

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

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Remarks by Ambassador (ret.) Nicholas Burns
Conference on Versailles 1919-2019
The American University of Paris
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Many of you know the old saying: “By this point in the proceedings of this extraordinary conference, everything that could possibly be said has already been said, but just not by everybody, and I am, unfortunately, for all of you this evening, that somebody.”

We have learned during the past three days the historical truth that all roads led to Paris in the first six months of 1919. Before I say a few words about the conference we are concluding with this dinner, permit a personal reflection first.

In many ways, all roads have led to Paris for my own family.

It was my wife Libby’s great uncle, an American writer named Hervey Allen, who gave us an insightful look into what happened to the United States when President Woodrow Wilson declared to Congress in April 1917 that, “the right was more precious than peace” and that the U.S. should enter a European war for the very first time in its history.

Hervey Allen was then a young graduate of the University of Pittsburgh who, along with his brother Win, answered the call to service. One year later, he found himself, in the summer of 1918, as a Lieutenant leading his green American troops into the savagery of the Second Battle of the Marne. The French and Americans linked arms to drive the Germans back from positions they had held for four years with the objective of ending that long and terrible war.

Libby and I had read Allen’s remarkable and riveting 1926 war memoir “Toward the Flame”, an account of battle from the infantry’s perspective from village to village across northern France. Last June, we drove out from Paris to follow his footsteps.

How many Americans of our generation recall the enormous scale of the U.S. effort under General Pershing a century ago? Over four million Americans were in uniform. Two million American soldiers came to France. By July-August of 1918, more than 375,000 American combat soldiers were up on the front lines with the French, and under French command, on the Marne River and beyond fighting hand-to-hand against a tough and veteran German army.

We followed Allen’s long march with his men toward the flames of war. As we drove through the impossibly beautiful farms, vineyards and villages of Picardy, Champagne and the Aisne-Marne

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region last summer, it was instructive and inspiring to see what the Americans and the French accomplished together.

You will recognize some of the iconic names from the fighting in that region.

Belleau Wood, a nearly sacred battle site for the U.S. Marines to this day.

The French and American cemetery and war memorial at Chateau Thierry that pays tribute to thousands of dead and wounded on the allied side.

A church at a lonely crossroads near Belleau destroyed during the Marne offensive and then rebuilt with funds from American veterans of the U.S. 27th Division after the war.

Another church in the little village of Epieds where Allen and his men found a dead German soldier and then live Germans trying to kill them up a country road just ahead.

Allen and his men crossed the Merne with the French army. They went into battle on the Vesle River where the Germans were protecting their retreat. Allen writes of being terrorized by the German “flammenwerfers” or “flamethrowers.” In a brutal night battle with German troops where the majority of Allen’s men were killed or wounded, he was gassed and barely survived to write the story in a field hospital over the next several weeks.

It was stirring, to say the least, to see two tall, stately columns flanking a bridge right on the Vesle River where this one small battle took place. Erected by the state of Pennsylvania in the 1920s, they memorialize the huge losses suffered by its own 28th Division of Pennsylvania soldiers.

The French town of Fismes at the site of the battle established last year its own memorial to the Americans, including to Hervey Allen, who came to fight with them a century ago.

Hervey Allen was just one of the two million Americans who fought in France a century ago.

With great care and exquisite beauty, the American Battle Monuments Commission has memorialized the sacrifices made by the American and French troops together in that consequential summer of 1918 throughout Northern France and along the Marne River, for all to see and to bear witness.

As Ambassador Craig Stapleton and Debbie Stapleton know from their time here as U.S. representatives, the two-century alliance between the U.S. and France is a remarkable story.

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This alliance started, of course, in the Revolutionary War at Yorktown and saw its zenith during the First World War.

As we have re-learned at this conference, however, the U.S. forfeited in many ways our alliance with France and Europe after Versailles with the refusal of the U.S. Senate to ratify our membership in the League of Nations.

However, Truman, Eisenhower and those who followed them in the White House did not make the same mistake after the Second World War, especially during the last seven decades of the NATO alliance's history. We committed to this alliance again in 1949 in the creation of NATO. An alliance that continues to this day in places like Mali in West Africa where American intelligence and air power supports 3,000 French troops fighting terrorists in that country's northern desert.

I saw first-hand the value of our alliance with Europe on 9/11 when I was the new American Ambassador to the Alliance. When we were hit hard in New York and Washington D.C., the allied Ambassadors came to me in Brussels that afternoon to pledge their support for us when we needed them most. They pledged to invoke the alliance's collective defense clause—Article 5 of the NATO Treaty—that an attack on one would be considered an attack on all.

