

Spring 1977

## 59th Commencement Address

John Kenneth Galbraith

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.conncoll.edu/commence>

 Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

---

This Speech is brought to you for free and open access by the Office of Communications at Digital Commons @ Connecticut College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Commencement Addresses by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Connecticut College. For more information, please contact [bpancier@conncoll.edu](mailto:bpancier@conncoll.edu).

The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author.

My friends:

I wish to join in the congratulations which you have all been receiving today. I should like to have you join in the sympathy which should be accorded to me. I am about to make a commencement speech. I have never heard a memorable or even a good commencement speech. I have never made one. Until there is proof to the contrary, I shall never believe that a good one has been made. On June 5, 1947, at Harvard, as some misguided purist will allege, George Catlett Marshall made the historic offer that, perhaps a little to his surprise, was to become the Marshall Plan -- an act of wisdom, generosity and responsibility. Alas, this great speech was not given at our commencement exercises where oratorical banality is a student tradition, but later that afternoon. The record stands. I am involved this happy morning in our greatest failed art form.

Nor are the reasons far to seek. There is the usual one: An indifferent speaker facing an indifferent audience. There is the further tendency for this audience to be especially distracted:

On no other occasion does nostalgia for the past, anxieties over the future and the pleasures of the present so completely preempt. No person, Mr. President, with the slightest sense of theater would have a speech on such an occasion. But we do, and all know the reason. We are all good Americans. And, as such, when we don't know how else to give a sense of occasion, we have an oration. I can delay no longer; I must make mine.

2

Were I inviting your concern in the years ahead for one subject above all else, it would be for your own survival. It is something in which one can urge a sustained and intelligent interest.

The problem of survival is neither theoretical nor vacuous; it has a solid, earthy core. We must develop relations with the Soviet Union which exclude the interchange of missiles that would destroy all in both countries and between. That this would be the consequence of a war, I believe there is now no serious scientific

doubt. Senator George McGovern, in a recent and admirable article in The Progressive, addressed information that some might survive such an exchange in the southern hemisphere -- to die later because of a deleted ozone layer, from sunburn and cancer. A year or two ago I visited Cheyenne Mountain, near Colorado Springs -- our command post in case of nuclear war. The tunnels extend a mile or two into the mountain; the ultimate control rooms are mounted on springs to absorb the shock of a nearby thermonuclear strike. The people therein estimate that they might last for six weeks longer than those outside. It would be a time for unpleasant recollection.

I do not believe that the people of the Soviet Union, high and low, are any less aware of the realities of nuclear conflict than we. They have been educated by a much more horrifying experience of war than have we. Few, if any, who have had occasion to discuss these matters with responsible Russians have retained doubts as to the depths of their anxiety. The Russians know as well as do we that the

ashes of Communism and those of capitalism would be indistinguishable.--

and lost therein would be the cultural heritage of 5,000 years.

What do we do?

3

In its present form the arms race with its threat to survival is not an ideological conflict. It is a trap in which technological innovation on one side forces responding and superseding innovation on the other. The first essential, if we are to escape, is to have relations with the Soviet Union that allow of rational discussion and revelation. I have no doubt that there are ways by which Soviet attitudes and internal politics could be improved to facilitate this end. About this, as about the other shortcomings of Soviet society and behavior, we can do very little. I imagine this will not prevent some from trying. We can understand our own politics as they bear on this problem and influence them in the direction of rational accommodation. On this I wish to have my main word this morning.

And on this I wish to urge your own understanding and effort.

4

The politics of our relations with the Soviet Union cross party lines and occupational and class interests. They are singularly indifferent to all. On balance, in recent times, they have been handled more imaginatively, more realistically, by Republicans than by Democrats. That, one hopes, will change.

On the one side, the most important political group in the equation is the great multitude of voters and their leaders in both parties who know or sense that a reasonable working relationship with the Soviets is essential if we are to avoid reciprocal suicide. These are the people who expressed their feelings in that prolonged cheer when, during his inaugural address last January, President Carter held out the hope of a world set free from the nuclear terror. They are the people who have taught all who seek office that mention of the use of nuclear weapons means political euthanasia. We do not,

characteristically, have a name for this political constituency. I do not think anyone can be in doubt; it is a force of great power.

