

September 11, 1956

Remarks at the People-to-People Conference

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I appear before such an audience with mixed emotions. There are so many of my friends among you that on the personal side I feel like I am coming to sort of a family gathering with all of the enjoyments we normally accord on such occasions.

When I look at the cross-section of American brains and ability here--some of you experienced widely in the fields in which I expect to talk--I must say I am very diffident if not embarrassed.

But I am emboldened to talk to you because the purpose of this meeting is the most worthwhile purpose there is in the world today: to help build the road to peace, to help build the road to an enduring peace.

A particular part of the work that we expect to do is based upon the assumption that no people, as such, want war--that all people want peace.

We know this to be a true assumption, but we know also that in certain portions of the world it is not understood as such. Some people are taught--and they are captive audiences--that others, including ourselves, want war: that we are warlike, that we are materialistic, that we are, in fact, hoping for cataclysms of that kind so that a few may profit, they say, out of the misery of the world.

For my part, and I have been around a long time and therefore more or less acquainted with all of the wars the United States has fought, to the glory of American businessmen I have never heard one single one--ever--refer to war in any terms except those of regret and hope that war will never occur again.

If we are going to take advantage of the assumption that all people want peace, then the problem is for people to get together and to leap governments--if necessary to evade governments--to work out not one method but thousands of methods by which people can gradually learn a little bit more of each other.

The problems are: How do we dispel ignorance? How do we present our own case? How do we strengthen friendships? How do we learn of others? These are the problems.

The communist way, of course, is to subject everything to the control of the state and to start out with a very great propaganda program all laid out in its details--and everybody conforms. They do this in every walk of life, in everything they do; and for a while it seems to score spectacular successes.

Of course, its great weakness is that in times of stress, whenever the love of freedom, for example, grows greater in a population than the fear of the gun at their backs, then the dictatorships fall. Indeed, in war, when the fear of the machine gun in front grows greater than that of the machine gun behind, the dictatorships' armies begin to disintegrate.

Our way is a different one. We marshal the forces of initiative, independent action, and independent thinking of 168 million people. Sometimes it appears slow and awkward--

weak. But the fact is that since all crises are met and action taken according to the will of the great majority, the tougher the going gets, the tighter is bound the whole: the more effective becomes the whole.

Today, we have this problem that I have stated: that of creating understanding between peoples. Here are people that we hope will lead us. Governments can do no more than point the way and cooperate and assist in mechanical details. They can publish certain official documents.

But I am talking about the exchange of professors and students and executives, the providing of technical assistance, and of the ordinary traveler abroad. I am talking about doctors helping in the conquering of disease, of our free labor unions showing other peoples how they work, what they earn, how they achieve their pay and the real take-home pay that they get.

In short, what we must do is to widen every possible chink in the Iron Curtain and bring the family of Russia, or of any other country behind that Iron Curtain, that is laboring to better the lot of their children--as humans do the world over closer into our circle, to show how we do it, and then to sit down between us to say, "Now, how do we improve the lot of both of us?"

In this way, I believe, is the truest path to peace. All of the other things that we do are mere palliatives or they are holding the line while constructive forces of this kind take effect.

Every bomb we can manufacture, every plane, every ship, every gun, in the long run has no purpose other than negative: to give us time to prevent the other fellow from starting a war, since we know we won't.

The billions we pour into that ought to be supported by a great American effort, a positive constructive effort that leads directly toward what we all want: a true and lasting peace.

So, in calling upon a group like this, I wanted to come before you, in spite of the diffidence of which I spoke, to tell you that in the opinion of this Administration there is no more important work than that in which we are asking you to participate. There is no problem before the American people--indeed, before the world--that so colors everything we do, so colors our thinking, our actions as does the problem of preserving the peace and providing for our own security.

Whether it be the Suez problem of today or another one of tomorrow, there is nothing else that so affects our daily lives. It dictates, almost, the level of our taxes. It colors every problem with which we deal at home.

So, as you start this work, as you have before you the government officials who will be the ones cooperating with you, you will understand that this is something that lies very close to the hearts of the Administration and to every man, woman and child in America--and indeed, we believe, the world--except for those few who want unjustly and improperly to rule others.

Thank you very much for your attention.

NOTE: On May 31, 1956, the White House announced that the President had asked a group of Americans representing many fields of activity to meet with him to explore the possibilities of a program for better people-to-people contacts throughout the world. In his letter of invitation, sent to 34 representative leaders and quoted in part in the release, the President said "there will never be enough diplomats and information officers... to get the job done without help from the rest of us. Indeed, if our American ideology is eventually to win out in the great struggle being waged between the two opposing ways of life, it must have the active support of thousands of independent private groups . . . and of millions of individual Americans acting through person-to-person communication in foreign lands."

On September 7 a further announcement listed the names of the chairmen of the 40 committees who were scheduled to meet with the President and other Government officials on September 11.