

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT

Event

“The 2023 Forum on Business and Democracy”

Concluding Remarks

DATE

Tuesday, March 28, 2023 at 11:45 a.m. ET

FEATURING

Johnny Walsh

White House Summit Coordinator, National Security Council

CSIS EXPERTS

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Marti Flacks: We've come nearly to the end of our day, it's hard to believe, but we do have one final speaker who I'm really excited to hear from because he has been intimately involved in designing not just this event but the entire week worth of summit events.

So, to close us out, I'm really delighted to introduced Johnny Walsh to share his conclusions and thoughts about this forum and the week. Johnny currently serves as the coordinator for the Summit for Democracy on the National Security Council staff. When he is not planning the summit and all of these side events, he serves as the deputy assistant administrator at USAID, where he oversees the Center for Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance. He previously served in government in a range of roles, including at the U.S. Mission to the United Nations and elsewhere.

So we're really delighted that he was able to make the time today amidst many, many important, high-level events to give us his thoughts about this important topic. So, Johnny, over to you. (Applause.)

Johnny Walsh: Thank you all so much. I've been budgeted for half an hour on the schedule here, but recognizing the time, I intend to at least double that. (Laughter.) In fact, you are catching me on a good day, the day before the summit starts. It's an interesting time to have the role that I'm currently in, so I will try to get you to lunch.

Enormous thanks, first of all, to CSIS, to all the organizations that contributed to where we are now, to the companies that made commitments, I mean, to the incredible Marti, who spearheaded so much of this process.

Looking across this entire summit, virtually the only events that we formally endorsed as the U.S. government as official parts of the summit were like held within departments and agencies and, at least until the very end, the solitary exception was the Center for Strategic and International Studies – (laughs) – hosting this, and it really is a sign of our just immense respect and confidence in this institution. Georgetown snuck in at the end, too, we like them all right.

So inasmuch as I am the summit lead at the White House based on grievous crimes in a past life, I'll talk a little bit about how the summit came to be what it is and what we hope to get out of this at the dawn of these few days, and then come around to the role of, I think, the work that has happened here and that this event has helped really just amazingly shake loose.

So from our perspective, the summit is really good for two things. It's – number one – shaking loose specific actions that can strengthen democracy. That's a huge – that covers a huge range of ground, but specific things that we can do to strengthen democracy, counter authoritarianism, fight

corruption, defend human rights. And second is to galvanize all of us to do it together – all of us, the democratic actors of the world who actually believe in democracy at a time when it is so often under attack.

And so it's very important to us, in hosting an event like this, that the U.S. show leadership, but it's even more important that we not be in – that we all be in it together, that we not pretend that this is just about what the U.S. is going to do or certainly not holding ourselves up as the arbiters of how to do democracy right. We approach it with humility, and we approach it with the sense that collective action is the only way we're going to meaningfully strengthen democracy, human rights around the world, or push back against authoritarianism in the many, many places it has crept in.

And so how do we intend to do that – like, what is the summit supposed to do toward those two ends? Certainly we're trying to strengthen democracy itself, and you can see that in – whether that means working on election integrity or strengthening civil society, or putting guardrails on the use of technology, strengthening rule of law in court systems.

But beyond that, it's at least as important for us to collectively show that democracy is delivering, first of all, material benefits, tangible benefits, and second, the more intangible, like a sense of justice in a society, a sense that the system of government is uplifting human dignity. And democracy, I think, on both the material and the non-material, wildly outperforms other systems of government, despite the often prevalent narrative that authoritarianism is efficient or is effective. And third, beyond strengthening democracy, making it more effective is showing democracies tackling the world's problems, the defining problems of our time. And I think you will hear a lot about that from the president and from others as the summit commences in earnest. That means showing that democracies are doing the real heavy lifting in combatting pandemics, dealing with climate change, addressing the food security crisis, addressing traditional security crises like that in Ukraine – it's more than a security crisis, of course.

