

Speech by the President of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly,
Hon. John Tanner (United States)

Plenary of the Annual Session
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*Ministers,
Ambassadors,
Colleagues and Friends of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly
Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Friends,*

It is my great pleasure to welcome you here to the Annual Session in Warsaw, Poland. This is a fitting building for a meeting of parliamentarians from across the transatlantic alliance. The Sejm ("SAME") is one of the oldest legislatures in Europe, operating in various forms since the middle ages. There may have been times when it was not the product of democratic elections by our modern standards, but there is no question that the tradition of representative democracy and the desire for independence runs deeply in Poland.

Poland also embodies the link between the two sides of the Atlantic. The large contribution that Poles have made to North American society is well known, but our struggles for independence were joined as well. Some of the heroes of the American Revolution, such as Casimir Pulaski, the father of the American cavalry, also fought for Poland's independence in the 18th Century. Although it played important roles in events that led to the creation of the United States, Poland had to wait much longer for its independence. By meeting here today, we pay tribute to that long struggle and Poland's place in a united Europe and the transatlantic alliance.

This has been a difficult year for Poland. A tragic air crash took the lives of much of Poland's political leadership, and wide-spread floods devastated the countryside. After those trying events, the hosting of this Annual Session by the Sejm and the Senate is deeply appreciated by us all.

We come here at a time when our Alliance is looking to the future and how to deal with our common challenges. Like any team, this Alliance is more than the sum of its parts. Our strength comes from working together for common goals, with each member of the team playing to their particular abilities. While the history of our transatlantic alliance is deep and the connections are strong, there are challenges we face in fulfilling NATO's promise as an

Alliance for the 21st Century. As parliamentarians, we have a responsibility to address those challenges head on.

There is a range of issues I could address, but in the next few minutes I would like to focus on two specific overarching challenges. First we need to find the resources to pursue our common security objectives. Secondly, we need to summon the political will to act when necessary.

All of our nations have been affected by the financial crisis of recent years. With declining revenues it is difficult to keep government spending at the levels of only a few years ago, and cuts, sometimes painful, have been implemented across the Euro-Atlantic area. One area that may appear to be a ready source for budget savings is defence spending. It has no natural constituency in our publics and in hard economic times, the defence budget may seem like an attractive target for further savings.

But I would like to stress that defence budgets across Europe are already at historic lows in real terms. It is unrealistic to expect that we can increase defence spending in the current environment, but if we are to be capable of the missions we have committed to as an Alliance, we need to hold the line on spending and wring more capability out of what we have. This means more cooperative programs, more asset sharing and more coordination. NATO can and does play a large role in all of those areas. In today's fiscal climate, we will need use NATO even more as a means of getting more aggregate security from our individual investments in defence.

It is the second part of the equation—finding the political will to act—that is perhaps the most difficult to solve. All the resources in the world are insufficient if we do not have the courage to act and the confidence in our ability to build security. Across this Alliance, people are feeling the fatigue of operations and the drain they place on society. It is an understandable sentiment, but it is part of our job as members of parliament to help them understand the deeper purpose of what this Alliance does. Its efforts to combat piracy, provide disaster relief, preserve peace in the Balkans and bring lasting stability to Afghanistan are all part of a package. That collection of activities helps to minimize the dangers to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area.

Our mission in Afghanistan deserves particular emphasis. Our publics tend to see only the cost of this operation in money and lives and ask if it is worth it. I would suggest that we ask them to consider the cost of not pursuing this mission. Were we to disengage from Afghanistan before the Afghans are ready to take over, what would be the likely effect? It is clear that those who have declared themselves to be the enemies of our values would

trumpet this as a major accomplishment. It would be a recruiting tool for them, one that would haunt us for years to come.

We face serious challenges in Afghanistan. Although it is all too easy to be caught up in gloomy predictions, it is worth reflecting on the words of Issac Bashevis Singer, the Polish-born writer who found fame in the United States. "If you keep saying things are going to be bad," said Singer, "you have a good chance of being a prophet." Singer understood that what we do and say today shapes expectations of what is to come. Expectations shape outcomes. We need to face up to challenges realistically, but if we prejudge efforts to fail, there is a good chance they will do just that.

Ladies and gentlemen, dear friends; this is my final speech before you as President of this Assembly. It has been an honour and a privilege to serve in this position. As you may know, I will also be leaving the United States Congress in a few weeks' time, so I will no longer be a member of the U.S. delegation. It is in many ways difficult to leave this Assembly which is a unique instrument for bringing together the parliaments that make up the transatlantic Alliance. But I do so with the full confidence that it will continue to be an important forum for discussion between the members of the Alliance and with our partners.

I would like to leave you with the words of one of Poland's most famous sons, the late Pope John Paul II. He once said, "Freedom consists not in doing what we like, but in having the right to do as we ought." What is true for individuals is true for nations and it is definitely true for an Alliance composed of free peoples. Let us always strive to use our freedom to do as we ought.
