

HARVARD UNIVERSITY  
JOHN F. KENNEDY SCHOOL OF GOVERNMENT  
Robert and Renée Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs

R. Nicholas Burns  
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of Diplomacy and International Relations



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Commencement Speech  
Ambassador (ret.) Nicholas Burns  
American University of Paris  
May 23, 2017

Good Morning, Ladies and Gentlemen. I am honored to be with you in the beautiful Theatre de Paris for the American University commencement.

To President Celeste Schenck, your extraordinary President, and to the Board of Trustees and its Chair, Raymond Henze: thank you very much for this kind invitation.

To my fellow Honorary degree recipients, Sultan Sooud al Qassemi and Her Excellency, Huda Ebrahim Alkhamis. Both of them are doing extraordinary work in the Middle East.

To the parents: as the father of an AUP graduate, I know how proud you are to see your daughters and sons reach this day.

To the graduates: this is your day. And I want to reassure you that I understand the perilous position of a commencement speaker: I am the one and only person standing in the way of you and your diplomas. So, I promise to be brief.

It is special opportunity to be back in Paris. Forty years ago, I spent my junior year in college here—at the Institute of European Studies and at the Sorbonne.

It was a life-changing experience to learn about the great French Impressionist Masters; to read Flaubert, Stendhal and Balzac; to take extraordinary courses at the Sorbonne with eminent Professors of History Jean Tulard and Jean Ganiage.

Paris was an education all by itself from the Louvre to the Pompidou Center, which had just opened, to the cafes of Montparnasse and St. Germain, to Pere Lachaise, Le Marais and the Luxembourg Gardens. So many beautiful and inspiring places!

I don't think I learned as much in the six other countries in which I have lived as I learned that one year in Paris.

Most importantly, I met and fell in love that year with a very intelligent and very beautiful young woman who was also an American student in Paris. Libby and I have been married for 36 years and are back this week to the place where we began.

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Ironically, nearly three decades after Libby and I met here, our oldest daughter, Sarah enrolled at AUP. She had a transformative academic and personal experience here and credits her Professors— Jim Bitterman, Susan Perry, Ann Mott, Geoff Gilbert, Nathalie Debroise, Paul Godt and Hal Gardner.

Sarah also met her husband in Paris just as Libby and I met here!

We have two younger daughters. So, you can see where I am going with this. Our current plan is to give them both an all-expenses paid trip to Paris so that we can finally become empty nesters!

As AUP parents, we valued the strong academics, outstanding professors and unique setting of this American University in the City of Light.

We also know that the American diplomat who founded AUP in 1962, Dr. Lloyd DeLamater, fused in this one university the traditions, cultures and values of the United States and our oldest and most constant friend, France.

Americans have always come to Paris. Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson were here 240 years ago to secure French support for a new American nation. Some of our greatest authors and artists-- James Fenimore Cooper, Samuel F. B. Morse, Augustus Saint Gaudens, Mary Cassatt, and John Singer Sargent-- came for inspiration and training. An African-American, Josephine Baker, came to be a free artist in a way she could not be in the segregated America of her time.

Young Americans of the age of the graduates here today first came to Paris in great numbers a century ago as volunteers for France during the First World War. Some of them formed the “Lafayette Escadrille” as pilots attached to the French Army.

More than 68 of them “fell from the sky”, in the elegiac words of that time, in the very first air battles in history. Libby and I visited a moving memorial to them just across the Seine from AUP a few days ago.

But what makes the American University of Paris truly special is that you have become the permanent link, here in France, between the French and American peoples. After fifty-five years, your roots are planted deeply in French soil. Your limbs and leaves are intertwined with the academic and intellectual traditions of two great democracies.

I learned an important lesson as an American Ambassador overseas. Our embassies and consulates are vital links between our governments. But it is often our private institutions that bind two countries permanently together and that can have the greater and deeper impact. Such is the role and legacy and future of your great university.

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At your founding, Dr. DeLamater asked a searching question about AUP's mission that President Schenk has mentioned frequently: "How do we transcend", he wondered, "the bounds of narrow nationalisms?"

More than a half century later, AUP has answered that question. After all, your class alone speaks not just French and English but 86 other languages. You represent 110 nationalities. You are a perfect expression of our globalized world we all inhabit--a vast, interlinked economy, digital and cellular superhighways, the Cloud, GPS and the internet. These transformative technologies have knit together, for the first time in human history, all 7.5 billion of us in 195 nation states. And with this new world comes responsibility for each other.

