.

Of course, our alliance is also rooted in shared interests, and we, during our lunch, reviewed a wide range of issues. I wanted to congratulate Poland on behalf of the United States for reaching the incredible milestone of assuming the Presidency of the European Union. This is Poland's first opportunity to take on this leadership role since joining the EU, and it speaks to the incredible progress that Poland has made both politically and economically during this

period of time. And we look forward to working closely with Poland as it assumes these new responsibilities.

Along those lines, we are interested and excited about Poland's plans for the Eastern Partnership as a priority of its EU Presidency. And I understand that it will host a summit this fall to raise awareness and support for Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus. And the dinner that I had yesterday was an indication of Poland's leadership in helping to shape a vision for the region that continues down a path that offers more opportunity and more prosperity to people. And obviously, one of the important roles that Poland can play is not just as a promoter of ideas, but as a living example of what is possible when countries take reform seriously.

We're also aiming to expand our bilateral economic relationship with Poland, as the Prime Minister mentioned. Poland's economy was the only economy in the EU not to fall into recession during the economic crisis and has enormous potential for economic growth. So far, we'll—as a consequence, this fall we will hold a high-level U.S.-Poland business roundtable, which brings together private and public sector leaders to identify and promote new opportunities to boost economic growth. And the idea that was raised by the Prime Minister about a potential innovation fund that is a part of this fall summit I think is an excellent idea, and so we're going to pursue that actively.

We also discussed the potential for us to cooperate on a wide range of clean energy initiatives, including how we can, in an environmentally sound way, develop natural gas in both the United States and Poland and how we can cooperate on the technology and science around that.

The United States is also fully committed to supporting safe nuclear power generation in Poland, and we're prepared to offer our expertise of the largest and safest nuclear power industry in the world.

And finally, we discussed the issue of how jointly we can promote democracy. The session that I had this morning with democracy promotion experts, including many of the founders of Solidarity, who recently traveled to Tunisia to share their advice and assistance, is just a symbol of why Poland is so important. It has gone through what many countries want to now go through and has done so successfully. And so the United States wants to work with Poland, and we welcome their leadership in reaching out to North Africa and the Middle East.

At the same time, as Prime Minister Tusk mentioned, here in this neighborhood, we still have challenges. We discussed in particular the unacceptable situation in Belarus. President Lukashenko has shown a total disregard for democratic values, the rule of law, and the human rights of his own people. And his brutal crackdown included the conviction and sentencing of Presidential candidates who challenged him in the Presidential election and the repression and imprisonment of members of the free press, including one of the Polish press.

So since this crackdown has begun, Poland and the United States have coordinated closely on Belarus, both bilaterally and through the EU. We appreciate Poland's leadership on this issue, including the strong support of Belarusian civil society and the generosity to its people. We are looking forward to strong cooperation on this front.

Last point, I guess, I will make, we discussed our respective relationships with Russia. And I am a strong believer that the reset between the United States and Russia has benefited this region, as well as the United States and Russia, because it's reduced tensions and has, I think, facilitated genuine dialogue about how each country can move forward.

We very much appreciate Poland's pragmatic approach to their relationship with Russia. I applaud the Prime Minister for his determination to continue these efforts, even if it is not always the most politically popular thing to do.

We both believe that we cannot compromise on our most cherished principles and ideals, but we should also seek to cooperate where we can, for example, in areas like counterterrorism, counternarcotics, the spread of nuclear weapons and materials, and the support of our joint operations in Afghanistan.

So this has been an excellent visit. It's fitting that I conclude my trip here in Poland. At each stop, I've affirmed the fact that America's transatlantic alliance is the cornerstone of our engagement in the world. It's indispensable to the peace and prosperity of the world. It helps to uphold the principles of rule of law and individual liberty around the world. And I think that Poland is a leader on all these issues.

So congratulations, Mr. Prime Minister, for your outstanding leadership. And to the Polish people, thank you so much for your incredible hospitality.

Thank you. Thank you, sir.

Moderator. Thank you very much. And now I would like to ask—[*inaudible*—]from the Polish Press Agency.

