

2020 Estoril Political Forum
Winston Churchill Memorial Lecture
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Your excellencies, Professor Espada, ladies and gentlemen,

It's a delight to be back in Portugal, if only virtually, and I look forward to the chance for it to be in person again. I want to talk just a bit. My remarks were really suggested earlier this morning—very early indeed, because this began at six o'clock in the morning, my time—by a remark that Mr. Barroso made in his opening speech, which was, as usual, always a bracing and challenging presentation.

He mentioned that my country, the United States of America, is of course an Atlantic power but also a Pacific power, and Lord Moore's remarks reminded us of what was to be the theme of the Estoril Political Forum before we were overtaken by an even more urgent crisis coming out of China: that is, the challenge of China.

Very distressing changes have occurred in China, even in the last five years, and its treatment of the treaty with the United Kingdom over Hong Kong and the citizens of Hong Kong has given people on the island of Taiwan alarm about the future of that island, as have the increasingly aggressive and worrying signs that China may be considering some kind of military action against Taiwan.

At the same time, similar things have been happening in the South China Sea, and the treatment by China of its least visible and most unfortunate citizens, the Uighurs in the western part of the country, have reminded us that China under its current regime does not respect human rights or guarantee to its citizens the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, freedom of religion, freedom of speech, that we consider to be part of the legacy and the inheritance of free peoples.

It's especially worrying that China's attack on these sorts of liberal rights has been combined with an embrace of technology, and that connects this to situations in our own countries, because China has largely borrowed the technology of Western countries and used it for less happy purposes.

Our reaction to this in the West is coupled with a concern about some changes in public opinion and in public reactions—and even in public leadership—that have tended to take us away from the idea of the rule of law and a decent respect for the opinions of each other.

In 1847, long ago, Frederick Douglass, who was a slave, asked the question, "What country have I?" and increasingly, I'm afraid, very many of our citizens are asking the same question. Some of them are asking it in America and in other countries in the West because they find that some of the defining characteristics of their own countries are in danger of slipping away—of not being respected anymore by their fellow citizens, of not being so widely shared.

Self-defense, and a kind of spirited willingness to speak and to understand the basis of our government, I think, is therefore more necessary than ever. But what we see often in the media, in the universities, and even among our public officials, is a combination of complacency, occasional despair, and sometimes discouragement and withdrawal from that sort of obligation, which has led to a kind of open season for pulling down statues, being willing to countenance violence and other kinds of attacks, and even a kind of toleration for things that never should be tolerated, which has been rude and noticed by ordinary citizens, who are then very discouraged by this.

I think self-defense is important on our part, and also a kind of self-restraint or moderation that means that when political arguments become fierce and sometimes vicious, we need to remind ourselves that we ought to be friends to those who share the common currency of belief in our liberal rights and traditions.

Particularly worrying is the propensity of younger people not to embrace these sorts of ideas—to be tempted by demagogues and by criticisms that encourage them to embrace a kind of political activism—which I, along with Lord Moore, saw in my youth and see roaring back in a rather unwelcome way just now.

I think in those circumstances the kind of meeting that the Estoril Political Forum exemplifies—the kind of education that Professor Espada and his colleagues have organized and continue to teach in at the Catholic University of Portugal, to which I have sent one of my students on graduating as a master's degree student, is a very encouraging sign, and deserves to be widely imitated, to the extent that such excellence can be imitated, in other parts of the world.

And I hope that thinking about the career of Winston Churchill, his remarkable flexibility in adapting to new circumstances, new dangers, and new situations, we might draw both inspiration and occasionally guidance.

[Note: running time of these remarks was 48:58 to 57:07, 8 minutes and 9 seconds, or 51 seconds less than the allotted time.]