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Barack Obama

Address to the Peoples of Europe

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Guten tag! It is -- It is wonderful to see all of you, and I want to begin by thanking Chancellor Merkel for being here. On behalf of the American people, I want to thank Angela for being a champion of our alliance. And on behalf of all of us, I want to thank you for your commitment to freedom, and equality, and human rights, which is a reflection of your inspiring life. I truly believe you've shown us the leadership of steady hands -- how do you call it? The Merkel-Raute. And over the last seven years, I have relied on your friendship and counsel, and your firm moral compass. So we very much appreciate your Chancellor, Angela Merkel.

To the members of the Bundestag, Prime Minister Weil, Mayor Schostock, distinguished guests, people of Germany. And I'm especially pleased to see the young people here -- from Germany and across Europe. We also have some proud Americans here.

I have to admit that I have developed a special place in my heart for the German people. Back when I was a candidate for this office, you welcomed me with a small rally in Berlin, where I spoke of the change that's possible when the world stands as one. As President, you've treated me and Michelle and our daughters to wonderful hospitality. You've offered me excellent beer -- and weisswurst in Krun. You've now hosted our delegation here in Hannover.



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My only regret is that I have never been to Germany for Oktoberfest. So I will have to come back. And I suspect it's more fun when you're not President. So my timing will be good.

And as always, I bring the friendship of the American people. We consider the German people, and all of our European allies, to be among our closest friends in the world -- because we share so much experience and so many of the same values. We believe that nations and peoples should live in security and peace. We believe in creating opportunity that lifts up not just the few but the many. And I'm proud to be the first American President to come to Europe and be able to say that, in the United States, health care is not a privilege, it is now a right for all. We share that as well.

Perhaps most importantly, we believe in the equality and inherent dignity of every human being. Today in America, people have the freedom to marry the person that they love. We believe in justice, that no child in the world should ever die from a mosquito bite; that no one should suffer from the ache of an empty stomach; that, together, we can save our planet and the world's most vulnerable people from the worst effects of climate change. These are things that we share. It's borne of common experience.

And this is what I want to talk to you about today -- the future that we are building together - - not separately, but together. And that starts right here in Europe.

And I want to begin with an observation that, given the challenges that we face in the world and the headlines we see every day, may seem improbable, but it's true. We are fortunate to be living in the most peaceful, most prosperous, most progressive era in human history. That may surprise young people who are watching TV or looking at your phones and it seems like only bad news comes through every day. But consider that it's been decades since the last war between major powers. More people live in democracies. We're wealthier and healthier and better educated, with a global economy that has lifted up more than a billion people from extreme poverty, and created new middle classes from the Americas to Africa to Asia. Think about the health of the average person in the world -- tens of millions of lives that we now save from disease and infant mortality, and people now living longer lives.

Around the world, we're more tolerant -- with more opportunity for women, and gays and lesbians, as we push back on bigotry and prejudice. And around the world, there's a new generation of young people -- like you -- that are connected by technology, and driven by your idealism and your imagination, and you're working together to start new ventures, and to hold governments more accountable, and advance human dignity.



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If you had to choose a moment in time to be born, any time in human history, and you didn't know ahead of time what nationality you were or what gender or what your economic status might be, you'd choose today -- which isn't to say that there is not still enormous suffering and enormous tragedy and so much work for us to do. It is to remember that the trajectory of our history over the last 50, 100 years has been remarkable. And we can't take that for granted, and we should take confidence in our ability to be able to shape our own destiny.

Now, that doesn't mean that we can be complacent because today dangerous forces do threaten to pull the world backward, and our progress is not inevitable. These challenges threaten Europe and they threaten our transatlantic community. We're not immune from the forces of change around the world. As they have elsewhere, barbaric terrorists have slaughtered innocent people in Paris and Brussels, and Istanbul and San Bernardino, California. And we see these tragedies in places central to our daily lives -- an airport or café, a workplace or a theater -- and it unsettles us. It makes us unsure in our day-to-day lives -- fearful not just for ourselves but those that we love. Conflicts from South Sudan to Syria to Afghanistan have sent millions fleeing, seeking the relative safety of Europe's shores, but that puts new strains on countries and local communities, and threatens to distort our politics.

