

Remarks of Mayor Noam Bramson
Bastille Day Observance
New Rochelle/La Rochelle Sister City Committee
July 13, 2018

This is typically a light-hearted occasion. We hoist a flag, sing two anthems – in key if we're lucky, I express well-earned thanks to the Sister City Committee and stumble through a few words of poorly-pronounced French, and then we all retreat to the City Hall Rotunda for croissants, maybe this time adding a quiet prayer for France in the World Cup. All these things we do again this year, and the thanks, in particular, I am pleased and honored to renew.

But I feel compelled today to add a little bit more, perhaps in a way that may make some here uncomfortable. Because although our connection to La Rochelle is a tiny thing in the context of world affairs, it represents in miniature something of far deeper and broader importance; it represents the bonds between two great nations that are pillars of enlightened civilization and, deeper and broader still, the bonds between the United States and every nation that has embraced the ideals of liberal democracy – bonds of mutual defense and trade, of the rule of law and of human rights, a shared belief in the dignity of all mankind, and in the systems of government that uphold and celebrate this dignity.

It is perhaps difficult to see amid the countless serious problems that still persist in our society – the millions upon millions who struggle in their daily lives, the brutal inequalities, the myriad imperfections and tragic flaws of even the most progressive states – yet the institutions of global democracy and security and commerce have created what is, by any historical standard, a golden age of peace, prosperity, and freedom.

We must never forget that for most of the human experience, it has been otherwise, with the weak ever subject to the predations of the strong.

That is why our democratic, rules-based institutions, domestic and international, are precious beyond measure.

This has never meant that we refuse to engage adversaries and tyrants, or that we are naïve about the world's complexity, but rather that we build from our circle of democratic fraternity outward, not the other way around.

I've always believed that these sentiments were a universal American creed, far outside the bounds of partisanship or the whims of particular political figures . . . truths we all learned at home, were taught at school. I am even surrounded by them at work: directly across from my desk on the office wall in the mayor's office, is an iconic photo of the D-Day invasion.

The individual thoughts of the boys just before they fell into the maelstrom of the Normandy Beach are perhaps unknowable, but I have never imagined that they gave life and limb to close a trade deficit.

My parents, who as children, were refugees in Siberia and Central Asia, dreamt of an Allied victory, but never considered that it might be motivated by financial demands.

The men and women of East and West Germany who took sledgehammers to the Berlin Wall and helped bring down what President Reagan rightly called an evil empire were not inspired to action by tariff levels.

Their aim was much higher. And what they won through their sacrifice, through their hopes, through their persistence was and is far, far more grand: a world in which it is possible for the good to prevail.

And yet all these self-evident truths seem at risk today, not primarily from an external threat, for there is no external threat strong enough, but rather from within – from those who would treat our alliances as matters of material interest before values, or, worse, as a protection racket to be auctioned to the highest bidder or compelled under threat.

It is at risk from leadership that is profoundly ignorant of history, contemptuous of democratic norms, skeptical of founding principles, and seemingly enamored of despots and dictators.

It is at risk, too, from those who countenance or excuse or rationalize or enable such leadership. And it is at risk from those who remain silent.

It is upsetting to me that such things need to be said, that happy, feel-good little events like this one should become occasions for sober words, and I regret imposing these words upon you.

But it is necessary, because if our central government falters in its commitment to these ideals, it then becomes more essential for small gatherings like this to preserve the flame of decency and truth, until it can – we earnestly hope – be rekindled from sea to shining sea.

Phrases like “God Bless America” and “Vive La France” roll easily of our tongues, yet, divorced from substance, they express nothing more than empty nationalism, no better than “Forward, Russia” . . . or, indeed, “Deutschland Uber Alles.”

It is the substance of our national principles, and of our friendships with like-minded peoples throughout the world, that give these expressions weight and meaning and emotional resonance.

And so, it is in that spirit, out of fierce allegiance to the values for which our peoples have spilled blood and treasure, and fervent belief in an international order of peace and justice built through the labor of generations, that I say with a full heart: Vive La France and God Bless America.