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H.E. Bronisław Komorowski, President of the Republic of Poland

On Wednesday September 24, 2014, Columbia's World Leaders Forum and the Harriman Institute welcomed His Excellency Bronisław Komorowski, President of the Republic of Poland. His remarks offered an interpretation of the history of Polish-US relations and the role of Poland in Europe and the world. For the most part, he discussed freedom and his hope that Poland can be a model and a guide to other countries struggling to attain it. "Polish freedom is a form of commitment to the freedom of others," he said.

Before entering politics, Komorowski was a dissident and a publisher in the underground press movement in Communist Poland. After Poland wrested itself from Communist control, he rose through the ranks as a member of parliament, a minister of national defense, and Marshal of the Sejm—Poland's lower house of parliament. He became president in 2010, following the death of President Lech Kaczyński in a plane crash.

Komorowski opened with an anecdote from his time in prison as a dissident. One cellmate, Janek, identified him as a political prisoner and joked, "remember this: we are also for freedom. When we get out, we should highjack a car and drive to America." Komorowski paused, then said, "He didn't even know about the Atlantic Ocean, but he knew that America represented freedom."

Komorowski explained that Poland and the United States have been engaged in a continuous dialog since the American Revolution, when the Polish nobleman Kazimierz Pulaski, a brigadier general in the Continental Army, died fighting the British in Savannah. "Poland adopted the world's second democratic constitution, after the United States and before France," he said, implying that the success of the American Revolution had engaged what he later called the "natural Polish feeling for democracy."

The connection between the United States and Poland is not just political; there has always been a natural affinity between the populations. Drove of Polish immigrants fled to the United

States, because "Poland disappeared from the map of Europe" and "could not be free," but the Polish people "found freedom in the United States during our occupation," said Komorowski. He listed the successive occupying forces: Russia, Prussia, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Nazi Germany, and the Soviet Union.

Komorowski lamented Poland's position at the end of World War II. "The West felt it had won. Russia felt it had won. But for Poland, this was not a time of freedom. The Iron Curtain went down on the Elba River, and we were behind it." In the midst of Soviet oppression, the Polish people fought back. Komorowski described his own work in the underground press, insisting that Polish dissident writing was livelier and more widespread than the famous *samizdat* in the Soviet Union. He said that his generation, which came of age in the 1970s, "had rejected armed conflict and decided not to use force. We would build our own structures underground." Even then, he said, the underground press had a global focus. He edited a journal called ABC (Adriatic/Baltic/Caspian), which focused on freedom and democracy in the eastern Soviet bloc. "You could see how *alive* [the underground press] was, and how *optimistic* it was."

Just as Poland had helped America attain its freedom in the Revolutionary War, America, in turn, helped Poland become free in 1989, Komorowski emphasized. He described Poland's mission in the world, insisting that Poland is a strong ambassador for regional freedom because it "tore [its] freedom from enslaving powers with its nails and teeth." Poles can help in a way that other people, who have had it easier, cannot. Poland has reconciled with Ukraine and Germany, its historical aggressors, and "it is worthwhile to reconcile with Russia," he added. "But, it takes two to tango."

In the question-and-answer session, Komorowski elucidated the complexity of US-Polish relations. He described Poland's long fight to become part of NATO—a move that NATO

was reluctant to make. “No one wanted us in NATO until Russia began to murmur,” he said. “It is not that someone *gave* us NATO—we had to fight.” He also expressed some frustration at the United States’ strict visa regime, stating that it stems from a stereotype. “We are not coming to take American jobs. We can get jobs in the European Union,” he said.

Although Komorowski admitted that Poles did sometimes take a negative view of the world and that Poland had historically seen itself as a

victim, he described a newly optimistic Poland, in which “Poles feel better in their own situation and history.” Poland has been quite a success story, he said, and “America likes listening about success. But,” he cautioned, “our success was achieved at great cost.”

*Reported by Matthew Van Meter
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