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New Paradigms and Pathways: Democracy, Development, and the Mitigation of Conflict

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The terrorist atrocities in Paris on November 13, 2015 tore through the frayed fabric of global order. A synchronized operation was mounted in the heart of a western democracy with access to the most sophisticated intelligence technologies. Earlier that day, I spoke to a few hundred teenage students in Chicago, Illinois. Following the talk, they asked challenging questions, including: “What did I mean by the ‘sameness’ of all human beings that can be learned during collaborative real world experiences?”; and, simply but poignantly, “What causes conflict?”^[1]

Two days later, I read about the program, “Social and Emotional Learning” (S.E. L.), available to thousands of American elementary school students. It has had remarkable results.

Participating students “become more aware of their feelings and learn to relate more positively with others”. ^[2]Empathy and kindness, research shows, can be fostered, and school climates can

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can imbibe “the concept of shared responsibility for a group’s well- being.” At the end of my talk, I had told the students that they were learning to be “builders of democracy, engineers of shared prosperity, and mitigators of social conflict.” It turns out that these attributes can be more actively cultivated than I had assumed.

Sadly, millions of young people worldwide are being trained differently, to be instruments of autocracy, destroyers of livelihoods, and perpetrators of atrocities. To meet this grim challenge, new paradigms and pathways are needed. The belief that democracy, inclusive development, and conflict mitigation constitute a virtuous cycle that can steadily gain traction is countered today by a vicious cycle in which enmity, violence, and even suicide are extolled.

I wondered if my talk would go “over the heads” of the middle teenagers, and whether it could compete for attention with their electronic gadgetry and playfulness. These concerns were quickly dissipated. The points made in my brief remarks could, of course, be presented in greater depth and complexity. [3] New paradigms and pathways that connect treasured values with real-world experiences, and which can be clearly communicated to many age groups, are urgently needed. [4] We must redouble our efforts to meet this challenge.

Thank you for inviting me to speak at the opening ceremony of this conference of the Northern Illinois Model United Nations. I am glad to see the attention being devoted to several important issues in Africa. In these remarks, I will not discuss those specific issues. Rather, I’ll comment briefly on three broad concerns in Africa, in other world regions, and even here in Chicago. These concerns are democracy, development, and the mitigation of conflict.



African migrants seeking a better future are heading to Europe (Source: ABC)

All students present here were born after a great global victory was achieved. That victory represented a triumph for democracy as an idea. Some scholars, like Francis Fukuyama now at Stanford University, contended that this was a decisive victory. They believed that there were no other ideologies and political economies in the world that could match capitalist democracy. However, that victory has not turned out to be as thorough as assumed. The world at the end of 2015 looks much different from the one envisaged a quarter-century ago when the Soviet Union collapsed, the Cold War ended, and many democratic transitions were launched in Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America.

Communist China first swung towards capitalism but the single-party monopoly of state power was retained. Then Russia retreated from pluralist democracy and authoritarianism was restored under Vladimir Putin. The global retreat from democracy has also been experienced in Africa where democracy is often more about presentability, especially in the convening of periodic elections. Yet, democratic breakthroughs continue to occur in Africa and elsewhere, as occurred earlier this year in Nigeria and just days ago in Myanmar (Burma).

A widely-reviewed book by Professor Steven Radelet of Georgetown University was recently published. It is entitled, *The Great Surge: The Ascent of the Developing World*.^[5] Five years ago, Professor Radelet published a similarly optimistic book just about sub-Saharan Africa:

Emerging Africa: How 17 Countries are Leading the Way. [6] If I wrote alternative volumes to those books, they could be entitled: *The Great Scam: How Predatory Governance Keeps Billions in Poverty*, and *Discordant Development: How Elites Shop in Qatar while the Poor Migrate by Land and Sea to Europe*. I don't intend to write them but some of my younger colleagues could easily do so.

Yes, there has been economic growth in Africa since the late 1990s after decades of stagnation and decline. But predatory governance, by which I mean the systematic use of government institutions to divert public revenues into private pockets, is widely practiced. You can look this up yourself on the Internet by entering searches for: Corruption since 2000 in Angola, or Congo, or Gabon, or Kenya, or Nigeria, or Senegal, or South Africa, or Tunisia. When you realize how many tens of billions of dollars are being stolen annually by government officials and their cronies, you will ask yourself: Are the gains in child mortality rates, girls' education, and per capita income cited by Radelet and other development optimists more "on the one hand and, on the other hand" kinds of portrayals? Moreover, do they obfuscate, i.e. cloud, the connection between ultra-corruption and ultra-poverty? [7]



Solidarity in France at a vigil, following the deadly attacks in Paris (Source: AP)

