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Remarks at Language Intern Graduation

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I am very pleased to have been asked to be here today to join in congratulating both you who have completed the Language Intern Program and those members of your families who are here. I know from experience how much support family members give students in such a program and how much patience is recurrently demanded of them.

I am so pleased because I belong to a group of people who entered government service after the Second World War in the belief that our country needed students of international relations and of foreign cultures and languages to help it build a better world. At this point in the history of America and the world, I hesitate to characterize our contribution towards reaching that goal, but the goal itself remains as valid, as demanding, and as worthy as ever.

You are members of a new generation, advancing to take our places in striving to achieve it. You represent a precious resource for our nation and our nation's mission in the world. It has been horrifying to my colleagues and me to witness the diminution in the attention paid by our educational system to foreign-language training, beginning with the declining interest in Latin — I even regret the loss from the curriculum of classical Greek and Hebrew. Fortunately, a countercurrent seems to be setting in and the recent report of the President's Commission on this problem should be helpful, although I'm not sure we'll ever get classical Greek and Hebrew back as college-entrance requirements.

Mrs. Kenny suggested that I say a few words about language and its impact on world affairs.

There is an Italian saying, *traduttore - traditore*, which implies — incorrectly, in my view — that it is impossible to convey the whole sense and savor of a literary production into another language. And there

is somehow the air of a shady enterprise about the translator's or interpreter's art, as there is, for that matter, about diplomacy. In his classic little book of that title, Sir Harold Nicolson notes that Hermes was the patron of travelers, merchants, thieves, and envoys, and expresses regret that "someone less brilliant but more reliable was not chosen as the tutelary deity" of the last group. Sir Harold also notes that, in primitive society, all foreigners were regarded as both dangerous and impure, adding, "Even today some relics of this taboo can be detected in Moscow and in Teheran."¹

Those who work at the boundaries between cultures face a difficult task when they attempt to interpret the language, psychology, and customary practices of one people for the benefit of members of another. The problem is neither primarily nor exclusively one of language, but of understanding the values which language reflects, often exaggerates, and sometimes obscures. In his *Prison Notebooks*, the brilliant Italian Communist theoretician, Antonio Gramsci, asked:

... is it possible to remove from language its metaphorical and extensive meanings? It is not possible. Language is transformed with the transformation of the whole of civilization, through the acquisition of culture by new classes and through the hegemony exercised by one national language over others, ... and what it does is precisely to absorb in metaphorical form the words of previous civilizations and cultures. Nobody today thinks that the word "dis-aster" is connected with astrology or can claim to be misled about the opinions of someone who uses the word. Similarly even an atheist can speak of "dis-grace" without being thought to be a believer in predestination.²

¹ Harold Nicolson, *Diplomacy*, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), pp. 18, 19-20.

² Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, eds. and trans., *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), pp. 451-2.

Many years ago, I translated a letter written from Lefortovo prison in Moscow by one of the members of the so-called Plevna affair. The salutation was, "Dorogoy Yura, nezabyvayemyy Rakhmetov." At first glance, I thought it had to do with a letter to someone named Yury Rakhmetov, until I recollected that, in Chernyshevskiy's novel, *What Is To Be Done?*, the hero is named Rakhmetov and became the prototype of the Russian professional revolutionary of the latter nineteenth century, depicted as a man of perfect moral integrity. I then realized that I was dealing with a different Yury and eventually it turned out that the addressee was the heroic Yury Timofeyevich Galanskov, who since, alas, has died in a Soviet camp of strict regime.

We Americans are fortunate — English is rapidly becoming the lingua franca of the world. French still has a certain limited sphere in Europe and parts of the Middle East and Africa, and Spanish, of course, will continue to prevail throughout nearly all of Latin America, but over both of these and so many other locally useful languages, English is gaining the ascend-

ancy and will, I am sure, continue to do so. Increasingly, the psychology of younger people is influenced by the pragmatic and technologically oriented attitude of so many young Americans. American popular culture spreads almost irresistibly around the world as a result of the penetrating power of modern communications media.

But there is no action without a reaction; so this pervasiveness of American values and attitudes evokes opposition.

We see a particularly virulent example of such a reaction in Iran today, and this is not an isolated case. In *The Fear of Freedom*,³ Erich Fromm saw authoritarianism as one of the refuges of individuals who found the burden of civic responsibility too great for them. In the parable of the Grand Inquisitor, which Dostoyevskiy has Ivan Karamazov tell Alyosha, the concept is expressed in classical literary form. The resort to totalitarianism in our century can be ascribed

³ (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1942).