Article 5 had never been invoked in NATO's long history. Starting with Truman, American Presidents had always expected that if it was to be invoked one day, it would likely be for the U.S. to come across the pond for a third time to help protect the European allies from a Soviet attack.

One of the great ironies of 9/11 is it was not the U.S. that rode to the rescue of Europe; it was the European allies who came to our defense when we were attacked and needed them most. Very early in the morning of September 12, 2001, I called then National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice to secure President George W. Bush's agreement that we would vote to have our allies join us in responding to the 9/11 attacks. Before ending our call, she said to me, "It's good to have friends in the world."

I have recalled her words and that moment more than a few times during the past two years when we have distanced ourselves so unwisely from those very same allies.

It is instructive to remember that the European Union is our largest trade partner. It is also the largest investor in the U.S. economy. In addition, the greatest number of American treaty allies in the world are Canada and the soon to be (with North Macedonia's accession) 28 European allies in NATO.

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This alliance, as well as our treaty and defense allies in the Indo-Pacific, are the great power differential between the U.S. and Russia, as well as the U.S. and China. They have no allies in the world they can count on. This is an enormous advantage for the United States.

Every American President of both parties until now has believed deeply in NATO and in the effort to create a united Europe to end the Franco-German rivalry that produced so much bloodshed for so long. We Americans have been the champions of every European initiative from the Coal and Steel Community of the 1940s to the Treaty of Rome in 1957 to the Common Market and then the European Union itself, the single currency and Schengen.

That is why it is such a colossal mistake for President Trump to describe our policy toward the EU, as we discussed yesterday, as one of open competition and even opposition. He is wrong, as well, to denigrate NATO, to cast doubt openly on whether he would honor an Article 5 attack on one of our allies. He has turned seventy years of careful, wise, effective and bipartisan American policy toward Europe on its head.

At a time when his own government is drawing inward, seeking to build walls and raise drawbridges over the modern moats it has dug around our country, it is important for the President to remember how valuable it is to have friends in an often cruel and dangerous world. To remember how much they need us and we need them.

How else can we hope to be successful in fighting climate change, in stabilizing the global economy, in defending against the cynical cyber aggression of Putin or the nuclear dreams of Iran and North Korea—all threats to our democracies? How else can we contest—in a new battle of ideas—the wave of anti-democratic populism here in Europe or the authoritarian model in Russia and China? Where are our JFKs and Reagans, our Thatchers and Kohls, our de Gaulles, to defend our liberal values and the democratic West against Putin, Xi and other who assert with great confidence that their way is the future? Why is President Trump now embracing the very populists, like Viktor Orbán, who do not believe in what we believe?

This conference has reminded us of how important it is that Europeans and Americans relearn together the mistakes of judgment, the hubris and even the folly that marked the Versailles conference and the actions and inactions of the democratic powers between the two world wars. This “somber warning,” in the words of Margaret MacMillan, challenge us to find a way to defend our democracies at a time of testing one hundred years after Versailles.

It is very clear that we have a sea of challenges ahead.

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But, there is always hope.

Hope that the U.S. and UK – victorious powers at Versailles – and until very recently the most dynamic global democracies, can revive and recover from their parallel existential crises.

Hope that the American people, in particular, can resist the temptation to retreat again from global leadership as we did so unwisely after Versailles.

Hope in diplomacy – that rather than resort in a reflexive use of force, we can find our way, however fitfully, to stability and even peace.

Hope in the energy and idealism of the Millennial Generation that we teach at Harvard and AUP.

When Harvard and AUP convene our companion conference next spring in Cambridge, we will look at Versailles from the perspective of a century to judge its very real impact on our world today. In the nationalism of the Balkans and elsewhere in Eastern Europe; in the fractured relationship between Russia and the West; in the violent and unstable states of the Levant created in the wake of Versailles; in Ottoman-inspired dreams of Turkish nationalists in Ankara; and in the complicated power plays between the U.S. and China.

I invite all of you to join us at Harvard next spring.

For now, let me close by saying thanks you, on behalf of all of us, to the remarkable team at AUP that brought us together.

To the incredible staff of AUP who produced a great three-day conference.

To Professors Stephen Sawers and Albert Wu.

To President Celeste Schenk and Chairman of the Board of Trustees Ray Henze.

To Ambassador Craig Stapleton whose vision led us here.

Let us applaud AUP and wish for its continued success for the century ahead.