Russian aggression has flagrantly violated the sovereignty and territory of an independent European nation, Ukraine, and that unnerves our allies in Eastern Europe, threatening our vision of a Europe that is whole, free and at peace. And it seems to threaten the progress that's been made since the end of the Cold War.

Slow economic growth in Europe, especially in the south, has left millions unemployed, including a generation of young people without jobs and who may look to the future with diminishing hopes. And all these persistent challenges have led some to question whether European integration can long endure; whether you might be better off separating off, redrawing some of the barriers and the laws between nations that existed in the 20th century.

Across our countries, including in the United States, a lot of workers and families are still struggling to recover from the worst economic crisis in generations. And that trauma of millions who lost their jobs and their homes and their savings is still felt. And meanwhile, there are profound trends underway that have been going on for decades -- globalization, automation that -- in some cases, of depressed wages, and made workers in a weaker position to bargain for better working conditions. Wages have stagnated in many advanced countries while other costs have gone up. Inequality has increased. And for many people, it's harder than ever just to hold on.



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This is happening in Europe; we see some of these trends in the United States and across the advanced economies. And these concerns and anxieties are real. They are legitimate. They cannot be ignored, and they deserve solutions from those in power.

Unfortunately, in the vacuum, if we do not solve these problems, you start seeing those who would try to exploit these fears and frustrations and channel them in a destructive way. A creeping emergence of the kind of politics that the European project was founded to reject -- an "us" versus "them" mentality that tries to blame our problems on the other, somebody who doesn't look like us or doesn't pray like us -- whether it's immigrants, or Muslims, or somebody who is deemed different than us.

And you see increasing intolerance in our politics. And loud voices get the most attention. This reminds me of the poem by the great Irish poet W.B. Yeats, where the best lack all conviction, and the worst are full of passionate intensity.

So this is a defining moment. And what happens on this continent has consequences for people around the globe. If a unified, peaceful, liberal, pluralistic, free-market Europe begins to doubt itself, begins to question the progress that's been made over the last several decades, then we can't expect the progress that is just now taking hold in many places around the world will continue. Instead, we will be empowering those who argue that democracy can't work, that intolerance and tribalism and organizing ourselves along ethnic lines, and authoritarianism and restrictions on the press -- that those are the things that the challenges of today demand.

So I've come here today, to the heart of Europe, to say that the United States, and the entire world, needs a strong and prosperous and democratic and united Europe.

Perhaps you need an outsider, somebody who is not European, to remind you of the magnitude of what you have achieved. The progress that I described was made possible in large measure by ideals that originated on this continent in a great Enlightenment and the founding of new republics. Of course, that progress didn't travel a straight line. In the last century -- twice in just 30 years -- the forces of empire and intolerance and extreme nationalism consumed this continent. And cities like this one were largely reduced to rubble. Tens of millions of men and women and children were killed.



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But from the ruins of the Second World War, our nations set out to remake the world -- to build a new international order and the institutions to uphold it. A United Nations to prevent another world war and advance a more just and lasting peace. International financial institutions like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund to promote prosperity for all peoples. A Universal Declaration of Human Rights to advance the "inalienable rights of all members of the human family." And here in Europe, giants like Chancellor Adenauer set out to bind old adversaries through commerce and through trade. As Adenauer said in those early days, "European unity was a dream of a few. It became a hope for [the] many. Today it is a necessity for all of us."

And it wasn't easy. Old animosities had to be overcome. National pride had to be joined with a commitment to a common good. Complex questions of sovereignty and burden-sharing had to be answered. And at every step, the impulse to pull back -- for each country to go its own way -- had to be resisted. More than once, skeptics predicted the demise of this great project.

But the vision of European unity soldiered on -- and having defended Europe's freedom in war, America stood with you every step of this journey. A Marshall Plan to rebuild; an airlift to save Berlin; a NATO alliance to defend our way of life. America's commitment to Europe was captured by a young American President, John F. Kennedy, when he stood in a free West Berlin and declared that "freedom is indivisible, and when one man is enslaved, all are not free."