Visa Waiver Program/Energy/Belarus

Q. Good afternoon. We know that the American administration plans to liberalize the visa system for the Polish people. What are the ideas? When can they come into force? In other words, when people of Poland will be able to do shopping at Fifth Avenue in London—in New York, certainly?

And the second question is, how do you see the cooperation in the area of energy security between Poland and America, and between America and the European Union? And my third, last question is, did you talk about political repressions in Belarus, amongst others, the arrest of a journalist of *Gazeta Wyborcza*, our daily, Andrzej Poczobut?

President Obama. Well, I'm going to try to remember all those questions. [*Laughter*]

With respect to the visa issue, this is a topic that was brought up by your President when he visited the White House. And I promised at that time that we would begin to try to find a solution.

The problem has to do with the existing law that had a very specific criteria for who gets the waiver visa system, and that criteria was based on the rejection rate of visas. Poland didn't qualify under that law, and I can't—I could not simply waive the law. But what I've now done is put my support behind legislation in Congress that would change the criteria so that we're looking at the overstay rate of visas, and our expectation is, is that by this change in the law, we can be in a position to resolve this issue in a way that is satisfactory to Poland, but also meets the security concerns of the United States.

We very much want you to shop on Fifth Avenue and anywhere else in the United States. [*Laughter*]

With respect to—see, I've already forgotten the other questions. [*Laughter*] There was Belarus, energy—

Q. [*Inaudible*]

President Obama. As I mentioned earlier, we had an extensive discussion about both shale gas and nuclear power. I think Prime Minister Tusk and I both believe that it is important for us to diversify our energy sources. The United States doesn't want to be energy independent on anybody, and Poland doesn't want to be energy dependent on anybody. And what that means is, is that there have to be a broad set of energy approaches.

Shale gas is an important opportunity; it has to be developed in a environmentally secure and sensitive way. We believe that there is the capacity technologically to extract that gas in a way that is entirely safe, and what we want to do is to be able to share our expertise and technology with Poland in a fully transparent and accountable way, because we think that consumers, environmentalists, everybody should be able to look at the data and say this is something that can actually work.

With respect to nuclear power, similarly, we have to do it in a way that is safe and secure. Obviously, all of us are mindful of what happened in Japan. And we have a great track record and enormous expertise in the United States of developing nuclear power in a way that is safe and secure. And we are happy to consult with the Polish Government and have our companies consult with the Polish Government in terms of how to approach that.

That does not eliminate the need for us in both countries and all around the world to continue to develop other clean energy sources like solar, like wind, biomass. And we are putting a lot of basic research dollars into this clean energy space because we think it's going to be important not only for our individual countries, but for dealing with greenhouse gases and climate change.

And the final point, with respect to Belarus, we had, as I indicated, a very extensive conversation. I am familiar with the case of the journalist that you just mentioned, and we agreed that we have to apply as much pressure as we can on Belarus to change its practices. And that's going to require close coordination between the United States and Poland, but also between the United States and all of Europe. And I think Poland is uniquely situated during its Presidency to be able to show extraordinary leadership on this issue.

Prime Minister Tusk. One sentence only for me to refer to the three issues raised by you. As far as the last one is concerned, I stated with satisfaction that our views are one hundred percent aligned. There is no future for such dictatorships as the one which is represented today by Lukashenko in Belarus.

Both the United States and Poland will be ambitiously setting forth a trail or just the road for conduct for the international community so that the Belarusian people did not have to pay too high a price and for too long a period. I also informed President Obama and—about our interpretation of the events in the Belarusian economy.

Talking about the victims of the regime, including our journalists—whether your journalists or our journalists and your colleague, Mr. Poczobut—already President Komorowski and myself too both informed President Obama about this particularly Polish problem.

Talking about visa waiver and Fifth Avenue, what is and what should be important in Poland is that more and more Polish people make enough money to be able to afford shopping on Fifth Avenue. And that means that it is in the interest of the United States to make sure that as many Polish people as possible could get not just the shops on Fifth Avenue, but all over the United States in the easiest possible way. Because this is the business for both parties.