Ambassador Davies addressing graduates of the Language Intern Program.

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in considerable part to the destruction of traditional forms of community life, a destruction for which America is hardly responsible, but which some politicians find it convenient to identify with American cultural patterns. Beyond that, a rise in the attractive power of apocalyptic or chiliastic doctrines has accompanied all the significant social, political, and economic upheavals of modern times. In the Soviet Union, for example, many believers, both in the Orthodox Church and outside it, regard the Soviet state as the beast with seven heads whose coming is foretold in the 13th chapter of the Revelation of St. John the Divine.

The situation is very different on the Indian subcontinent, where most of the inhabitants of the thousands of villages are still little disturbed by the industrial, agricultural, communications, and political revolutions which have created such ferment in Europe, North and South America, and the Near and Middle East. Despite recurrent efforts by the Chinese Communists to break the cake of custom in the Chinese village, it, too, appears to have been less affected than we had earlier supposed. Those revolutions are primarily ones which attack industrializing and urbanizing societies.

Nevertheless, elites the world around seek to realize the promises of "progress" which lie in industrialization and, as they proceed, the same kinds of revolutionary action, reaction, and counteraction will begin their ebb and flow.

Now, the understanding of those processes depends not upon our ability to understand and translate this language or that, but upon the recognition and analysis of various kinds of social processes in widely disparate cultures and upon our ability to describe them meaningfully to our compatriots. Until recently, the word "socialism" could be used to epitomize this process and our understanding was facilitated because there were really only two principal branches of that doctrine: social-democracy and Marxism-Leninism.

Within the past 30 years, however, a whole gardenful of exotic blooms has sprung up, differing in one aspect or another from the two basic kinds of Eurocentric socialism. When the Chinese Communists triumphed, a new kind of synthesis began, involving both a new kind of struggle between their doctrines, on the one hand, and old religions and philosophies, on the other, and the nationalism of peoples who, while they may accept Western doctrines as a framework, are intent upon filling that framework with something that is peculiarly their own.

So to a social revolution, a national one has been added, producing ever greater complications for the

foreign student who has to try to interpret it for his compatriots.

There is, moreover, a kind of law which teaches us that, following any revolution, the society which emerges once the turmoil has subsided will resemble in many particulars that which preceded it, although, of course, significant changes will have occurred here and there. If we look at our own revolution — so epochal for the evolution of the modern world — we see that many of the attributes of the British monarchy of the 18th century were embodied in our presidency, as some of the attributes of the House of Lords of that day were given to our Senate. Meanwhile, in the United Kingdom, the powers of the British monarch and upper chambers have been reduced to shadows of what they were — in large part as the result of the repercussions of developments in America. Many of the features of the constitution of Tsarist Russia persist in the Soviet Union, although the autocratic power is vested in a collective body instead of a single ruler. I leave to those more familiar with China than I the question of the extent to which the institutions of the mandarin state continue to characterize the top levels of party, government, and state.

During his nonconformist period under Khrushchev, the Soviet poet, Yevtushenko, wrote, "We are sometimes told that we talk too much about the past. But for us talking about the past means thinking about the future."

Yevtushenko was pointing to the development of a particular esoteric form of communication, intelligible only to the political and intellectual elite, but not to those beyond it. One important esoteric means of communication uses essays on historical events, perhaps from a quite distant past, or discussions of classical literary works as the vehicle for public debates about policy — debates which cannot be followed by the masses and are not easily accessible to foreigners.

So a whole series of subdisciplines have developed, called Kremlinology, Pekingology, and the like. In Moscow and Peking, of course, there are Potomacologists, whose problem is not so much finding and interpreting the arcana of esoteric communications published in the *New York Times Magazine*, the *New Republic*, *Playboy*, or the *National Review*, as sifting the flood of information, rumor, punditry, and speculation, most of it trivial, in search of gains of relevant fact.

Despite all the efforts which a closed society may make to conceal what is happening inside it, despite the scantiness of data available in backward societies which are not particularly closed, there is always plenty of material available for analysis, so much, in

fact, that, as you well know, we have developed quite complicated and highly specialized bureaucracies to gather, evaluate, and analyze it.

Now I do not see how these activities differ essentially in their techniques from those employed by scholars in the groves of academe. There is considerable, healthy in-and-outing between government agencies and the academy. Recently, the State Department announced a new approach, involving collaboration between senior Department personnel knowledgeable about a particular area of the world, an intelligence analyst working on that area, and an academic expert. In my view, such a team provides the right kind of balance between personal experience and scholarly expertise required to foster a view of the area and its problems which will be deeply grounded in practical knowledge and directed as well towards the provision of policy-relevant analysis.

