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**REMARKS OF ALBERT SHANKER  
PRESIDENT, AMERICAN FEDERATION OF TEACHERS  
AT THE LECH WALESZA DINNER  
INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEE**

November 16, 1989

(Thank you.)

"Who would have believed it?"

For the past few months, wherever I go, there's hardly a conversation that doesn't turn to the cataclysmic events in Poland, the Soviet Union, Hungary, China, and, now, East Germany and Czechoslovakia.

Who would have believed it, everyone says. Who would have thought it could happen in our lifetime?

Who would have thought that Lech Walesa, an electrician, would stand before the United States Congress, not because he is a head of state but because his heart cried out for democracy and his hands joined in solidarity with other workers to build one? Who would have thought that the moral authority of a trade unionist from Poland would rattle the conscience of the free world and shake the foundations of the totalitarian world?

And who would have thought that peoples who had never known democracy in their lives would rise up, risking everything, to demand freedom as their inalienable birthright?

Who would have believed it, everyone asks.

And, of course, the marvelous answer is: All of us in this room believed it could happen: Lech Walesa, Leo Cherne, our much-missed Bayard Rustin -- each of us in this room.

We certainly have acted as if it could happen -- and as if our lives depended on it happening because so many lives did

depend on it happening. And by acting as if it were indeed possible to preserve and extend democratic and human rights, even in the face of ruthless adversaries and despite the fashionableness of cultural relativism, we did indeed help make it possible.

The International Rescue Committee believed it was possible for human rights to triumph; its belief has been apparent in each and every one of its heroic acts to save refugees from tyranny and demonstrate that the world's veil of indifference is not impenetrable.

And Lech Walesa believed it could happen; his belief was apparent every time he raised his voice against the lies of a lying regime and proved that one voice was really many voices and that the many wanted democracy.

Lech Walesa especially, but also each of you here, acted all these years as if it were not impossible for democracy and freedom to triumph because we would not and could not accept the alternative -- the view that only the people in democratic nations treasured liberty and that, elsewhere, official murder, the suppression of human rights, and individual despair were legitimate options, were just another choice of "lifestyle." Because of course they weren't -- and may the image of an electrician scaling a fence forever prove the moral bankruptcy of that cynical and smug view.

So let us never forget that our words and deeds on behalf of our belief in the virtues of democracy were frequently greeted

with discomfort, embarrassment, even opposition. Because we will face that again just as surely as we are celebrating a triumph for democracy tonight. We have new friends now, and that is good. But the old friends in this room know there is still hard work ahead. Lech Walesa will continue to need us to build a democracy in Poland and we will continue to need him and his brave colleagues to help us sustain ours at home. And together, we must continue to act as if it is not impossible to win the struggle for democracy and human rights so that it will be possible for history to record one day, "No one would have believed it, but the struggle for human rights was won."

It is now my pleasure to introduce a man who has dedicated his life to acting on that belief and who heads the National Endowment for Democracy, that great institution founded to promote that belief. Carl Gershman has contributed so many words and deeds to the cause of democracy and human rights that I sometimes think he is a very ancient man. Certainly he is a very effective man. Wherever he has gone -- the Social Democrats-USA, the A. Philip Randolph Institute, Freedom House, the United Nations, and now NED -- he has strengthened the cause of democracy and human rights with his intellectual rigor and practical skills. Bayard taught Carl well, and Carl has now taught the far less willing pupils of the U.S. Congress the value of strong and open institutions unabashedly dedicated to promoting democratic aspirations. Carl Gershman...

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