With strength and resolve and the power of our ideals, and a belief in a unified Europe, we didn't simply end the Cold War -- freedom won. Germany was reunited. You welcomed new democracies into an even "ever closer union." You may argue over whose football clubs are better, vote for different singers on Eurovision. But your accomplishment -- more than 500 million people speaking 24 languages in 28 countries, 19 with a common currency, in one European Union -- remains one of the greatest political and economic achievements of modern times.

Yes, European unity can require frustrating compromise. It adds layers of government that can slow decision-making. I understand. I've been in meetings with the European Commission. And, as an American, we're famously disdainful of government. We understand how easy it must be to vent at Brussels and complain. But remember that every member of your union is a democracy. That's not an accident. Remember that no EU country has raised arms against another. That's not an accident. Remember that NATO is as strong as it's ever been.



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Remember that our market economies -- as Angela and I saw this morning -- are the greatest generators of innovation and wealth and opportunity in history. Our freedom, our quality of life remains the envy of the world, so much so that parents are willing to walk across deserts, and cross the seas on makeshift rafts, and risk everything in the hope of giving their children the blessings that we -- that you -- enjoy -- blessings that you cannot take for granted.

This continent, in the 20th century, was at constant war. People starved on this continent. Families were separated on this continent. And now people desperately want to come here precisely because of what you've created. You can't take that for granted.

And today, more than ever, a strong, united Europe remains, as Adenauer said, a necessity for all of us. It's a necessity for the United States, because Europe's security and prosperity is inherently indivisible from our own. We can't cut ourselves off from you. Our economies are integrated. Our cultures are integrated. Our peoples are integrated. You saw the response of the American people to Paris and Brussels -- it's because, in our imaginations, this is our cities.

A strong, united Europe is a necessity for the world because an integrated Europe remains vital to our international order. Europe helps to uphold the norms and rules that can maintain peace and promote prosperity around the world.

Consider what we've done in recent years: Pulling the global economy back from the brink of depression and putting the world on the path of recovery. A comprehensive deal that's cut off every single one of Iran's paths to a nuclear bomb -- part of our shared vision of a world without nuclear weapons. In Paris, the most ambitious agreement in history to fight climate change. Stopping Ebola in West Africa and saving countless lives. Rallying the world around new sustainable development, including our goal to end extreme poverty. None of those things could have happened if I -- if the United States did not have a partnership with a strong and united Europe. It wouldn't have happened.

That's what's possible when Europe and America and the world stand as one. And that's precisely what we're going to need to face down the very real dangers that we face today. So let me just lay out the kind of cooperation that we're going to need. We need a strong Europe to bear its share of the burden, working with us on behalf of our collective security. The United States has an extraordinary military, the best the world has ever known, but the nature of today's threats means we can't deal with these challenges by ourselves.



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Right now, the most urgent threat to our nations is ISIL, and that's why we're united in our determination to destroy it. And all 28 NATO allies are contributing to our coalition -- whether it's striking ISIL targets in Syria and Iraq, or supporting the air campaign, or training local forces in Iraq, or providing critical humanitarian aid. And we continue to make progress, pushing ISIL back from territory that it controlled.

And just as I've approved additional support for Iraqi forces against ISIL, I've decided to increase U.S. support for local forces fighting ISIL in Syria. A small number of American Special Operations Forces are already on the ground in Syria and their expertise has been critical as local forces have driven ISIL out of key areas. So given the success, I've approved the deployment of up to 250 additional U.S. personnel in Syria, including Special Forces, to keep up this momentum. They're not going to be leading the fight on the ground, but they will be essential in providing the training and assisting local forces that continue to drive ISIL back.

So, make no mistake. These terrorists will learn the same lesson as others before them have, which is, your hatred is no match for our nations united in the defense of our way of life. And just as we remain relentless on the military front, we're not going to give up on diplomacy to end the civil war in Syria, because the suffering of the Syrian people has to end, and that requires an effective political transition.

