

Event Scenario and Remarks for Ambassador at the Estoril Political Forum's  
George Washington Memorial Dinner  
Europe Room, Hotel Palacio, Estoril  
Monday, June 26, 2023, 8:15-10:00 p.m.

Remarks:

Good evening, VIPs Rector Isabel Capeloa Gil, Professor João Carlos Espada, and distinguished speakers and guests. I am honored to follow a long tradition of American Ambassadors who have opened this prestigious dinner. And what a fitting subject – whether George Washington and the events of his lifetime still matter to us today.

The short answer to that question is YES. While my esteemed colleagues Antonio Neto da Silva, Antonio Rebelo de Sousa, and Bill Kristol will take a deeper dive into history, politics, and current events - I want to address the vision and fulfillment of democracy.

Some view George Washington and the founding fathers as the perfect mixture of brilliance, courage, and foresight. They didn't just plant the seeds of U.S. democracy, they invented the agriculture.

Although they were all those things – brilliant, brave, progressive – they were not perfect.

What the 18th century can teach us is that despite the enlightenment that produced the marvels that are the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution, the ideals they represented needed real work to implement them. Persistent, diligent work. Work that is still ongoing.

We must remember that even the most legendary American figures – Washington, Jefferson, Adams, Hamilton, Franklin – suffered from the flaws, great and small, that afflict all human beings. The original U.S. Constitution, which relegated non-white, non-male, and non-monied citizens to an inferior status, did not reflect Jefferson’s “all men are created equal” decree.

However, the philosophies those men wove into the fabric of the nation – equality, due process, individual freedoms – allowed Americans to correct

mistakes and spread democratic principles throughout society.

President Biden has said that democracy doesn't happen by accident – it requires constant effort and maintenance by each generation. So it is worth looking back at the authoritarian environment of the 18th century that drove people like Washington to fight for change.

When Washington took office in 1789, the hero of the Revolutionary War could have taken the fledgling government and the office of the presidency in any direction he chose. Despite this overwhelming power, he opted for service before self, warned about the pitfalls that lead to corruption, and feared that political divisions could foment strife and possibly insurrection.

At that time, presidential term limits did not exist. But after two terms, the 65-year-old Washington, the father of the nation, decided to relinquish

power and retire. He had been a soldier and public servant from the age of 18.

In Washington's farewell address in 1796, which has been read in the Senate on his birthday since 1893, Washington cautioned that factions would provide platforms for, and I quote, "potent engines by which cunning, ambitious, and unprincipled men will be enabled to subvert the power of the people and to usurp for themselves the reins of government."

He feared that foreign influences on political parties or assistance to a person or party could make them beholden to a foreign government.

Although Washington advocated for a strong centralized government, he believed it was there to protect individual liberties, not to take them away – a philosophy not shared by some of today's biggest international players like Russia or the People's Republic of China.

No one understood more than Washington that democracies are hard work.

And as Washington predicted, we have experienced challenges to our own – both from internal and external forces.

Understanding that democracies need to be nurtured, President Biden convened the Summit for Democracy to examine our institutions, recognize the challenges, and push for improvement. We can and should discuss shortcomings openly, acknowledge mistakes, and move forward. Last week the United States celebrated Juneteenth, which President Biden established as a federal holiday in 2021 to commemorate the end of slavery. In this year's Juneteenth celebration, President Biden spoke of the importance of remembering history, not erasing it.

Since the end of World War II, the United States and Europe have forged a solid partnership based on

democratic principles and sustained by common values.

The U.S.-Portugal relationship in particular is one of our oldest and strongest, as symbolized by the toast of Madeira wine at the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

Both our countries understand that the bonds of the transatlantic relationship are forged from a shared respect for democracy, individual liberty, and the rule of law.

As Secretary of State Blinken said earlier this year, “We don’t believe that we hold all the solutions – far from it. But we do know that when we join together with our fellow democracies, we make one another stronger, more resilient, more responsive to our citizens, and better able to do what we’re here to do, which is to deliver for them – and, I hope, for the world.”

Now more than ever it is important for democracies to stand together against authoritarian regimes that

threaten our security and our democracy. Portugal and the United States, for example, stand united against Russia's war on Ukraine.

As President Biden said, "This is about freedom. Freedom for Ukraine, freedom everywhere."

In George Washington's vision, we will continue to work together to strengthen our own democracy in the United States and join with our democratic European allies to tackle authoritarian threats and challenges around the world.

Thank you for having me, and I look forward to the discussion.