With that in mind, I wanted to leave you with just two thoughts this morning.

The first is an Olympian challenge for the ages. But it is one you must confront. It is nothing less than preserving the democratic world from rising authoritarianism and anti-democratic populists in many of our countries.

When AUP was founded, there was no question what the Transatlantic community stood for—democracy, human rights and human freedom, free trade and free speech. NATO defended against the communist Soviet Union. The Common Market and later the European Union buried forever the historical animosities between France and Germany. We assumed then that democracy was secure.

But the defining global events of your four years here in Paris have been major challenges to democracy and our democratic way of life on both sides of the Atlantic, and indeed, around the world.

Consider Vladimir Putin's aggression in Ukraine as well as Georgia, the rise of an authoritarian government in Turkey, the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom, the awakening of narrow, nationalist spirits across Europe.

The most dangerous of these may be the return of the far right in its most powerful form in Europe since the 1930s.

Victor Orban in Hungary, Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, Alternative fur Deutschland in Germany, the extremist government in Poland, the Golden Dawn fascist party in Greece. And, most notably, Marine Le Pen and the Front National here in France.

I don't need to remind you about the power of these forces. They are organized and well-funded. Some have support from Moscow. And they could, if not challenged at the ballot box and in the hearts and minds of Europeans, change Europe and even the United States in unimaginable ways.

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It was a populist party that authored the disaster of Brexit in the United Kingdom.

It was a populist leader in my own country, Donald Trump, who unleashed the cynical politics of division—between black and white, Christian and Moslem, rural and urban in order to gain power in the White House.

As he arrives in Europe this week, he is the first American President in seven decades to cast doubt on the central building blocks of the Transatlantic world--the European Union and NATO.

He holds high the banner of an America First movement. Of course, every President, from the U.S. or France, should think of his own country's welfare first. That is only natural.

But, if America First means shutting down trade agreements, diminishing our alliances, closing our doors to immigrants and refugees and demonizing the press and an independent judiciary, then it will deny the very history and core principles of the United States itself.

Your connected generation knows all too well how the far right works.

They are disciples of fake news and altered facts. They contest reason and empirical thought by denying the scientific basis for Climate Change, perhaps our greatest global challenge.

Their pernicious ally, Russia, has interfered in the U.S., French and German elections.

Fortunately, due to the wisdom of the Dutch, due to the thousands of students who worked for the young democrat, Emmanuel Macron, as he won his stunning victory here in France, due to the solidity of Chancellor Angela Merkel in Berlin, the populists will not overturn European democracy this year. But, they will continue to try in both Europe and even America.

So, my first advice to you is this—please continue to believe in the beauty, the power and the truth of our democratic way of life. Defend it from the hate-filled ideologies of the far right and their assault on our liberties.

And defend it, as well, from the despicable terrorists who murdered innocent people in Manchester last evening.

My second recommendation follows the first. We will not succeed in preserving the West if we, and that includes all of us, spend the majority of our time staring at computer screens or tweeting from the sidelines as more powerful, more sinister and more determined forces seek to weaken our democracies in the halls of power in Europe and the United States.

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There were echoes of that message in the words of another American who came to Paris, the former President of the United States, Theodore Roosevelt, when he spoke at the Sorbonne 117 years ago in April 1910.

Addressing university students like yourselves, Roosevelt had this to say about how best to change the world:

“It is not the critic who counts... The credit belongs to the man (or woman) who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again... who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat.”

“Those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat”.

Roosevelt’s message in Paris was clear and it was right. If you really want to change the world, you must go into the arena of public life and public service. At least part of your life should be devoted to the public good—here in France or in the U.S. or the more than 100 other countries you represent in your graduating class.

President John F. Kennedy, whose centennial is in a few days—he was born on May 29, 1917—had this to say:

“One person can make a difference, and everyone should try”.

That is my advice for you on this beautiful and hopeful morning. Defend our democratic way of life. , Have the courage to get into the arena. Make a difference for our world. Make it more just, more secure, more peaceful.

All of us here today look forward to witness all you will accomplish as you live and write the history of our world in the decades to come.

Thank you again for the great honor of speaking to you this morning.

Congratulations and best wishes to the 2017 graduates of the American University in Paris!