And so with those objectives in mind, we gathered 15 months ago at the first summit. It was over a hundred countries, and all of them brought specific commitments to the table – every head of state. Now we're not naïve; some of them took those commitments incredibly seriously, some of them maybe less so. That was all right; it was a starting point. It launched a lot of processes around the world.

The U.S. – we held ourselves, I think, to the highest standard of all as the conveners of this event. We announced the Presidential Initiative for Democratic Renewal, which is just an enormous expansion of our democracy assistance work around the world. I see people in this room who have been central architects of the thing. It not only expanded what we do, it updated it

to the really pressing challenges of the 2020s, like the digital authoritarianism phenomenon, like corruption as it exists in the modern era.

We launched a series of multi-stakeholder groups called Democracy Cohorts whereby governments and civil society organizations would work together on a particular part of this sprawling idea of strengthening democracy, whether it was strengthening labor rights, or media freedom, or fighting corruption, or the role of youth, the role of women in a democracy. There were 15 of them all told, and they all came back with specific – sometimes like realistic but tangible achievements to report back by this second summit.

And now we come back together. A lot of work has been done in those 15 months. As we set out to plan this second summit, we had a few things that we really needed to achieve if this was going to be worth its salt. First is that we had to show progress, that all that work had actually achieved something. I feel extremely gratified at how that has gone since the first summit. Second, it has to not be seen as a purely American exercise. I don't think we viewed as – I know we did not view it as America, you know, teaching democracy to the world or certainly democracy as an American value at any point in this process, but as it has evolved, it was so important that this become all of the participants doing it because we want to and because we want to do it together, not because of diplomatic whatever from the United States.

And so you see that in my favorite part of the second summit, which is that there's five co-hosts – like this summit is launching in five capitals, basically one on every continent, each one focused on different parts of democracy and human rights, and together kind of creating a really global celebration of democracy. And there has been so much creativity and energy surrounding those events in South Korea, Costa Rica, Zambia, and the Netherlands alongside Washington.

Third is we had to include more stakeholders, and I think that it's not that there was no private sector role the first time, but we collectively wished that we had done more to engage the private sector in this inherently multi-stakeholder, everyone-is-in-it-together effort that we launched the first time around. And so a few months ago, the State Department issued the call to the private sector to advance democracy, and that invited any company that believes in these values, that sees why democracy is good for businesses and businesses are good for democracy, to come to the table with their own commitments. There was no leverage applied, like, just voluntarily out of the importance of these issues. State, I think wisely, grouped them into four areas of particular focus, which was advancing – which were advancing technology for democracy, defending civic space – very closely related – defending labor rights, and fighting corruption. And that's not an exclusive list; there are many different ways to support democracy.

But I think those particular areas dovetailed really well with work that that U.S. was doing on technology. You're going to hear a huge range of deliverables from the president and others this week about how we're countering the hostile use of surveillance technology, countering other forms of digital repression, pushing for a more open internet.

On labor you'll hear discussion of a national labor strategy, which we've been working on at the White House, on anti-corruption. You'll hear a huge suite of programs. The South Korean event is entirely focusing on anti-corruption. Treasury is doing one right as we speak. '

So there's a lot of work going on, and with the private sector helping us, I think it all more than the sum of its parts. And that's why this is so useful.

So it's the beginning of a process, not the end – I really stress that. But we got work over those months. I'm so grateful to the organizations that convened roundtables to help bring these commitments together – the Global Network Initiative, Business and Social Responsibility, the American Apparel and Footwear Association. CSIS – as if it didn't already have enough to do to get this thing going – ran one of the roundtables. The State Department and USAID ran their own anti-corruption effort. And companies showed up. They came with commitments. We came out with a new fund to support human rights defenders with things like security keys to protect their digital security with a form of, like, white glove service from another company for human rights defenders who are encountering attempts to compromise their digital security; a range of commitments to provide data on internet shutdowns so that researchers can keep up with the latest and greatest authoritarian tactics to deny populations the use of the internet; reporting on other campaigns by authoritarian governments to go after activists, journalists and others; sometimes active steps to impede the use of platforms to do so.

