

**Remarks Prepared for Delivery by Richard J. Durbin  
Majority Whip of the United States Senate  
To the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania**

Speaker Cmilyste-Nielson, President Adamkus, President Grybauskaite, Professor Landsbergis, Esteemed members of Seimas: Aciu. Thank you. And thank you to Mr. Pranckietis and former Speaker Vinckus for their kind words.

One-hundred-and-eleven years ago, a young mother in Jurbarkas said goodbye to everyone and everything she had ever known, gathered her three small children and sailed for America to join her husband. In her arms, she carried their youngest child, a 2-year-old daughter. That little girl, Ona Kutkaite, was my mother.

My mother never saw this beautiful land of her birth again. But she carried Lithuania in her heart. She prayed for Lithuania's freedom. And she taught *her* three children to be proud of our Lithuanian heritage.

If my mother were here today to see her son accept this honor named for President Stulginskis, one of Lithuania's great patriots, she would be astonished and deeply moved, as am I. I am especially honored to receive this prestigious award in the same year as President Adamkus, and in his presence. As the President who led Lithuania's entries into the European Union and NATO, President Adamkus's contributions to Lithuania's security and integration into Europe are monumental. And I am proud to call him my friend.

The Lithuania of my grandmother's time was ruled by a czar, who tried to force his religious beliefs and his native tongue on this land. I have shared with you that my grandmother carried to America her Catholic prayer book written in Lithuanian. To her, it was an act of courage and defiance. I have come to learn she truly reflected the spirit of this nation.

The first time I saw Lithuania was in 1979, during the darkness of Soviet occupation. A new international exchange program created to foster understanding among young elected officials chose me as someone who might have a future in politics. They invited me to tour the Soviet Union as part of a delegation of young American leaders of the future.

I remember my impression of the Soviet Union---oppressive and gray. The Lithuania I visited in 1979 was far different than the vibrant democracy we know today. In Vilnius, the building that is now the "KGB Museum" <sup>1</sup>was still a KGB headquarters, where Lithuanian patriots were interrogated, and hundreds were killed. The beautiful Church of St. John's at the University of Vilnius had been used as a warehouse and then closed by the Communists. St. Casimir Church had been turned into a Museum of Atheism. In the historic March 11 Hall, a hammer and sickle filled the space now occupied by the Lithuanian Vytis.

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<sup>1</sup> The official name of this museum is the Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights but it is popularly and widely referred to as "the KGB Museum.

It was a different world. And yet, despite the oppressiveness of occupation, one could sense Lithuania's unbreakable spirit and determination to reclaim your freedom. I remember a Mass at a Catholic Church early Sunday morning. Fathers and mothers brought their little children to keep the faith alive in their families. A meeting with saintly Archbishop – now Cardinal – Tamkevicius of Kaunas, his spirit unbroken by ten years of Soviet imprisonment.

I witnessed the re-emergence of Lithuania's uncrushable spirit in 1990, when I returned as a member of the United States Congress leading a delegation to oversee your historic elections.

I will never forget the scene in the dead of winter, when this historic city was alive with the energy of people preparing to fight for their freedom. I saw this Seimas building protected by trenches and sandbags. I remember groups of school children praying their rosaries and lighting little candles at the barricades. My friends took me inside the Parliament building to show me the secret arsenal of the Lithuanian freedom fighters. In a closet stood a handful of old rifles, useful for a farmer or hunter but no match for the Soviet war machine.

Nine months later, I watched from America as Gorbachev's Soviet tanks rolled in to Vilnius to try and crush your new democracy. Fourteen martyrs died that day for Lithuania's freedom. But the people of this proud nation were armed with stronger weapons than the Soviet's tanks and artillery shells; like today's valiant fighters in Ukraine they were armed with faith and courage.

Freedom prevailed. Six months later, the Russians formally recognized Lithuania's independence. And by the end of that year, the Soviet Union ceased to exist.

Twenty years later, I was honored to speak in this historic building on the 20th anniversary of Defenders of Freedom Day. Among those seated where you are now were family members of the fallen heroes of Jan. 13 – and my old friends, President Adamkus, and Professor Landsbergis.

Today, I see a Lithuania that is small in size but mighty in spirit – a vital member of the EU and NATO and a champion of human dignity and freedom, not only in the Baltics, but in Belarus, Europe, and throughout the world. A Baltic beacon of hope in troubled times.

I see a vibrant economy that offers increasing hope to the excluded and greater opportunity for all. No longer must Lithuania's sons and daughters leave. They can stay and raise their families here, in freedom and prosperity. And you have ensured that your freedom can never be held hostage for fuel and your euros will not finance Putin's hellish war on Ukraine or any other sovereign nation.

And I assure you: The United States of America will stand *with* Ukraine's courageous defenders, its extraordinary leader and its displaced citizens -- in Ukraine, Lithuania ... and throughout the world. And we will not surrender an inch of NATO's territory to Russian aggression. Not one inch. Not now. Not ever. The commitment of the United States to NATO's Article 5 guarantee of common defense and to our common struggle for freedom and democracy is strong and resolute.

We await the day when Putin's gang of thugs and murderers collapses, true leaders like Alexei Navalny and Vladimir Kara-Murza leave their prison cells and a new, democratic Russia is born.

*This* is the message that I will carry tomorrow to Sweden and then to the NATO summit in Madrid, where the United States will support the expansion of NATO to include Sweden and Finland.

For more than 200 years, our two nations have supported each other in our commitment to freedom, security and human dignity. It was a Polish-Lithuanian war hero, Tadeusz Kosciuszko, who fought for America's freedom in our War of Independence from Great Britain. His close friend, Thomas Jefferson, called him "as pure a son of liberty as I have ever known." Today, a monument to this shared national hero stands in a park across from the White House in Washington. And after the First World War, 200 Lithuanian-American war veterans travelled to your nation to help drive out the Russian occupiers.

America's commitment to this partnership is unbreakable. We have stood together in times of trial. And we stand with you today.

I'll close with one more treasured memory. Later today, I will meet the mayor of Jurbarkas. Waiting for that meeting sparks a memory from my first visit to my mother's birthplace. It was with my brother in 1997. My brother brought a photograph of our mother as a young girl. We showed it to a group of people, hoping someone might remember our family.

Out of a group of strangers stepped a man holding a copy of the same photo, which has been carefully kept since our family had left for America. After almost a century, our family, which had been divided by czars, Nazis and an Iron Curtain, was reunited. We had found family we never knew we had.

Today, a Russian invader is forcing families in Ukraine to hide in dank basements, bury their beautiful children and scatter to the four corners of the earth. The brave Ukrainians cannot match his military might but his soldiers will never match the Ukrainian courage and resilience.

But Putin will fail, along with the tyrant in Minsk and strongmen like them throughout our world – as long as we remain united. For as you showed the world three decades ago, tanks and terror cannot suppress forever a people who are determined to be free.

Thank you again for this great honor. Tegyvuoja Lietuva! Long live Lithuania! Tegyvuoja laisvė ir demokratija. Long live freedom and democracy!

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