My third theme is conflict mitigation. Later today, you will discuss several violent conflicts in Africa and elsewhere in the world. We should apologize to your generation, and those that

follow, for the great messes you will inherit. They can be seen right here in Chicago with gun violence prematurely ending the lives of many innocent youths. And it extends to the stabbings and point-blank shootings between Israelis and Palestinians; the utter horrors taking place in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen; and the atrocities committed by Boko Haram since 2010 in northern Nigeria. [8]

I have chosen to use the term “conflict mitigation” instead of “conflict prevention” or “conflict resolution”. Why? My family bought a home in Sarasota, Florida, last year that needed much renovation. After replacing the roof, a “wind mitigation” certificate was obtained. It attests to the fact that the new roof, with appropriate bolts, is expected to withstand winds up to a certain velocity. Now, you cannot stop the wind, but you can ensure that your roof doesn’t blow off in a storm or a moderate hurricane. The same is true of social groups, from the family, to a community, to a nation and a region. Indeed, that’s what the United Nations is fundamentally about.

We live in an age in which violent conflicts are increasing and intensifying for a number of reasons: livelihoods and life-chances are so discordant; religious ideologies are so extreme; sovereign state systems are eroding; climate change is degrading economic environments, especially for farmers and herders; and rising powers – such as China, Iran, and Russia – dismiss western value systems and the institutions that uphold the liberal international order of democracy, constitutional government, the rule of law, and human rights. With time I could suggest other reasons why violent conflicts will continue to exacerbate in our era, instead of the peaceful competition expected after the Cold War. In retrospect, the 2001 collapse of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center defines our era as much as did the collapse of the Berlin Wall after 1989.

So what does this have to do with you? While I am speaking to you today, I have in mind our five grandchildren, ages 11-17, and hundreds of millions of youths in Africa and elsewhere. Many are being plucked from their homes in Africa and the Middle East and taken by their parents to live in refugee camps and confront an uncertain fate abroad. Although these are grave problems, we also have resources with which to mitigate them. One of these resources is education and the technology that is making education a global good. I have taught in African universities. Today I could teach students anywhere and from anywhere. And learning can be simultaneous and interactive. Indeed, we hope to post a video of this talk online so it can be accessed by anyone – even by some of you who might wish to revisit these remarks in the future.

To conclude: while you are discussing the issues of conflict, oppression, and poverty in your sessions today, take a moment to think of how *you* can both pursue a comfortable life and also contribute to others, at home and abroad, doing the same. This is an experience I have had since my undergraduate days at Dartmouth College. It is the same for our eldest son, Mark Joseph, also a professor, whose co-authored book on mixed-income housing in Chicago has just been published.^[9]

My family has had the opportunity to live in many countries. Last year, three of our grandchildren spent six-months in Accra, Ghana. Two of them attended a local school, the third (at 15) taught classes in that school. Engaging collaboratively in real-world experiences enables us to connect with the sameness beneath differences in language, culture, religion, income, ethnicity, and economic status. It is not too early for you to reflect on how to build resilient democracies, foster shared prosperity, and help create institutions for mitigating rather than exacerbating group conflict. You may not realize it, but you are already training to be builders of democracy, engineers of shared prosperity, and mitigators of social conflict. I congratulate you, your parents, your school administrators, and the many who have made this event possible.

[1] The student who asked the second question struggled to rephrase it. In the end, he could only repeat it, and so must we.

[2] Julie Scelfo, "Teaching Peace in Elementary School," *The New York Times*, November 16, 2015.

[3] See my forthcoming essays: "Dilemmas of Democracy and State Power in Africa," *La Vanguardia* (Barcelona), December 2015, and "The Growth-Governance Puzzle in Africa" (provisional title), *Foresight Africa 2016*, The Africa Growth Initiative, The Brookings Institution, January 2016.

[4] To that end, we salute the publication of Larry Diamond's distillation of three decades of frontline analysis: *In Search of Democracy* (Routledge, 2015).

[5] Simon & Schuster, 2015.

[6] Center for Global Development and Brookings Institution Press, 2010.

[7] For a discussion of progress, disaster, and prismatic narratives, see <http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2012/03/29-priorities-africa-joseph>; <http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2012/04/23-strategic-priorities-africa-joseph>; <http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2012/05/16-strategic-priorities-africa-joseph>. Further on prismatic analysis, see “Growth, Security, and Democracy in Africa,” *The Journal of Democracy*, October 2014.

[8] Many commentaries on Boko Haram can be found at www.africaplus.wordpress.com and <https://sahelblog.wordpress.com>. See also Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Monclos, ed., *Boko Haram: Islamism, Politics, Security and the State in Nigeria* (Tsehai Publishers, 2015).

[9] Robert Chastain and Mark Joseph, *Integrating the Inner-City: The Promise and Peril of Mixed-Income Housing Transformation* (University of Chicago Press, 2015).

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