We saw the State-USAID initiative, GPS, for Galvanizing the Private Sector. A large range of companies signed up to help anti-corruption efforts abroad; for example, big companies here helping small companies abroad fight corruption as it – or resist corruption as it exists in their local context.

We saw the USAID Grand Challenge. We had a company promise a program of mentorship to the winners. A grand challenge is essentially a contest that has a history of shaking forth really creative, innovative ideas for how we can address a development – a major development problem, of which corruption is one.

And then I would just cite, in addition to things that came directly out of this commitments process, we saw lots of other parts of the Summit for

Democracy that companies helped out with, partnered on. I would especially cite the media sector in which, at the first summit President Biden announced a sort of seed donation to the International Fund for Public Interest Media. It was \$20 million to start this neutral, multi-donor fund that could support independent media outlets, small and large, around the world. Companies joined in on that.

We saw the private sector help out the Media Viability Accelerator, which is a USAID program that goes beyond providing grants to companies, but to help them become more viable from a business perspective. Another, called Reporters Shield, functions kind of like an insurance company to help small media outlets fight off predatory lawsuits whose purpose is just to drive them out of business, but with, quote, unquote, “coverage,” they can either deter or fight off these suits in the first place.

These are all really useful. We don’t have to agree on everything that the private sector is doing or the government is doing. There are many issues above all of our heads that this or that company, this or that government has not gotten to yet. But the world is better for the steps that we’ve seen that came out of this process, and certainly we have to implement them in earnest. We have to build on them as time goes on because anti-democratic forces will not stop with the status quo. We have to keep – we have to keep setting our own standards higher on how much we rally to support democracy at a time when it could be in great danger. But it’s in all of our interests to do so.

I would repeat that democracy is good for businesses and businesses are good for democracy. So to conclude, we’ll be turning to many questions about the future of the Summit for Democracy after this week. You’ll hear a bit of an announcement about where this is going – the process is most definitely not ending. But, with a little bit of time and space away from party planning, we will turn really in earnest to questions like – processes like this one, like the Democracy Cohorts – how do we sustain them because these are intended to be a start, not a beginning for every stakeholder, every company, every non-governmental organization that has signed on to this effort.

I think, though, that all of it together has shown the summit at its best – this private sector, this business forum has shown it. It has helped rally us to strengthen democracy, and it has helped motivate us to get specific things done.

I said before, we hold ourselves – the U.S. government – to a really high standard on that, and we thank others who have gotten on board as well. We’re in this together; it’s the only way that democracy is going to advance in the coming years.

So thank you so much for listening to me. Thank you for the commitments. I appreciate it. (Applause.)

Ms. Flacks:

Well, thank you, Johnny, so much for laying that all out, and what a fantastic summary of not just the summit itself, but what came out of this private sector process, which has been, as you said, a multi-month effort to engage companies on the Summit for Democracy and their commitments around democratic resilience.

I've been incredibly impressed and inspired by the conversations that we had today, and particularly the wide range of tools and ideas that the private sector and allies came forward with on how to address human rights and democracy – everything from digital tools, both offensive digital tools and defensive digital tools; different policies companies have adopted to make sure that their principles align with their practice; financial commitments that are being made; and then just a wide-ranging discussion about stakeholder engagement and influencing and the repeated importance of – that came from every panel about engaging with stakeholders, whether they are civil society, media and journalists, your own employees, workers down supply chains, NGOs and human rights advocates, and of course, governments – both the U.S. government and foreign governments around the world.

And so it has been just amazing to hear this collection of ideas come forth from this process as well as the specific commitments – Johnny outlined many of them – that companies have stepped forward with to make – in the context of the summit itself.

I want to thank, again, our sponsors for today's events – Ford Foundation and Open Society Foundations for allowing us to come together and have these important conversations.

And I'll just end where I began this morning, which is just to say that I continue to believe that any efforts to address democratic backsliding to make democracy more resilient require all stakeholders to be engaged, including the private sector. As we've said many times today, business – democracy is good for business and business must, in turn, be good for democracy.

So thank you all for being here today, and enjoy the rest of your day. (Applause.)

(END)