I want to already say, Mr. President, that there are many other places in the world where you can buy things and where you can spend your money, so I'm really very glad that there are very clear signs and your personal engagement, Mr. President, in this, and this will most probably also let American people to make more money on Polish tourists and Polish buyers.

Talking about energy security, this is a breakthrough moment. And I'm not talking about our conversation here, but it is simply that reconfirmation of the fact that we are approaching, or that we are participants of the energetic breakthrough. It's not really joking anymore or kidding. We are speaking about technological cooperation. We are talking about joint investments. And we are talking about political cooperation of the two nations, out of which one is an absolute leader in the area of technology, and the other one, Poland, turned out to be one of the leaders in terms of deposits, resources.

That is why it was with a great satisfaction that I received the words of the United States that in the United States, well, people think very seriously about cooperation. We want to combine our ideas about innovative cooperation and technological cooperation with the sectors that will be cooperating in real terms with each other. It's mainly about power sector.

And we also want to reconfirm the full will of the Polish party to be fully open in the area of nuclear power. American people will be a very valuable partner to us as a country, which is really experienced and with good will.

White House Press Secretary James "Jay" Carney. For the American press corps, Scott Horsley of National Public Radio.

Role of North Atlantic Treaty Organization in Poland's Security/Missile Defense System

Q. Thank you. Mr. Prime Minister, can you tell me if Poland today feels reassured about the U.S. commitment to Poland's security and if, coming into this meeting, you felt that reassurance was required?

And, Mr. President, you've talked a lot this week about inspiration: inspiration in Northern Ireland for the Middle East peace process, inspiration in Eastern Europe for the Arab Spring. I wonder if you take home with you also some cautionary lessons about the challenges in the experience here and in Northern Ireland and what you can do as President to maintain that Emersonian enthusiasm at a time of fiscal austerity in the U.S. and Europe?

Prime Minister Tusk. Well, these were my first words during the meeting with President Obama. I spoke about the security of Poland. The security of Poland has different dimensions. People every day feel safer and more secure if they do not have to pay too high prices. This dimension of security will be achieved by us when we have energy independence and when both of us act effectively for stability and peace in different regions of the world.

Risk, danger, high living costs—they are born where conflicts are born, while speculation feeds on unrest and war. And that's why this dimension of security of both Poland and the United States requires our cooperation so that we could stabilize the situation in the world, especially in the regions which are really very much suffering from the conflicts.

Talking about the direct security of Poland, I have to tell you that it is a very important sign for us to reach an agreement which will be finalized by the signing of the memorandum of understanding, the memorandum that in the future will mean the presence of American troops on the Polish soil. The order of magnitude is not really large, but the gesture is very significant.

Secondly, we spoke about the future of the installation, the so-called missile defense. The product of President Obama informed also public opinion in—well, in Poland long time ago. And I want to stress very strongly that the words that I heard from him today give us this sense that together we work also for the sake—for the purpose of Polish security. These words, that NATO is to defend NATO, these words are very much binding, binding for all the members of NATO. And I also wanted to thank for these words.

Definitely after this meeting, with our—with absolutely pure conscience, I can tell you that our cooperation with the United States, both bilaterally and within NATO, leads to the fact that every year, Poland becomes a country which is more and more secure. And our political cooperation, as was mentioned by President Obama, leads to the point when, perhaps, never in the future we will have to use arms in this part of Europe.

Both of us focused very much on political methods of conflict resolution and solving threats, and I believe that this is the best way to guarantee security to Poland. But you know, you have to be cautious, and you have to be ensured. That is why we always speak also about the military aspects of security.

President Obama. Just a point about security. As I said, Poland is one of our closest and strongest allies. That's been demonstrated time and again. Really what we did here today was simply to reconfirm what Prime Minister Tusk and I have discussed before, which is that NATO is the strongest alliance in history, primarily because it has a very simple principle, and that is, we defend each other. That's what Article 5 is all about.

