

Silence is not an option in fight against antisemitism

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As author of the law that created the 'Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism' in 2004 and another law enacted earlier this year to elevate the post to the high-level position of ambassador, I am acutely aware of the ongoing threats posed by the recent explosion of antisemitism in the United States and worldwide.

Today — unparalleled since the dark days of the Second World War — Jewish communities are facing violent attacks against synagogues, schools, cultural sites, cemeteries and individuals.

No one — and nowhere — is immune. The remarkable Jewish community in my district in Lakewood has suffered from multiple manifestations of anti-Semitic hate.

Antisemitism in the U.S. — which had already been worsening according to the FBI with more than 60% of anti-religious hate crimes directed against Jews — is now exploding.

I have been fighting antisemitism for over 40 years.

In 1982, I traveled to Moscow and Leningrad to meet Jewish human rights activists.

For hours on end, our delegation heard stories of Soviet physical and mental abuse, systematic harassment, gulags and psychiatric prisons, and an array of wanton, brutal acts of antisemitism.

In one Moscow apartment, the mother of the great Jewish human rights leader and political prisoner in the Soviet Union, Natan Sharansky, admonished us to do more for her son, because his life was in dire jeopardy. We did.

A few years later, and shortly after Sharansky's release from the infamous Perm Camp 35 in the Ural Mountains, I visited that gulag — a dreadful place filled with prisoners of conscience.



U.S. Rep. Chris Smith | Peter Ackerman File

To the utter dismay of Lt. Col. Osin — Perm Camp's KGB warden — a colleague and I interviewed and videotaped more than 20 religious prisoners and pushed for their release. In time, they all got out. Then, almost suddenly, the Soviet Union and the communist Warsaw Pact nations collapsed, and hope and expectation soared. A new day dawned — the matriculation of several dictatorships to democracy, respect for human rights, the peace dividend and a better future for Jews.

It didn't take long, however, to be seriously disappointed.

In early 1996, I chaired the first Congressional hearing on antisemitism — The Rising Tide of Global Anti-Semitism — as it was becoming increasingly clear that the status of Jews in many countries was rapidly deteriorating.

At another hearing I chaired in 2002, Dr. Shimon Samuels of the Wiesenthal Center in Paris said, 'The Holocaust for 30 years after the Second World War acted as a protective Teflon against blatant anti-Semitic expression (especially in Europe). That Teflon has eroded, and what was considered distasteful and politically incorrect is becoming simply an opinion.' He warned ominously, 'cocktail chatter at fine English dinners can end as Molotov cocktails against synagogues.'

In response to a sudden, dramatic, frightening spike in antisemitism in several countries,

including the United States, I proposed the idea of a major conference or conferences on combating antisemitism under the auspices of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

Those efforts led directly to a series of high-level OSCE conferences on combating antisemitism, first in Vienna and then the historic 2004 Berlin Conference and then other venues including Berlin plus 10 — 10 years later.

Since then, the 57 countries of the OSCE — all of Europe, Russia, the caucuses, Canada and the U.S. — have made solemn, tangible commitments to put noble words into concrete action.

If our fight to crush this pernicious form of hatred is to succeed, we need government officials at all levels to denounce, without hesitation or delay, anti-Semitic acts wherever and whenever they occur. No exceptions.

Holocaust. Remembrance education must dramatically expand.

And we need to better understand and expose and combat the existential threat to Israel.

People of conscience must stand in solidarity with our Jewish brothers and sisters against this rising tide of hate.

Our words and deeds must be clear and bold.

Abraham Lincoln once said: 'To sin by silence when they should protest, makes cowards of men.'

Silence is not an option. Nor is inaction

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