

Trump's Defense of Western Civilization Echoes Warnings of Historians

By Jim Kelly
July 10, 2017

In last week's speech at the Warsaw Uprising monument, President Donald J. Trump explained how Poland is an example for those who "seek freedom and who wish to summon the courage and the will to defend our civilization." The President used the well-received speech to remind the world how, through four decades of communist rule, Poland and other nations in Europe endured a brutal campaign to demolish their freedom, faith, laws, history, and identity. In the process, he echoed the features, challenges, and hope of Western Civilization described by two of the twentieth century's great "meta-historians": Arnold Toynbee and Oswald Spengler. The parallels between President Trump's speech and the works of these respected historians suggests that his concerns and ideas are built on a strong and durable foundation.

Early in his remarks, President Trump movingly observed how the Polish people, following their liberation from Soviet occupation, asked not for wealth or privilege, but, at a Mass celebrated by Pope John Paul II, sung the words "We Want God."

The British historian Arnold Toynbee believed that, if the people of the West were to no longer make use of the human faculty for spiritual contemplation, they would forfeit their birthright of being human. But he expressed hope that "the human impulse to seek God may be ineradicable, however hard we may try to pluck it out and cast it from us." The exemplary faith of the Polish people in the face of such terrible adversity justified that hope.

President Trump also explained that, to protect the West from the three threats of radical Islamic terrorism, Russian aggression, and expanding government bureaucracies, a strong alliance among a community of free, sovereign, and independent nations is needed. Here, too, he echoed Toynbee's observations.

As for Trump's reference to radical Islamic terrorism, in 1948, Toynbee predicted that the West's expansion of influence around the world could "end in an explosion," in which Islam might be the "active ingredient in some violent reaction" against Western powers. Toynbee cautioned that the dormant Pan-Islamic "sleepers" may awake and call for anti-Western leadership, a call that "might have incalculable psychological effects in evoking the militant spirit of Islam," which "might awaken echoes of a heroic age" that moves Islam to again challenge the West.

As for President Trump's call for the West to address Russian aggression, in comparison, during the Soviet Union's former occupation of Central and Eastern Europe, Toynbee explained that every human being should do his utmost to defend his personal freedom of choice against those who are grasping at power. In 1971, he feared that "the massiveness and the complexity of present-day society, and the vast number of its members, are going to play into the hands of people who are eager to deprive individuals of their power of choice."

Four decades after Toynbee's warning, Russia employs armed soldiers without insignia ("little green men") to create unrest, occupy government buildings, and incite the population in foreign countries and uses cyber-warfare to unduly influence elections in Western nations.

In his remarks, as the third threat to the West, President Trump cited "the steady creep of government bureaucracy that drains the vitality and wealth of the people." Professor Toynbee anticipated this warning about vitality when he observed how private agencies and public authorities use computers to produce vast quantities of information at lightning speed, which they can use to "organize human relations on a colossal scale at the price of dehumanizing human beings."

As for government's threat to the people's wealth, the German historian Oswald Spengler explained in 1933 that, when the "mob" convinces the government to annihilate the accumulated wealth of the "ruling class"—turning it into an endangered object of suspicion and scorn—the will to acquire property ceases to create wealth. Economic livelihood, spiritual well-being, and ambition die out. Competition no longer pays.

President Trump's speech highlighted the features of Western Civilization that will cause it to prevail over these three challenges, including our creative capacities, pursuit of excellence, exploratory spirit, love of knowledge, emphasis on faith and family, and respect for fundamental freedoms, human dignity, and the rule of law.

Toynbee harbored similar hope, believing that the growth of the West depends on the work of "creative personalities and creative minorities" who develop and transmit our values, culture, and traditions in such a way that it inspires "the uncreative rank and file of mankind" to embrace them and, if need be, sacrifice themselves for the sake of achieving them.

In his closing remarks, President Trump declared that the fundamental question of our time is whether the West has the will to survive and whether we have the confidence in our values to defend them at any cost. In 1933, Spengler similarly expressed his exasperation with a "sick" Western Civilization that, in the face of a revolution against its classical liberal values, "offers no defense" and "takes pleasure in its own vilification and disintegration." Spengler noted the small number of people "possessed of the true political instinct, see what is going on and whither it is leading and exert themselves to prevent, moderate, or divert accordingly," — leaders such as Burke in England, Bismarck in Germany, and Tocqueville in France.

To President Trump's credit, he sees what is going on, where it is leading, and is attempting to "prevent, moderate, or divert accordingly."

Jim Kelly, is President of Solidarity Center for Law and Justice, P.C. and serves as Director of International Affairs for the Federalist Society for Law and Public Policy Studies. From 2005-2008, he served on the U.S. National Commission for UNESCO. The views expressed herein are his own.