And when I came into office, I indicated to all the NATO members that there's no such thing as a new NATO member or an old NATO member, there are just NATO members. And everybody is the same, and everybody has the same rights and the same responsibilities. And as a consequence, one of the things that I initiated was making sure that we have actual contingency plans for each country, including those in Eastern Europe and Central Europe that obviously are coming out of a fairly recent and difficult history of security issues.

Now, as Prime Minister mentioned, that evolution of our security relationship continues to evolve. The aviation detachment that is being finalized will be significant, and we're proud that we've gotten that completed. Our missile defense plans that we have laid out that involve Poland will allow us to deal with shared threats. And what we want to do is to create an environment in this region in which peace and security are a given. That's not just good for this region, it is good for the United States of America. And we will always be there for Poland.

Now, I wasn't sure, because it was such a clever question, what exactly cautionary notes you wanted me to address. Were you referring to cautionary notes about what's happening around the world? Were you talking about cautionary notes and any reflections I have about what's taking place back home? So I want to make sure I answer your question.

U.S. Foreign Policy/U.S. Role in Promoting Democracy and Development

Q. The endpoint in Northern Ireland—I said the endpoint in Northern Ireland and Eastern Europe is a happy endpoint, but in terms of the process, the length of time, the obstacles, the challenges, the patience that was required, if there's something you learned on this trip that you take home that maybe gives you some thoughts about how you will approach that as President and maintain the interest in a country where our attention spans are short and our resources are limited.

President Obama. I think it's an excellent question, and this has been something that I've been reflecting on throughout this trip.

Keep in mind what the purpose of this trip was from my perspective. In addition to reestablishing a wonderful conversation with strong friends and allies, I wanted to make sure that everybody in our country, but everybody around the world, understands that the transatlantic alliance remains a cornerstone, a foundation stone for American security.

We share ideals, we share values, and we have taken on consistently leadership on some of the toughest challenges that face the world. And part of that leadership has always been the promotion of freedom and democracy in different regions.

I was struck by something that the president of the Senate—or the head of the Senate here in Poland mentioned during our democracy forum, that he had lived through three waves of revolutionary transformation in his lifetime. He saw the shift from military rule to democracy in Latin America. He saw those changes then take place with incredible speed when the Berlin Wall came down and the Iron Curtain was pulled asunder. And now he's seeing what's happening in North Africa and the Middle East.

And in each of these cases, what you have is a process that's not always smooth. There are going to be twists and turns. There are going to be occasions where you take one step forward and two steps back; sometimes, you take two steps forward and one step back.

What's required, I think, is, number one, understanding that you have to institutionalize this transformation. It's not enough just to have the energy, the initial thrust of those young people in Tahrir Square or the initial enthusiasm of the Solidarity movement. That then has to be institutionalized, and the habits of countries have to change.

It's not sufficient just to have elections. You then also have to have a process to establish rule of law and the respect of the rights of minorities and a constant vigilance when it comes to do with freedom of the press and freedom of speech and freedom of religion. And you have to then broker a whole set of potential ethnic conflicts that may arise, and sometimes those may flair into violence.

So part of the lesson is that you have to institutionalize change. And that is a hard process, and it's a long process.

Number two is that countries on the outside cannot impose this change, but we can really help. We can facilitate. We can make a difference. And the testimony of, I think, the people that I've spoken to here in Poland—as is true when I had conversations about the resolution of the Northern Ireland conflict—was that American participation, American facilitation of dialogue, our investment in civil society, our willingness to do business, our openness to ultimate membership in international institutions like NATO—all those things made a difference. It solidifies, it fortifies people's impulse that change is possible.

And so to the American people, even at a time when we have fiscal constraints, even at a time where I spend most of my day thinking about our economy and how to put folks back to work and how to make sure that we're reducing gas prices and how we stabilize the housing market and how we innovate and adapt and change so that we are fully competitive in the 21st century and maintain our economic leadership, I want the American people to understand we've got to leave room for us to continue our tradition of providing leadership when it comes to freedom, democracy, human rights.

