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Speech in Krakow, delivered in Poland in May 1989

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SPEECH IN KRAKOW, POLAND  MAY 1989

To Rector Altkorn and all of our colleagues at the Academy, I express appreciation for the kindness you have shown to the Chairman of our Board of Control, Mrs. Maxine Swanson, and Mr. Swanson, Mrs. Lubbers and me. Polish hospitality is special, and we first became aware of its special qualities when we moved to Grand Rapids, Michigan, where many people of Polish descent live.

Four times in the last decade we have been received here amongst you at your highly respected institution in friendship and respect. The honor you bestow upon me today is a measure of that friendship and respect, and I accept it on behalf of all those at my university who join with me in enthusiastic support of the cooperation between the academy and Grand Valley.

Just as on our first visit to your historic and beautiful city, we entered Poland by automobile. As we drove through the countryside, I was reminded as I was previously of that part of America where Mrs. Lubbers and I have our origins in the rich farm land of the mid continent. I feel a strong affinity for you and your land, and those feelings that are more than the common
professional intellectual interest we share enhance the bond between us.

I appreciate the accommodation you have made so that this ceremony is being held while our Grand Valley students are here. I want them to have an enriching personal experience, but I also want them to understand the growing together of our two institutions. I want them to understand that what we as academy and university do together contributes to the improvement of relations between our two countries, and in its own modest way, it alters for the better the attitudes of Poles and Americans who participate in our programs, thus improving the general climate for understanding between us. Through that understanding comes an opportunity for each of us to influence the ideas and behavior of the other. In our global village we need to understand one another and learn from our international experiences. We are privileged to participate in that process. The professors and students from our institutions who have moved between Krakow and Grand Rapids for more than a decade comprise a growing group of enlightened people who want, who insist, that we live in harmony
and open communication.

We, your friends in America, have watched with interest and caring the developments in your country in recent years. For us, your Grand Valley colleagues, to be in Poland now is to be where fundamental change may be taking place. And as I accept this honor from you, I hope you will not object to my reflections on change and revolution because they are at work in both our societies, and many others as well.

The winds of change increased in velocity as they swept over the European continent in 1848 carrying away the old regime, bringing in the new. In Austria Count Metternich, a dominant figure on the stage of Europe, was no longer a player. For the first time since Napoleon had raised the hopes of freedom advocates, dashed later in imperial and military self aggrandizement, did Europe see a vision of a new, freer time. There were more disappointments, and in many lands the conclusion of the First World War provided the next opportunity for people to determine for themselves the nature of their societies. The political events of 1848 and the ideas behind them left their
indelibility on the character of Europe, even though the ideal of civic life envisioned by the revolutionaries was beyond their grasp. For a moment in time there was new hope, possibly unfulfilled, but not irrevocably lost.

In your midst today I sense the feeling of 1848. Here in Poland there is that hope for a better life - life in a freer environment - an environment open to individual expression and individual endeavor. The spirit of '89 is special. In fact it is a continuation, a logical next stop from the events and ideas of the recent past. In your country, two hundred years after the French Revolution, there are stirrings in the Polish state that will be as profound for Polish life as the events of 1789 were for the French. The challenge, it appears to me, is to keep that special spirit alive without frittering it away in intensive squabbles that use energy needed for productive work, and lead to the breakdown of law.

It appears to a foreigner that there is an important difference in the Polish state today from the Austrian-Hungarian empire of 1848. The most powerful in government are not waiting
and plotting to reestablish the system that sustained their initial authority. That was true of the Habsburg monarchy in mid 19th century Vienna. Today, with the spirit moving also across the Soviet Union, propelled by Mikail Gorbachev and his regime, the realities of international politics are changing. They allow more and repress less. They encourage more and restrain less.

Those elements that kept you a people during the times of partition should assist you now. One language, one church, one nationality should bind you together so your energies can be melded into a great effort to build an economy that will support your cultural, political and personal aspirations. I am not unaware of the differences that tend to separate you, the factors beyond your control that so often shape your lives. There is no simple or easy path to improved conditions for life. But when there is an open door, we attempt to move through it, mobilizing all our strength to keep it open in the hope that our weakness will not undermine us.

In my country the initial revolution reached its successful climax 208 years ago, and since then, with one exception, the subsequent successful revolutions in our society have been less
violent. Our political tradition is liberal. We are a people used
to change, and a leader class ultimately sustains itself through
its ability to lead the change. When it fails it is replenished
and replaced by ambitious men and women who have more successfully
assessed the opportunity and used the relatively open political
and economic system to gain their ends. Reform of our financial
structure, broadened suffrage, protection of citizens in time
of need, the role of government in society have been peaceful
revolutions in America. Land ownership, birth, and membership
in a political group (the last line of page 7 was cut off).