The objective must be not only to provide policymakers with information and analysis on the basis of which they can reach judgments and make decisions about short-range problems, but to look as far into the future as the available data permit and to provide long-range forecasts which will help our national leaders prepare the policies we need in order to deal steadily and confidently with a world of increasing complexity.

Nor can we expect that world to grow less complex. Let me mention just one relatively new phenomenon which bids fair to complicate your work still further. This month there will be a referendum in Quebec which could mark the beginning of the division of Canada, the good neighbor with which, for over 150 years, we have peacefully shared the northernmost portion of our continent. We in this country hope that the forces of unity will prevail in Canada. If they do not, we will experience new and difficult pressures and face new and difficult problems.

I mention this because we now find, paradoxically, that at the end of the process of revolutionary change, which began with the Reformation, the unitary national state in Europe is subject to fissiparous tendencies. Let me say here that I see no particular reason to believe that this is likely to happen in the United States, precisely because we *are* United States, i.e., we embody simultaneously the principle of many and one — *e pluribus unum*.

But in unitary parliamentary democracies and “mature” polities, local nationalist sentiments have emerged which are not satisfied by gestures or economic subventions, because they embody both ancient

cultural differences and strivings and a revolt against the gigantism of scale of states containing tens of millions of people in which government is insufficiently representative. Thus, the Basques, Catalans, Galicians, and Andalusians in Spain; the Occitanians and Bretons in France; the Scots and Welsh in Great Britain — the problem of Northern Ireland is similar, but slightly different in character. The adoption by the Federal Republic of Germany of a federal structure provides insulation against this tendency there. In Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, there are many similar problems, the consequences of which in the political realm could be a good deal more fateful than the effects of these Western European particularisms.

We English-speakers need to be very much aware of the hurt that can be done to bearers of ancient cultural traditions who are not given every reasonable opportunity to maintain them. The Quebecois feel deep resentment at the position of second-class citizenship to which they believe their English-speaking fellow countrymen have relegated them. Here in our own country, we have a growing number of Spanish-speaking fellow citizens about whose feelings we need to be concerned.

For one of the great blessings under which this country grew and flourished has been the fact that we have never had an official national language. People have been able to come here, publish newspapers and books in their own tongues, establish theaters, teach the language to their children and grandchildren, establish colleges which are based upon a non-English culture, and form associations to celebrate their difference from the majority. It is striking that the substantial number of Quebec-descended Americans in our New England states feel none of the kind of resentment towards their non-Quebecois fellow citizens, so far as I am aware, which is so common north of the border.

You are in a growth industry. There is going to be no decline in the demand for language-and-area experts — however clumsy it may be, that is the accurate description of people like us. But never mind the economics of it. This business is fun!

Robert Frost said that poetry was what gets lost in translation. In deep disagreement, the great American translator, Rolfe Humphreys, asked how much poetry had gotten lost in the King James version of the 23rd Psalm or of the Song of Songs, which is Solomon's. Rolfe Humphreys said, “Translators should swash-buckle a bit more than we do.”

Indeed we should. When you have found that word — sometimes, alas, it turns out to be three or four

words — which precisely renders the meaning and which you know will make the passage intelligible to the reader who lacks the cultural context; when you have supplied the footnote which is necessitated by the fact that things are done in the country of origin in a way which is simply not understood by most Americans; when you have turned the entire document into good, clear English — then you feel like swash-buckling a bit. For the most part, we deal with prose, but we can, I think, see in ourselves a little of the poet of whom Yeats wrote:

When I was young,
I had not given a penny for a song
Did not the poet sing it with such airs
That one believed he had a sword upstairs.⁴

⁴ Rolfe Humphreys, *Nine Thorny Thickets* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1969), pp. xv and xvi.

Richard T. Davies, a career Foreign Service Officer with over 30 years' service, has had extensive diplomatic experience with the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries, particularly Poland. His first assignment in 1947 was as a Consular Officer in the American Embassy in Warsaw; he later served as Ambassador to Poland from 1972 through 1978. During the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, he was Counselor for Political Affairs at the Embassy in Moscow. Most recently he served on the Intelligence Community Staff as Director, Humint Tasking Office. Mr. Davies, who holds a BA degree from Columbia College, is a skilled linguist as well as a diplomat. He speaks Polish, Russian, French, and German and has a reading knowledge of Spanish.