

Teaching FREEDOM

a series of speeches and lectures honoring the virtues of a free and democratic society



Charles Krauthammer, winner of the 1987 Pulitzer Prize for distinguished commentary, writes a nationally syndicated column for The Washington Post Writers Group. He was the first recipient of the Bradley Prize in 2003, and in 2004 he was honored by the American Enterprise Institute with the Irving Kristol Award.

Krauthammer was educated at McGill University, Oxford University and Harvard (M.D. in 1975). He came to D.C. in 1978 to direct planning in psychiatric research for the Carter administration. He joined *The New Republic* as a writer and editor in 1981.

Krauthammer lives in D.C. with his wife Robyn, an artist. Their son is a student at Harvard.

American Exceptionalism in the Age of Obama

By Dr. Charles Krauthammer

This April, at The Fund for American Studies' annual conference, guests were honored to hear from Dr. Charles Krauthammer. Krauthammer is a scholar, physician, philanthropist, Pulitzer Prize-winning editorialist, revered commentator for FOX news and a living embodiment of the adage: if you're not liberal and you're under 30, you've got no heart; if you're not conservative when you're over 30, you have no brain. For the past two-and-a-half decades Krauthammer has framed the debate on American foreign policy. He coined the term the "Reagan Doctrine." In 2005, The Fund had the distinct privilege of awarding him its Walter Judd Freedom Award for his work advancing the cause of human freedom around the world.

I've been asked to speak about American exceptionalism in the age of Obama. American exceptionalism is an old idea – a venerable idea. It goes back to Jefferson's "Empire of Liberty," to Lincoln, who spoke of Americans as the almost chosen people, and to Ronald Reagan, who used to return over and over to that great image of America as a shining city on a hill.

In terms of our understanding of our self, it's rooted in two things. We are utterly unique as a nation, being the only nation on earth founded not on race, bloodlines, even geography and history. We are a nation founded on an idea and that is new in human history. And in terms of how we conduct ourselves abroad, we are also unique in many ways in that we never sought hegemony. That was a result of the civilizational suicide of Europe in the First

and Second World Wars, leaving a vacuum, which we had to fill to maintain liberty for ourselves and for the world. It was also a consequence of the fact that we're a commercial republic and we do not hunger for empire.

We are the only great power in history who, upon arriving on a foreign shore, first asks the question, "what's the exit strategy?" I can assure you that when the British arrived in India, they were not asking themselves "what's the exit strategy?" It was "what's the entry strategy," "what's the staying strategy," and "what's the governing strategy?" We don't like that. We always want to leave. Unfortunately, after the Second World War, because of the rise of the Soviet Union, we were not able to. And I think history will demonstrate (and it does to any objective observer) that how



2009 TFAS alumni meet Dr. Charles Krauthammer after his speech during the annual conference.

we conducted ourselves as the reluctant hegemon after the Second World War was remarkable.

I'll give you three examples. Three peoples who were split by the Cold War: East and West Germany, North and South Korea, and Taiwan and Mainland China. Look at how those nations evolved, one-half of those people with a common history, culture, language, etc., under our jurisdiction and the other half under the jurisdiction of our adversary.

Compare the liberty, prosperity, the humanity of West Germany versus East Germany, Taiwan and Communist China, North and South Korea. I think it's a fairly good record. And it is the reason that in most of the world, they see our ascendancy, power and dominance as a good thing. There's a reason why the countries of the Pacific Rim and the rest of Asia want us around – Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam, India and other countries – because they would rather be under the influence

of the United States, knowing our history, our idea of liberty and how we conducted ourselves generally-speaking, unlike the alternative today, which is under the dominance of China. So, I think the world speaks by its actions, by its welcoming of our influence, particularly in areas where there are regional hegemonies who aren't as nice, as humane, or benign as we are. It speaks to how exceptional we are.

Now, unfortunately, I'm not sure that our president shares that vision. I think it's rather remarkable that when he was asked about American exceptionalism he replied – this is not a direct quote, but it's rather a good approximation – “Yes there's American exceptionalism, but I suspect the Brits also believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks, Greek exceptionalism.”