But this remains a difficult fight, and none of us can solve this problem by ourselves. Even as European countries make important contributions against ISIL, Europe, including NATO, can still do more. So I've spoken to Chancellor Merkel and I'll be meeting later with the Presidents of France and the Prime Ministers of Great Britain and of Italy. In Syria and Iraq, we need more nations contributing to the air campaign. We need more nations contributing trainers to help build up local forces in Iraq. We need more nations to contribute economic assistance to Iraq so it can stabilize liberated areas and break the cycle of violent extremism so that ISIL cannot come back.

These terrorists are doing everything in their power to strike our cities and kill our citizens, so we need to do everything in our power to stop them. And that includes closing gaps so terrorists can't pull off attacks like those in Paris and Brussels.

Which brings me to one other point. Europeans, like Americans, cherish your privacy. And many are skeptical about governments collecting and sharing information, for good reason. That skepticism is healthy. Germans remember their history of government surveillance -- so do Americans, by the way, particularly those who were fighting on behalf of civil rights.



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So it's part of our democracies to want to make sure our governments are accountable.

But I want to say this to young people who value their privacy and spend a lot of time on their phones: The threat of terrorism is real. In the United States, I've worked to reform our surveillance programs to ensure that they're consistent with the rule of law and upholding our values, like privacy -- and, by the way, we include the privacy of people outside of the United States. We care about Europeans' privacy, not just Americans' privacy.

But I also, in working on these issues, have come to recognize security and privacy don't have to be a contradiction. We can protect both. And we have to. If we truly value our liberty, then we have to take the steps that are necessary to share information and intelligence within Europe, as well as between the United States and Europe, to stop terrorists from traveling and crossing borders and killing innocent people.

And as today's diffuse threats evolve, our alliance has to evolve. So we're going to have a NATO summit this summer in Warsaw, and I will insist that all of us need to meet our responsibilities, united, together. That means standing with the people of Afghanistan as they build their security forces and push back against violent extremism. It means more ships in the Aegean to shut down criminal networks who are profiting by smuggling desperate families and children.

And that said, NATO's central mission is, and always will be, our solemn duty -- our Article 5 commitment to our common defense. That's why we'll continue to bolster the defense of our frontline allies in Poland and Romania and the Baltic states.

So we have to both make sure that NATO carries out its traditional mission, but also to meet the threats of NATO's southern flank. That's why we need to stay nimble, and make sure our forces are interoperable, and invest in new capabilities like cyber defense and missile defense. And that's why every NATO member should be contributing its full share -- 2 percent of GDP -- towards our common security, something that doesn't always happen. And I'll be honest, sometimes Europe has been complacent about its own defense.

Just as we stand firm in our own defense, we have to uphold our most basic principles of our international order, and that's a principle that nations like Ukraine have the right to choose their own destiny. Remember that it was Ukrainians on the Maidan, many of them your age, reaching out for a future with Europe that prompted Russia to send in its military.



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After all that Europe endured in the 20th century, we must not allow borders to be redrawn by brute force in the 21st century. So we should keep helping Ukraine with its reforms to improve its economy and consolidate its democracy and modernize its forces to protect its independence.

And I want good relations with Russia, and have invested a lot in good relations with Russia. But we need to keep sanctions on Russia in place until Russia fully implements the Minsk agreements that Chancellor Merkel and President Hollande and others have worked so hard to maintain, and provide a path for a political resolution of this issue. And ultimately, it is my fervent hope that Russia recognizes that true greatness comes not from bullying neighbors, but by working with the world, which is the only way to deliver lasting economic growth and progress to the Russian people.

Now, our collective security rests on a foundation of prosperity, so that brings me to my second point. The world needs a prosperous and growing Europe -- not just a strong Europe, but a prosperous and growing Europe that generates good jobs and wages for its people.

As I mentioned before, the economic anxieties many feel today on both sides of the Atlantic are real. The disruptive changes brought about by the global economy, unfortunately, sometimes are hitting certain groups, especially working-class communities, more heavily. And if neither the burdens, nor the benefits of our global economy are being fairly distributed, it's no wonder that people rise up and reject globalization. If there are too few winners and too many losers as the global economy integrates, people are going to push back.

So all of us in positions of power have a responsibility as leaders of government and business and civil society to help people realize the promise of economic and security in this integrated economy. And the good news is, we know how to do it. Sometimes we just lack the political will to do it.

