

Speech by Congressman Rodrigo Maia

President of the Brazilian Federal Chamber of Deputies

On the occasion of receiving the Woodrow Wilson Award for Public Service

November 15, 2019 in New York City

Good evening everyone.

I am very grateful to the Wilson Center and the Brazil Institute for this honor, and to everyone here—Mr. Bruce [Blakeman], Ambassador Anthony [Harrington], Ambassador Tom [Shannon], [Minister Nelson Jobim,] and of course my friend Paulo Sotero, for the honor, which I will remember for the rest of my life. I would like to take a moment to thank [someone who] represents all of those who allowed us to be here today: Mr. Marc Allen [senior vice president of Boeing and president of Embraer Partnership and Group Operations] I thank him and all of those who collaborated to create the opportunity of this evening.

On behalf of all of us, I am grateful for the presence of my friend, my brother, Davi Alcolumbre, President of the Federal Senate. Sometimes we imagine that the efforts of Congress are made possible under the leadership of one person. Congress, unlike the other powers, it is a power built on the basis of dialogue and the sum of its leaders. I have no doubt [of this]—and there are many congressmen and many leaders from the Chamber and the Senate here. I thank them for their trust—because what we have already done and what we have yet to do together, Davi, we owe to the trust of the deputies [and] senators of our country. And I am certain that the role played by the President of the Senate, including in the Social Security reform vote in the House (which was not obvious), has been a decisive role.

Politics depends on signals. When a congressman receives the signal that the other congressional chamber [the Senate] has the same will, and that there is on the other side a leader with the same interest in pursuing an issue, then [that] certainly influences, impacts the result of the Chamber's vote. So our accomplishment [in passing Social Security reform] is also thanks to the leadership of President Davi, who generously came here today, as he told me, "I will go there to applaud you." So thank you very much for your friendship.

Certainly for me, this is not just any night; nor is it for the Brazilians who are here tonight. Today, November 15, is the date when we celebrate the birth of the Republic. I do not know if the date of this event was planned intentionally by the Wilson Center; to me, it is more important to try to understand the signs that appear throughout our trajectory. Receiving this award on the day of the proclamation of the Republic is a huge sign. I believe that nothing in life happens by chance; fate, though uncertain, is the result of our mistakes and

attempts, our efforts, and our choices. Signs appear all the time and I always try to interpret them.

On the day that we celebrate the birth of our Republic, I receive this honor on behalf of all Brazilian parliamentarians. Yes, on behalf of EVERYONE! Of those who think like me, but also of those who think differently from me; for those who voted for me for President of the Chamber of Deputies, but also for those who voted for other candidates; for those who praise me, but also for those who criticize me. I accept and depend on the [debate of] contradictory [ideas]!

A public figure has an obligation to accept other points of views, to accept the differences [of ideas]. For that reason, I sincerely thank all who think differently from me, who criticize me and who show me different ways and solutions. You are unquestionably a great influence on my life.

Accepting differences is an act of responsibility. I believe that politics is the art of building consensus, of finding outlets, of seeing a streak of light in the darkness, of offering solutions in the midst of conflict. Politics is an art, and those who try to criminalize it do not realize that politics is part of our daily lives. The exercise of convincing a friend through words is politics; to persuade and to fight for an idea within any institution is to do politics. When we are able to persuade through words, we have the ability to empathize, and when we empathize we create bonds of trust.

Empathy and confidence: perhaps there are no better attributes than these to describe President Woodrow Wilson. I like to see the signs that life sends our way. [The year] 2019 marks the one hundredth year since President Woodrow Wilson won the Nobel Peace Prize. Just look how history often insists on repeating itself. Wilson fought against the plague of nationalism that sparked the outbreak of the First World War and he bet all his chips on the construction of a multilateral world. Wilson won the Nobel Peace Prize for betting on and working for a world where disagreements are solved through dialogue. The seed of what is today the United Nations was planted by him in the former League of Nations; not to mention the fundamental role he played in valuing women by fighting for their right to vote.

Wilson's "peace without victory" is a lesson for all who believe in democratic and universal values. There is nothing more current and urgent than fighting for a "peace without victory" today.

Once again, we are witnessing a nationalist wave that revives those sparks that have always led us into chaos. We see borders being closed and families being separated over an imaginary dispute for space; we see skin color, religious or sexual orientation being used as labels to classify people. May this centennial of President Woodrow Wilson's Nobel Peace

Prize inspire, enlighten, and unite lovers of these universal values: people who, unlike those who take refuge in prejudice, are strengthened in differences.

These values also unite our countries. And far beyond the products that make up our trade balance, I think the main product that we import from the United States is the model of liberal democracy. The belief in the separation of powers; the view that powers must be supervised to prevent one from overlapping the other; the federalist struggle for state independence; and the divine respect for the Constitution are, in my opinion, this country's greatest contribution to the world. There is no democracy other than a liberal democracy. Any other model that does not recognize [these] as the basis of a representative democracy should be given another name. Democracy is not a majority regime, it is above all the regime that protects minorities.

I deeply desire that the ties between Brazil and the United States continue to strengthen based on the values we share. Our trade balance will be stronger if our democracies are stronger, our tourism will be more vibrant if our institutions are more solid. I carry with me a sublime phrase by John Adams that fits like a glove these days: "You will never know how much it cost my generation to preserve your freedom. I hope you will make a good use of it." By the whims of fate, I was born in Santiago, Chile, because my father was in exile. I am the son of a former exiled [activist] and I learned that the only non-negotiable thing [in life] is freedom. There will always be groups that try to reverse the civilizing process. To this group, our Congress has given an unequivocal answer: they will not succeed.

I always say that a nation is strong only when its institutions are strong. We have worked hard to maintain our freedoms, but also to guarantee that [same] freedom to the millions of Brazilians still living as prisoners of poverty.

We will be freer and stronger when millions of Brazilians can stand on their own two legs. We undertook the most important pension reform in [our] history; we delivered the most complete tax reform; we gave life to administrative reform to modernize the State; and we created a task force to accelerate projects intended to combat poverty. Never have we [in Congress] produced so much in such a short amount of time.

In February of this year I completed 20 years as a congressman. I live amongst leaders who have been in politics for much longer. Everyone unanimously agrees that this is the best moment for the Brazilian Congress in decades. We are the voice of reason; we are the conflict resolvers; we are the balancing point so necessary for finding new paths. I take great pride in leading the Chamber during this troubling but rewarding time. Politics fulfills me; the friends I have made in Congress fulfill me; we are stronger, more independent, and more aware of our historical role.

I will finish by recalling what I said at the beginning: I like to interpret the signs. History is not a straight line. Today, we are living a cycle that bears similarities to the period in which President Woodrow Wilson lived. So, if there is any advantage in being alive today it is to remember the consequences of nationalism, prejudice, xenophobia, and contempt for science. History repeats itself in cycles; it now depends on all of us here to make this cycle remembered in the future for the sacred values of liberal democracy that unite us.

The days are hard, the battles are intense, sometimes we think that there are no alternatives, sometimes we get discouraged. But I have no doubt that our effort is paying off, and this award is proof of that. And I'll end with an emblematic phrase by President Woodrow Wilson. He said that, "We grow great by dreams. All big men are dreamers. They see things in the soft haze of a spring day or in the red fire of a long winter's evening. Some of us let these dreams die, but others nourish and protect them; nurse them through bad days till they bring them to the sunshine and light which comes always to those who sincerely hope that their dreams will come true."

Let us nourish our dreams of living in a freer, fairer, and more humane country.

Thank you.