And in the dinner last night, I thought something very interesting was said. These are Central European leaders and Presidents from all across the region. One of them said, "There were those who said we could not handle democracy, that our cultures were too different. But America had faith in us. And so now we want to join with America and have faith in those in the Middle East and in North Africa. Even if some don't think that they can handle democracy or that their cultures are too different, our experience tells us something different."

And I think that's a good lesson for all of us to remember. And I think that Poland can play an extraordinary role precisely because they have traveled so far, so rapidly, over the last 25 years.

We're looking forward to being a strong partner with them because when we work together, that's a force multiplier. The more we have strong leaders like Poland working alongside us, the more successful we can be in dealing with North Africa and the Middle East and encouraging the best impulses in that region. And that's going to be good for all of our security.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President's news conference began at 2:30 p.m. at the Chancellery Building. In his remarks, the President referred to President Aleksandr Lukashenko and opposition Presidential candidates Vladimir Neklyae, Andrei Sannikov, Vital Rymasheuski, Nikolai Statkevich, and Dmitry Uss of Belarus; and President Bronislaw Komorowski and Speaker of the Senate Bogdan Borusewicz of Poland. Prime Minister Tusk, a moderator, and a reporter spoke in Polish, and their remarks were translated by an interpreter.

Categories: Interviews With the News Media : Joint news conferences :: Poland, Prime Minister Tusk.

Locations: Warsaw, Poland.

Names: Borusewicz, Bogdan; Komorowski, Bronislaw; Lukashenko, Aleksandr; Neklyae, Vladimir; Obama, Malia; Obama, Michelle; Obama, Natasha "Sasha"; Poczobut, Andrzej; Rymasheuski, Vital; Sannikov, Andrei; Shatkevich, Nikolai; Tusk, Donald; Uss, Dmitry.

Subjects: Afghanistan : U.S. military forces :: Deployment; Arms and munitions : Nuclear weapons and material :: Nonproliferation efforts; Belarus : Democracy efforts; Belarus : Human rights issues; Belarus : Polish journalist, detention; Belarus : President; Budget, Federal : Congressional spending restraint; Civil rights : Minorities :: Minority rights and ethnic tolerance; Commerce, international : Global financial markets :: Unrest; Defense and national security : Missile defense; Economy, national : Strengthening efforts; Egypt : Democracy efforts; Employment and unemployment : Job creation and growth; Energy : Alternative and renewable sources and technologies :: Promotion efforts; Energy : Foreign sources; Energy : Gasoline, oil, and natural gas costs; Energy : Nuclear energy :: Safety and environmental issues; Environment : Climate change; Europe : President Obama's visit; Europe : Relations with U.S.; Foreign policy, U.S. : Civil and human rights, promotion efforts; Foreign policy, U.S. : Democratization; Housing : Housing market :: Strengthening efforts; Immigration and naturalization : Visa policy, U.S.; Immigration and naturalization : Visa Waiver Program; Ireland : Relations with Northern Ireland; Japan : Nuclear power plants in Fukushima; Legislation, proposed : "Secure Travel and Counterterrorism Partnership Program Act of 2011"; Middle East : Democracy efforts; North Africa : Democracy efforts; North Atlantic Treaty Organization; Poland : Afghanistan, Polish military forces, deployment; Poland :

Counternarcotics efforts, cooperation with U.S.; Poland : Counterterrorism efforts, cooperation with U.S.; Poland : Energy cooperation with U.S.; Poland : Energy, alternative and renewable sources and technologies; Poland : European Union, Presidency; Poland : Nuclear energy, cooperation with U.S.; Poland : President; Poland : President Obama's visit; Poland : Prime Minister; Poland : Relations with Russia; Poland : Relations with U.S.; Poland : Security cooperation with U.S.; Poland : Speaker of the Senate; Poland : Trade with U.S.; Poland : Tunisia, role; Poland : Visa policy, U.S.; Russia : Relations with Poland; Russia : Relations with U.S.; Tunisia : Democracy efforts; United Kingdom : Northern Ireland :: Relations with Ireland.

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