In the United States, our economy is growing again, but the United States can't be the sole engine of global growth. And countries should not have to choose between responding to crises and investing in their people. So we need to pursue reforms to position us for long-term prosperity, and support demand and invest in the future. All of our countries, for example, could be investing more in infrastructure. All of our countries need to invest in science and research and development that sparks new innovation and new industries. All of our countries have to invest in our young people, and make sure that they have the skills and the training and the education they need to adapt to this rapidly changing world.



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All of our countries need to worry about inequality, and make sure that workers are getting a fair share of the incredible productivity that technology and global supply chains are producing.

But if you're really concerned about inequality, if you're really concerned about the plight of workers, if you're a progressive, it's my firm belief that you can't turn inward. That's not the right answer. We have to keep increasing the trade and investment that supports jobs, as we're working to do between the United States and the EU. We need to keep implementing reforms to our banking and financial systems so that the excesses and abuses that triggered the financial crisis never happen again.

But we can't do that individually, nation by nation, because finance now is transnational. It moves around too fast. If we're not coordinating between Europe and the United States and Asia, then it won't work.

As the world has been reminded in recent weeks, we need to close loopholes that allow corporations and wealthy individuals to avoid paying their fair share of taxes through tax havens and tax avoidance, trillions of dollars that could be going towards pressing needs like education and health care and infrastructure. But to do that, we have to work together.

Here in Europe, as you work to strengthen your union -- including through labor and banking reforms, and by ensuring growth across the Eurozone -- you will have the staunch support of the United States. But you're going to have to do it together, because your economies are too integrated to try to solve these problems on your own. And I want to repeat: We have to confront the injustice of widening economic inequality. But that is going to require collective work, because capital is mobile, and if only a few countries are worrying about it, then a lot of businesses will head toward places that don't care about it quite as much.

For a lot of years, it was thought that countries had to choose between economic growth and economic inclusion. Now we know the truth -- when wealth is increasingly concentrated among the few at the top, it's not only a moral challenge to us but it actually drags down a country's growth potential. We need growth that is broad and lifts everybody up. We need tax policies that do right by working families.

And those like me who support European unity and free trade also have a profound responsibility to champion strong protections for workers -- a living wage and the right to organize, and a strong safety net, and a commitment to protect consumers and the environment upon which we all depend.



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If we really want to reduce inequality, we've got to make sure everyone who works hard gets a fair shot -- and that's especially true for young people like you -- with education, and job training, and quality health care and good wages. And that includes, by the way, making sure that there's equal pay for equal work for women.

The point is, we have to reform many of our economies. But the answer to reform is not to start cutting ourselves off from each other. Rather, it's to work together. And this brings me back to where I began. The world depends upon a democratic Europe that upholds the principles of pluralism and diversity and freedom that are our common creed. As free peoples, we cannot allow the forces that I've described -- fears about security or economic anxieties -- to undermine our commitment to the universal values that are the source of our strength.

Democracy, I understand, can be messy. It can be slow. It can be frustrating. I know that. I have to deal with a Congress. We have to constantly work to make sure government is not a collection of distant, detached institutions, but is connected and responsive to the everyday concerns of our people. There's no doubt that how a united Europe works together can be improved. But look around the world -- at authoritarian governments and theocracies that rule by fear and oppression -- there is no doubt that democracy is still the most just and effective form of government ever created.

And when I talk about democracy, I don't just mean elections, because there are a number of countries where people get 70, 80 percent of the vote, but they control all the media and the judiciary. And civil society organizations and NGOs can't organize, and have to be registered, and are intimidated. I mean real democracy, the sort that we see here in Europe and in the United States. So we have to be vigilant in defense of these pillars of democracy -- not just elections, but rule of law, as well as fair elections, a free press, vibrant civil societies where citizens can work for change.

And we should be suspicious of those who claim to have the interests of Europe at heart and yet don't practice the very values that are essential to Europe, that have made freedom in Europe so real.

So, yes, these are unsettling times. And when the future is uncertain, there seems to be an instinct in our human nature to withdraw to the perceived comfort and security of our own tribe, our own sect, our own nationality, people who look like us, sound like us. But in today's world, more than any time in human history, that is a false comfort.