As I interpret that response, if everybody is exceptional, nobody is. It sounds as if he's saying it's sort of a conceit that all countries have about themselves.

“We are utterly unique as a nation, being the only nation on earth founded not on race, bloodlines, even geography and history. We are a nation founded on an idea and that is new in human history.”

In his early travels, President Obama went around the world saying things about his own country that I believe no American president has in the past, particularly abroad. He was quite critical of America. He was on what can only be called an apology tour. He apologized for an astonishing array of actions, starting with the 1953 Eisenhower policy of supporting the coup against the Mosaddegh regime in Tehran.

He apologized over and over again for Guantanamo, for torture. He implied that the war in Iraq, in his view, wasn't only a mistake, but it was actually immoral. He apologized at one point for, I think the words were “dismissiveness” and “derisiveness” about U.S. relations toward Europe and then he apologized – I think quite egregiously – for what he implied as our disrespect or lack of respect for the Muslim world. The last one I found thickly offensive because in the last 20 years, this country has gone to war or engaged in military action to liberate a Muslim population from

oppression: Kosovo, Bosnia, Afghanistan, Kuwait in '91 and then Iraq. Each time liberating, each time acting in a place where probably no one else would have acted, each time the genocide would've continued. I would even add the Somalia operation was unsuccessful but also purely humanitarian in the name of saving lives in a Muslim population.

Look also at how the United States reacted after 9/11, the worst massacre on American soil in our history. The President of the United States – within days – went to the mosque in Washington and spoke to the American people and urged them, encouraged them and demanded of them understanding and tolerance of the Muslim population, outreach of friendship and no sense of revenge or retaliation in any way.



In fact, I think it's remarkable that in the years after that, there were dozens killed in Muslim riots over cartoons in a Danish magazine and yet not a single anti-Muslim riot in the United States, a testimony to the tolerance of the United States in understanding and to the influence of the government in enforcement.

So, I'm not sure how disrespectful we have been. But that was the attitude in the words of the president of the United States, Barack Obama.

And then there was a third element in this, apart from his denigrating the idea of exceptionalism, apart from the apologies. It was something he said just earlier this week. That was one of the side meetings of the recent summit. The president met with the president of Kazakhstan (a rather nasty dictatorship). A spokesman of the administration said afterwards that they had discussed, among other issues, human rights and that the president had stressed that we also are working on our democracy.

To draw any kind of equivalent, even to imply an equivalence between our admittedly imperfect democracy and what's an outright nasty dictatorship in Kazakhstan is quite remarkable. I think the point of view this president has is that the kind of hegemony, power and dominance that we have had since the Second World War (and particularly since the world became rather different after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and we became the dominant power) is a rather undeserved position and that we do not quite have the moral authority to act in

a way that we had. We are an imperfect republic. And the president's view, I think, goes beyond skepticism about American exceptionalism. He also has a view that nobody ought to be dominant.

It's not just that we have earned it because of our sins and our mismanagement and our imperial impulses in the past, but there ought to be order in which there are no dominant powers. If you remember the speech he gave at the U.N. General Assembly last year, it was a sort of major speech he made on the world stage. He said, "No nation can or should try to dominate another." Note the "can." How naïve. He said no nation can dominate another. He's amazingly adolescent and utopian with that statement alone. No nation "should," is a very subtle critique of how we have conducted ourselves for the last 20 years – we obviously have been a dominant nation in the world for the last 20 years. He went on to say, "No world order in which there is a balance of power can sustain itself." And then he went on and said that it makes no sense that the alignments among nations – which are rooted in the cleavages of the now obsolete Cold War – make sense.

Well those alignments were not arbitrary alignments. That was a division between the free world and communism. That was a division between true liberty and tyranny. That was a division between NATO and the Warsaw Pact, and they made sense if you accept the notion that the way of life that we would represent and support and lead and try to spread is superior to what the other side had offered.

