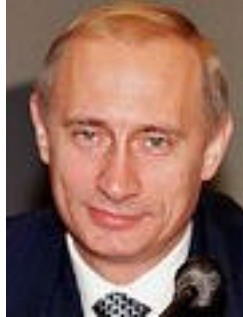


President Vladimir Putin

Speech at Columbia University in the City of New York

September 26, 2003



President Vladimir Putin:

Good afternoon, my friends!

Despite the difficulties in entering the University building, we have nevertheless managed to meet, and this is already a positive result. I would ask you not to take offence at the security service. What can we do, this is the world that we have to live in. I often get angry with the security service - with my own and others' - but I don't take offence. They are doing their job, and there's nothing you can do about it.

Mr. President,

Friends,

First of all, allow me to welcome Mr. Bollinger. I also thank all the students who have gathered in this hall and professors of Columbia University for the warm and cheerful reception.

I am pleased to have the opportunity to visit one of the oldest universities in the U.S.A. I know that next year you are celebrating your 250th anniversary. Mr. Bollinger and I have already had the chance to talk about this, and he told me about the University. And I want to make use of the opportunity, and congratulate you on this important upcoming event.

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Universities like Columbia have a particular influence on political, economic and cultural life. Here ideas are born - new ideas, and people are educated who should implement these ideas and give them practical application.

Your university is one of the acknowledged world centres for studying problems of political science, theory and practice of international relations. And I would like to take this opportunity to share my views on several problems of the modern world and Russian-American relations.

One could say that for many of you, Russia has become your destiny as scholars. You know a great deal about the history of our country, its culture and the traditions of Russia. You study its contemporary economics and politics. But you probably also know something else: how relations between Russia and the United States have changed in recent decades.

Unfortunately, the American school of "sovietology" and the Soviet school of "American studies," or rather, "the study of American imperialism", as they liked to say in Russia at the time - were for many years the hostages of big politics - when our countries alternated between becoming allies, and bringing the world to the brink of a nuclear catastrophe.

Naturally, in these conditions, scholarly work was excessively politicized. It was not so much involved in the study of the uniqueness and diversity of American and Russian civilization, as finding weak points in our political systems, and looking for tools to make as many attacks as possible, and do as much damage as possible to each other. Unfortunately, the inertia of such approaches is very strong. The world has changed fundamentally, and the Soviet Union is no more, but "sovietology" still exists.

The President of the University and I talked, and I told him: these disciplines need to be abolished. There is nothing to study! I see words inscribed on the arches of this hall: "Medicine," "Theology," "Philosophy". Sovietology is not there. And this is correct, because capital knowledge about each other should be based on fundamental knowledge. Only then will it be objective and profound, and will help people to understand each other - for Russian to understand America and for Americans to understand Russia.

We have travelled a very difficult path towards each other. Today, our countries adhere to many common values like never before. However, we can see that we are still a long way from a complete and mutual end to differences and stereotypical views about each other. To break the inertia of thinking, to oppose it with an objective analysis and positive knowledge - your direct involvement is extremely important in this task.

And in connection with this, we need new and well-thought out forms of interaction with one another like we need oxygen. And not just in the sphere of security and the war on terrorism, but in general - in the economy, in politics, in culture, and in the humanitarian sphere, in the widest sense of this word.

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Ladies and gentlemen,

Two weeks ago America paid tribute to the memory of the victims of 11 September. I must say that the events of two years ago were a true shock to Russian society, which has its own bitter experience of a similar kind. Because the Russian people have felt this for themselves.

I visited the fire academy yesterday. I must say that I still feel a strong emotional effect from the story of these events, and from the exhibition we looked at, with photographs of the fire fighters killed.

Tragedies of this scale are turning points in history. They not only leave a trace in the memory, they fundamentally change and transform thinking, the system of reality and the way of life for entire peoples and nations.

Today the world should think about the nature of terrorism, about its roots. One cannot close ones eyes to the fact that explosions and assassinations are only the tip of the iceberg in such a dangerous and destructive phenomenon.

For at the basis of ideology and practice of terrorism lies an aspiration to remake the world, to deny the values of human life - both others' and one's own. And when I said that the aspiration to remake the world lies at the basis of terrorism, I was not exaggerating. This is what lies at the basis of terrorism. This is what they aspire to, however strange this may seem. Perhaps some terrorists have destroyed two or three thousand people - it is a terrible catastrophe, but do they think they can remake the world? They think they can. And their main weapon is not even terrorist acts. It is an attempt to enter people's minds, to poison people's minds with ideas that have nothing in common with humanism. They sow fear and hate, trample on rights and freedoms, and the democratic foundation of society.

At the same time, both your and our experience shows that methods of force in fighting terrorism are far from being the only ones, and they are not always effective. We believe that along with anti-terrorist operations, it is necessary to deploy a wide-ranging intellectual front to fight terrorism.

Conflicts of religions and nations that are artificially stirred up by terrorists need to be opposed with humanist values and knowledge, tolerance and extensive information about each other.

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Ladies and gentlemen,

The modern world is very interdependent. And any unstable area in the world may become a source of threats for people who live on the other side of the global. It is no coincidence that the terrorist act against the UN mission in Iraq is, in its brutality, senselessness and means of execution, a complete copy of the crimes - I repeat, a complete and absolute copy of the crimes - which terrorists committed in a number of cities in Russia.

Our countries must together, step by step, unravel the areas of regional conflicts. Together - within the framework of the UN and other international organizations - we must choose a strategy of building a more stable and just economic system. A system which should have no place for poverty or social disorder.

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I specially prepared a short introductory speech, so as not to tire you out, and I would like to leave more time for questions. But in conclusion, I would like to remind you that we are only a few years away from the two-century anniversary of diplomatic relations between our countries. Then, in 1807, President Jefferson wrote to Russian Emperor Alexander I: "I am certain that Russia is a country that is most amiably disposed to us." When we have been together, we have always achieved success and triumphed over evil, tyranny and prejudice. This was the way it was during the American war of independence, and Jefferson did not write these words for no reason: Russia was the truest ally of the U.S.A. during this period. This was the way it was during the First and Second World Wars. This is also the way it is at the moment.

I am certain: any breakthroughs - in politics and in business - require new staff, and serious investments in the human potential of our cooperation. And this is why joint training and exchange of specialists is so important, and exchange of education systems, and research and innovation activity. All this work lies ahead.

Knowing each other from their student days, young people in Russia and the U.S. will form a view of the world that is free of stereotypes more easily and quickly. It is young people who determine the spirit and nature of relations between our nations. They determine common values that are necessary to build a safe, prosperous future for the entire planet.

I sincerely wish you success and thank you for your attention.

Please, if you have any questions, I will try to answer them.

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