

U.S. Senator John McCain remarks at the Ambrosetti Forum

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“Thank you for that kind introduction. And thank you to European House for inviting me join you here at the Ambrosetti Forum in Lake Como. I don't know how I will leave this beautiful, magnificent place tomorrow to return to Washington. It may take Dan Coats's security detail to pry us both out of here.

“On a serious note, I realize that not all Americans fully appreciate the vital role Italy plays in protecting our common security—in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Kosovo, where Americans and Italians are serving side by side ... to North Africa and the Mediterranean, where we are working together to defeat ISIS in Libya and address the flow of refugees and migrants. I also realize that many Americans are not aware of how Italians, despite very real strains, have set an example for us all by showing compassion to those who have come to this country's shores fleeing oppression or simply searching for a better life. But for all of us who do realize the important contribution that Italy is making to our common interests and values, let me say thank you.

“My friends: Since this forum began more than four decades ago, and in all the years I have had the honor of attending it, I cannot recall a year where its purpose was more necessary or more important.

“The previous panels have considered big questions about our security and prosperity, and about our shared future. Now we must consider America's role in all of this.

“I realize that I come to Italy at a time when many are questioning whether America is still committed to remaining engaged in the world, to upholding our traditional alliances, and standing up for the values we share. I also realize—and there is no point in avoiding a little straight talk here—that this doubt has much to do with some of the actions and statements of our President.

“It is true that there is a real debate underway now in my country about what kind of role America should play in the world. And frankly, I do not know how this debate will play out. What I do believe, and I do not think I am exaggerating here, is that the future of the world will turn, to a large extent, on how this debate in America is resolved.

“That is why I will never stop fighting to ensure that America stands by our allies and remains an active, principled leader in the world. I know I am fighting along so many of my countrymen who feel the same. But we cannot do it alone. We need your help, my friends. Now more than ever, we Americans are counting on Italy and our other European allies to stick with us ... to encourage us to stay true to who we are at our best ... and to remind us always just how much is at stake.

“This is why I have come to this forum: to tell you that I believe that Italy, and our other NATO allies and European partners, can still count on America.

“Put simply, my friends: I believe bipartisan majorities of Americans remain pro-alliances, pro-trade, pro-investment, pro-military, pro-globalization, in favor of an internationalist foreign policy, and supportive of our transatlantic alliance. It may not look that way on Twitter, but that is what opinion polls clearly show, time after time after time.

“That is because most Americans remain committed to the values that are our greatest strength, the values that we share with Italy and Europe. Americans remain committed to truth over falsehood, fairness over injustice, freedom over oppression, and the immortal spirit of humankind.

“These values are enshrined in our institutions. Our foreign friends always tend to focus on the person in the White House. But America is far bigger than that.

“America is our Congress, our courts of justice, our state and local governments.

“America is our innovators and our entrepreneurs, our artists and our scientists.

“America is our free press—just don’t tell any of our journalists I said so.

“And America is our men and women in uniform—who remain, despite recent challenges, the most committed, battle-tested, and formidable force on the planet.

“But you will also find the best of America in those who do not wear a uniform, who hold no special title.

“You saw the best of America in Heather Hayer, a young woman who lost her life standing up against hatred and bigotry in Charlottesville, Virginia.

“You are seeing the best of America right now in Houston, Texas, where countless ordinary citizens are sailing boats of every size and shape—not away from the flood, but back into it, to rescue fellow Americans in need.

“This is America at its best—ordinary people, despite long odds, rising to master moments of extraordinary challenge, powered by their belief in that most simple and audacious of ideas—that all people are created equal.

“Put simply: No one has ever gotten rich betting against America, my friends, and now is not a good time to start.

“Now, to be sure, America has its problems. And yes, these are dangerous times. Our values and our vision of world order has committed opponents. But none of them can harm us more than we can harm ourselves. And deep down, our adversaries know that. That is why, what they want more than anything, is for us to doubt ourselves, for us to doubt each other. They want Europe to count out America. And they want America to count out Europe. They want us to give up on NATO and the EU. They want us to give up on our common values and shared ideals.

“Our adversaries have no meaningful allies, so they seek to sow dissent among us and divide us from each other. They know that their power and influence are inferior to ours, so they seek to subvert us, and erode our resolve to resist, and terrorize us into passivity. They know they have little to offer the world beyond selfishness and fear, so they seek to undermine our confidence in ourselves and our belief in our own values.

“We must take our own side in this fight. We must be vigilant. We must persevere. We must never stop believing in the moral superiority of our own values. And we must never stop making the case for those values and the world order that protects them.

“This year, Europeans and Americans have been celebrating the 70th anniversary of the Marshall Plan, which not only helped Italy and the nations of Europe to emerge from the ashes of world war, but as Carlo Sforza and others recognized, forged and nurtured the European unity that would be necessary to secure a lasting peace.

“This we all remember well. What is less remembered is how much persistent, painstaking political salesmanship went into the establishment of the Marshall Plan and the international order it helped to secure.

“In the beginning, the Marshall Plan was anything but a foregone conclusion. Many Americans did not initially believe that giving their hard-earned tax dollars to Europeans in need was in their self-interest. They needed to be convinced of it.

“America’s Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, literally crisscrossed the country for months on long drives and train rides to take the case for global engagement directly to the American people.

“Yes, he gave speeches in Washington, but also in Spokane, Washington.

“He didn’t just speak to the World Affairs Council in San Francisco. He spoke to the National-American Wholesale Grocers Association in Atlantic City, New Jersey.

“After speaking with busloads of miners in Duluth, Minnesota, Acheson stayed up into the wee hours of the morning selling the Marshall Plan to crowds rotating in and out of a hotel ballroom. A quarter got them a coffee and a chance to hear why the resurrection of Europe and the greater good was in their interest.

“My friends: This was populism in the service of internationalism. And that is why we succeeded. And we have never needed that kind of effort more than right now.

“Our predecessors had faith in the rightness and justice of our ideals. But they did not rest upon that faith alone. They took nothing for granted. They knew their capacity for an ambitious foreign policy would only be as strong as the domestic political consensus on which it rested. And they set out to build both together.

“Their success was not preordained. It was earned. Free citizens persuaded one another that our values, and the security and prosperity they generate, were worth the fighting for. We marshalled our power and influence in their defense. We bore the costs and the sacrifices. We made the choice to defend our common interests and shared ideals.

“We did all of this before, and we can do it again. This is no time to despair. This is a time to trust each other, rely on each other, roll up our sleeves together, and work even harder on behalf of the values, and the international order, and the way of life that we all hold dear. I thank all of you for joining me in this effort, and for being here today.”