Dr. Roger Pilon, founder and director of the Cato Institute's Center for Constitutional Studies, speaks during the question and answer session.

So, the president has a vision, I think, that the world in which differences in strength, power and dominance of nations is or ought to be abolished, and that's why he speaks over and over again about the world community, an international community acting as one.

It's why he, in that same speech, tried to say America had turned the corner in its respect for the rest of the world. He gave (among other examples) paying our UN dues and joining organizations such as the UN Human Rights Council (which as you all know is one of the most Orwellian, predacious bodies on the planet in which dictatorships gather in Geneva on your tab and on mine in excellent hotels and denounce the United States and democracy, in particular Israel, and exonerate themselves from any human rights abuses). So, it's a rather odd acclaim of how we had sort of improved our position in the world by joining organizations within the UN and the UN itself, which are at best either useless, at worst rather harmful.

But this president has a vision of the world in which the differences between the great powers and other countries are level and in which there really is no moral authority, no one superior nation to another.

The problem with the vision that he presents is twofold: (a) I think he's wrong about American exceptionalism and the moral right that we have earned through our actions in the past, through the ideas we try to advance to be a dominant nation in the world, and (b) the naïve vision of the world in which the international community somehow enforces its own norms.

Henry Kissinger once said, the only way to teach stability and peace is either through balance of power or through hegemony, and Obama seems to have a view that the way to achieve stability and peace in the world is for all to act as one and promote high ideals. If you listen to the speech he gave at the summit in Washington early this week on nuclear weapons, or you heard his speech at the General Assembly, that is the theme that somehow we have to unite together, act in our higher interest. And it's not how the world works. International arenas exist in a state of nature in which the states act for interest and power and, unless they are restrained by the power of other nations, we will have chaos, war and instability. The world doesn't act, it doesn't protect itself or ensure stability from the signing of treaties, declarations or resolutions in the UN Security Council.

So, the vision I think is, first unrealistic in terms on how the world works. It is not ideal that we should have an absence

of powers like us who are dominant and who can enforce the peace. And, secondly, it's a misreading of the nature of America – of how America conducts itself in the world. As I indicated earlier, there are reasons why people around the world prefer American influence to other influences.

Now the theme of the Obama policy seems to be that if we would only conduct ourselves with humility, everything would work out. I think it's an interesting concept that a man who finds humility in himself rather difficult at the defense of his country. I'll give you one sort of remarkable instance. Remember on the night he claimed the nomination for the presidency in the Democratic Party? He made a speech in which he said that that night would be remembered in history as the day on which the earth began to heal and the oceans could begin to recede. A friend of mine noted that the last person to do that was Moses... and he had help.



Supporter David Rosenberger talks to Dr. Charles Krauthammer after his address.

“Compare the liberty, prosperity, the humanity of West Germany versus East Germany, Taiwan and Communist China, North and South Korea. I think it’s a fairly good record. And it is the reason that in most of the world, they see our ascendancy, power and dominance as a good thing.

I could go on at length, but I’m going to wrap things up by looking very briefly at the actual implications of the vision Obama has about American exceptionalism and about how we are to conduct ourselves in the world.

The result of the ideas he has about our own non-exceptionalism – at about how the world ought to be run by an international consensus – is that he has given us a foreign policy of contraction and apology and accommodation.

I’ll give you two examples, one is rather small, but I think it’s a rather revealing one. In Honduras, there was an elected president who decided he wanted to be



Supporter Erin Vorhoff speaks during the question and answer session.

re-elected. It’s against the constitution. All the institutions of his democracy, the Congress, Supreme Court, the army and the church were opposed. He’s holding a referendum which would have allowed the change in the constitution. It was a violation of a very important article in the constitution. Latin America has a long history, like with Hugo Chavez, of dictators who were elected and then changed the constitution and then never left. He was deposed. The Obama administration immediately called it a coup d’état, even though it’s consistent with Article 239 of the Honduran Constitution, and worked assiduously for weeks to try to reinstate a man whose chief champion is of course Hugo Chavez.