In support of this large, amorphous political power are other interests, none very important. There are those with an interest in Soviet trade. But foreign trade, the old South apart, has always been small in the American political calculation and influence. Trade with the Soviet Union is small in the total. Those who resist making our trade relations equitable as between the Soviets and other countries believe this trade an important bargaining chip. This it is not. We have a small community that is interested in the cultural and literary achievements of the Russians. Artists, alas, are also politically unimportant. Once American Communists made the case for a close and supportive association with the Soviet Union, ultimately with more damage than benefit. That voice, except in fervent imagination, no longer exists. Overwhelmingly the political case for detente rests on the sense of its relation to the desire to

exist.

5

The opposition is more complex. It is also better disguised by euphemism. And it involves me in more problems of clear expression, for it is not a case that I am accustomed to make.

Its most important base is economic interest -- it sustains our largest public bureaucracy and, in aggregate terms, one of our largest industries. It is an industry that attracts notably innovative, intelligent and articulate people. It is in connection with bureaucratic and economic interest that euphemism enters: This interest, all recognize. It is our practice in most discussion to suppress mention. National security alone is involved. We do not believe it; we all know that, at budget time, Soviet power and perfidy always show a sharp seasonal increase. We know that tension is helpful for this industry. But these things we do not say. I do not suggest that deliberate legerdemain is involved. People disguise economic interest from themselves by the requisite alternative belief most successfully when they are

directly involved.

It would greatly clarify our political discussion if economic interest could be openly recognized and discussed. It would help the discussion if those who are on the other side -- my side -- could deal with it as a fact of life and not as something calling automatically for lofty indignation.

Supporting the economic interest are the two overpowering fears that pervade our political life. Perhaps they are as powerful or more so: One is the fear of Communism; the other is the fear of being thought soft on Communism. The first fear is deeply indigenous to the conservative soul. The second is the unique affliction of liberals. Of the two, the second is by far the most dangerous. Few, in modern times, have risen to such a dangerous level of irrationality as the liberal who feels that he must show that he is as tough on the Reds as anybody. It is because they are exempt from this fear that conservatives, in recent times, have made more progress in

lowering tension than my political co-religionists. I hope that affliction, too, is at an end.

## 6

There are three lesser sources of tension in our politics where the Soviets are concerned. One is the fear that they are taking over the underdeveloped world. Last year Angola, this year Ethiopia. This I cannot believe anyone will long think a threat. We have learned to our cost and sorrow that we cannot guide political and economic development in countries distant geographically and culturally from our own. But in China, Ghana, Algeria, Egypt and perhaps Indonesia the Soviets have had the same lesson. It is extravagant to imagine that Africans will exchange Portuguese, British or French colonial rule for that of Russia. And Marx was not wrong when he held that socialism and communism were irrelevant in the absence of capitalism. Perhaps the Chinese can prove the contrary; not many peoples are as organized as they.

There is also in our politics the sensitive issue of Israel.

A few years ago one would worry about a confrontation in the Middle East which would bring us automatically to the side of the Israelis, the Soviets as automatically to the Arabs. Not everything in our diplomacy fails. Clearly in recent years we have done something, perhaps much, to persuade the Arab states that we have a reasonably even-handed interest in peace in the whole area. In consequence, the number of people who feel that to be for Israel requires them to be against a Soviet/Arab alliance is almost certainly declining.

Finally there is the issue of civil rights. That, as a threat to detente, I confess I never took as seriously as some of my friends. Let me assure all that my stand for civil liberty is impeccable -- on occasion, I've enjoyed even its more abrasive exercise. Briefly, the terrible truth is that civil and human rights are in poor condition the world around. Complaint of their perversion in

the Soviet Union was certain sooner or later to be lost in comment on their even greater abuse elsewhere in the world, including such illustrious examples of anti-Communist purity as Chile, Uruguay, South Africa and Rhodesia. There is also the unfortunate hiatus in this issue between hortatory effort and result. There have been only two countries where we have been in a position to exercise immediate direct leverage on behalf of human rights. There alone could we expect results. The two countries have been South Vietnam and South Korea.

Such, then, is the political alignment on easing tension, making possible the context in which we negotiate with the Soviets for safety and survival. All can be helped by the recognition by Soviet leaders that such is the balance of forces -- and such recognition I believe important and something to be urged. One cannot be sanguine. When Democrats are in power, there is always the danger that economic

interest, militant anti-Communism and scared liberalism -- liberalism that lives in terror of seeming to appease -- will lead to dangerous overreaction. That was the coalition that kept us in Indo-China.

Because it is amorphous, the political interest in rational negotiation and ultimate survival surfaces very much more slowly. But it is there.

Let all who want to live be a part of it and a part of its response.

But let all politicians fear it. For our political graveyard is well-populated by those who did not.