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It pits people against one another because of what they look or how they pray or who they love. And yet, we know where that kind of twisted thinking can lead. It can lead to oppression. It can lead to segregation and internment camps. And to the Shoah and Srebrenica.

In the United States, we've long wrestled with questions of race and integration, and we do to this day. And we still have a lot of work to do. But our progress allows somebody like me to now stand here as President of the United States. That's because we committed ourselves to a larger ideal, one based on a creed -- not a race, not a nationality -- a set of principles; truths that we held to be self-evident that all men were created equal. And now, as Europe confronts questions of immigration and religion and assimilation, I want you to remember that our countries are stronger, they are more secure and more successful when we welcome and integrate people of all backgrounds and faith, and make them feel as one. And that includes our fellow citizens who are Muslim.

Look, the sudden arrival of so many people from beyond our borders, especially when their cultures are very different, that can be daunting. We have immigration issues in the United States as well, along our southern border of the United States and from people arriving from all around the world who get a visa and decide they want to stay. And I know the politics of immigration and refugees is hard. It's hard everywhere, in every country. And just as a handful of neighborhoods shouldn't bear all the burden of refugee resettlement, neither should any one nation. All of us have to step up, all of us have to share this responsibility. That includes the United States.

But even as we take steps that are required to ensure our security; even as we help Turkey and Greece cope with this influx in a way that is safe and humane; even as Chancellor Merkel and other European leaders work for an orderly immigration and resettlement process, rather than a disorderly one; even as we all need to collectively do more to invest in the sustainable development and governance in those nations from which people are fleeing so that they can succeed and prosper in their own countries, and so that we can reduce the conflicts that cause so much of the refugee crisis around the world -- Chancellor Merkel and others have eloquently reminded us that we cannot turn our backs on our fellow human beings who are here now, and need our help now. We have to uphold our values, not just when it's easy, but when it's hard.



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In Germany, more than anywhere else, we learned that what the world needs is not more walls. We can't define ourselves by the barriers we build to keep people out or to keep people in. At every crossroads in our history, we've moved forward when we acted on those timeless ideals that tells us to be open to one another, and to respect the dignity of every human being.

And I think of so many Germans and people across Europe who have welcomed migrants into their homes, because, as one woman in Berlin said, "we needed to do something." Just that human impulse to help. And I think of the refugee who said, "I want to teach my kids the value of working." That human impulse to see the next generation have hope. All of us can be guided by the empathy and compassion of His Holiness, Pope Francis, who said "refugees are not numbers, they are people who have faces, names, stories, and [they] need to be treated as such."

And I know it may seem easy for me to say all this, living on the other side of the ocean. And I know that some will call it blind hope when I say that I am confident that the forces that bind Europe together are ultimately much stronger than those trying to pull you apart. But hope is not blind when it is rooted in the memory of all that you've already overcome -- your parents, your grandparents.

So I say to you, the people of Europe, don't forget who you are. You are the heirs to a struggle for freedom. You're the Germans, the French, the Dutch, the Belgians, the Luxembourgers, the Italians -- and yes, the British -- who rose above old divisions and put Europe on the path to union.

You're the Poles of Solidarity and the Czechs and Slovaks who waged a Velvet Revolution. You're the Latvians, and Lithuanians and Estonians who linked hands in a great human chain of freedom. You're the Hungarians and Austrians who cut through borders of barbed wire. And you're the Berliners who, on that November night, finally tore down that wall. You're the people of Madrid and London who faced down bombings and refused to give in to fear.

And you are the Parisians who, later this year, plan to reopen the Bataclan. You're the people of Brussels, in a square of flowers and flags, including one Belgian who offered a message -- we need "more." More understanding. More dialogue. More humanity.

That's who you are. United, together. You are Europe -- "United in diversity." Guided by the ideals that have lit the world, and stronger when you stand as one.



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As you go forward, you can be confident that your greatest ally and friend, the United States of America, stands with you, shoulder-to-shoulder, now and forever. Because a united Europe -- once the dream of a few -- remains the hope of the many and a necessity for us all.

Thank you very much. Thank you.