Luckily, it didn’t work out; our policy failed. It’s one of the rare times I will as an American, applaud the failure of our policy. Ultimately there was an election, and the dictator is now gone. Now think about why they reflexively reacted that way. You could see particularly in some of the statements the left-wing perception of America’s own history and

Latin America as being intrusive and being manipulative. It has happened in our history, but it was relatively a long time ago – it doesn’t reflect how America has reacted in the last 30 years. We have supported the restoration of democracy in Chile and supported the restoration of democracy in Argentina, Brazil and elsewhere. It’s because of this sort of historical guilt that we had to support the left-wing alternative in Honduras.

I think a more telling example, a more important example, is our relations with Russia. The approach that this administration has had in dealing with Russia is that we have to reset relations. The notion is that they were allowed to drift – that’s the word Obama has used over and over again in talking about our relation with the Russians. The implication is that somehow Bush, the cowboy, had been disrespectful or didn’t look after Russian interests and thus the relations had drifted.

In fact, the reason that we had a cold relationship with the Russians is

because they actually invaded a small country called Georgia earlier in 2008, and we didn't like that. We opposed it and that made the Russians unhappy, which led to a cooling. So, if anything, it was a result of Russian aggression and their violation of international obligations.

But nonetheless, the Obama idea was he had to reset relations. You remember the button that the secretary of state presented him (which was mislabeled in Russian)? It was a reset button. As a result our first gesture was to undercut the Czech Republic and even Poland. To literally and summarily aggravate an agreement that we had with our closest allies in Eastern Europe – countries who have fought and bled with us in wars popular and unpopular, Afghanistan and Iraq – in order to appease the Russians who oppose our agreement with the Polish and the Czechs to put in place missile defenses.

The Russians were unhappy. They made all kinds of threats against the Poles and the Czechs and then we decided overnight (without really any consultation with our allies) to pull the plug, leaving them out there hanging in the wind. The argument was, well perhaps by doing this, we sold out our allies, but we get something in

return. Hardheaded realism is how the administration looked at it. But what have we gotten in return? Russians show up in Venezuela selling them \$5 billion worth of arms, which you can be sure will be used against friendly countries and nations like Colombia and elsewhere and will increase the power of the dictator who represents the antithesis of our ideals. The Russians have just announced a nuclear reactor in Iran. And of course on sanctions, which everybody assumed was an implicit or hidden quid pro quo for the selling out of the Polish and Czechs, they have done absolutely nothing.

If anything, they have watered down any possible strong sanctions. They are the ones who have insisted that we will not have to have a boycott of the Iranian Central Bank (which would have an important influence on their economy), and they have indicated they will not support any sanctions which involve the oil and gas sector, which is where Iran lives and where you would hit it if you wanted to have effective sanctions. So, what we have in return was nothing. But we acted in a humble way, we wanted to recognize Russian interests. What we got was what happens in the real world: the Russians acted in their interest, and we sold out our allies in order to appease them.

So, my objection to what this administration has done around the world is that it is completely unrealistic. It is a vision of the world without hegemonies, without great powers and with a kind of world consensus. That is how Obama insists you move the world and how you change things. Secondly, it doesn't understand the nature of American exceptionalism particularly as it applies to how we, in a broad and benign and extremely humane way, compare with any other empire, any time in human history.

And, lastly, it doesn't work. Thank you very much.

Teaching Freedom is a series of remarks published by The Fund for American Studies, a nonprofit educational organization in Washington, D.C. The speakers featured in each issue of *Teaching Freedom* delivered their remarks at a TFAS institute or conference or serve as faculty members in an institute.

The speakers who participate in the educational programs contribute greatly to the purpose and mission of TFAS programs. The speeches are published in an effort to share the words and lessons of the speakers with friends, alumni, supporters and others throughout the country and world who are unable to attend the events.

Visit www.TFAS.org/TeachingFreedom to read past issues of *Teaching Freedom*.