ADDRESS

BY

HENRY M. WRISTON

ON THE OCCASION OF HIS ELECTION AS HONORARY PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS

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FOREWORD

ON April 6, 1964, members of the Council on Foreign Relations intimately associated with Henry Wriston attended a dinner in order to express to him their deep appreciation for his long years of dedicated service as President of the Council. By a rising vote, they expressed their approval of the action previously taken by the Board of Directors in electing Mr. Wriston as Honorary President, and they noted with great satisfaction his stated willingness to continue as Chairman of the Committee on Studies.

Eloquently introduced by John J. McCloy, Henry responded with a memorable speech which is now printed for distribution to the members of the Council. At the end of this address, Mr. McCloy turned the meeting over to our new President, Grayson Kirk, who closed the evening with these appropriate words:

Last night I attended a small dinner given in honor of the Master of Pembroke College, Cambridge. After having had the pleasure of meeting him before, I talked with him a little and in the course of the conversation later in the evening, I asked him how long he had been Master of the College. And he said, "Oh, let me see, I think it's about ten years." He said, "You know it's one of the most conservative of all the Cambridge Colleges, and I think it's about five years before people really realized that the former Master was no longer there." Should that be happily the case for the Council, I can think of no better fate for it, Henry.

FRANK ALTSCHUL
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Chairman Jack and Friends:

If you want to know why I am standing here tonight, it is because of my faith in the value of long-range planning and the total elimination of chance. The first thing to arrange in a well-planned life is a careful choice of ancestors. I was singularly wise in selecting blood-lines. My paternal forbears came from Britain to the southern colonies, then moved into the piedmont of Virginia where my father was born. That event proved too much of a shock to the Old Dominion, so the section where he lived broke away from the rest and has ever since been the state of West Virginia.

My maternal line came from Scotland and Ireland. My great grandfather, aware of how dangerous it is to have too much blue in the blood, married the girl of his own choice and was cut off without a farthing. So he came to the United States. Thus my mother was born in New York City but, as a girl of nine, crossed to Colorado in a prairie schooner, partly under the guidance of a government scout, William F. Cody.

My father was the first in some generations to break out of the West Virginia hills. He went to the new University of Denver and graduated in its second class. They had a whole commencement for him and one other graduate. I notice that Denver University is celebrating its centenary—which gives you some idea
of his age. But I have the first degree of an English university which celebrated its centennial two years ago—which, if there were no other factors, would make me older than my father. However, both celebrations related to the founding of predecessor institutions.

My father met a school teacher and choir singer in Castle Rock and married her. After the birth of my brother in Denver, the family moved to Wyoming. Again that fatal family mystique manifested itself, for I was born in the Territory of Wyoming, which led it promptly to be made into a state. I beat my father's record; it took him two years to get West Virginia set up, I got statehood for Wyoming in about six months.

I attended public schools in Denver and all over Massachusetts, then went to college in Connecticut with a very precise objective—to have a good time. I wanted to get rich, so decided to be a lawyer. As a logical consequence I went to graduate school to study Spanish history. Therefore I was trained as a mediaevalist—then taught comparative government for which I had no background or training whatsoever. My research was in American constitutional history and diplomacy in neither of which did I have either background or training. I received the first degree Harvard gave in American diplomacy without ever taking a graduate course in American history, much less in foreign affairs. It should be clear from this account that consistency of purpose and long-range planning were my mottoes; nothing was left to chance.

Then I began to teach, and what an experience that was! The trustees did not think I would be busy enough with four courses, so I was made a reference librarian. I got my passionate interest in librarianship right then and have never lost it.

On the advice of my colleagues, who wanted larger salaries, I took leave from teaching to assist the President of the College
in a three-million dollar endowment campaign. I made a great rep-
utation as a money-raiser and did it in a most extraordinary way.
I got a man to die, of whom I had never heard; he left the college
sugar stock at the precise moment when sugar was selling at
twenty-five cents a pound. The result of that skillful maneuver
was that Wesleyan got one million dollars instead of the quarter
million he had intended to give. This signal achievement made
it inevitable that I would be elected a college president since the
principal function of that office is to perform fiscal miracles. This,
of course, is exactly the kind of career for which I was peculiarly
fitted, since I have always suffered from claustrophobia, have
hated to sit up front, and all my life have been shy about meet-
ing new people.

Meanwhile I had become involved with the Institute of Poli-
tics in Williamstown, doubtless through careful planning, though
I have forgotten how. In the summer of 1925, Walter McLaren,
who ran that short-lived institution, suggested I join the Council
on Foreign Relations. The requirements for admission must have
been a great deal looser at that time. It was a profitable move for
the Council since I immediately left for Wisconsin and stayed
twelve years—so ate no food and drank no wine at 45 East 65th.
Nonetheless, I became an avid reader of *Foreign Affairs* and other
Council publications.

I did not find quite enough to do as a college president. With
no experience whatever in chemistry, my one contact being an in-
troductory course twenty years before, I joined with one or two
others to establish the Institute of Paper Chemistry, and directed
it for eight years. That kind of thing is now known as moon-
lighting.

After two members of the Council, one long a member of its
Board of Directors, declined to become President of Brown, the
Fellows and Trustees went in *partibus infidelium*. No one on my
staff knew that it meant "among the heathen." Thus I was the first non-Baptist in nearly a century and three quarters, and the only non-Brown man in more than a hundred years, to become President. There I stayed for eighteen and one-half years after January 1937.

In 1940 I joined the Political Group of the Council's War and Peace Studies; in 1942 became a member of the Steering Committee of that project. In the same year I was co-opted as a member of the Committee on Studies—a post I have now held—to my own astonishment—for over twenty-one years, and have been chairman since 1949.

In 1943 Harold Dodds became too busy to be a Director, and I was chosen, doubtless to keep a touch of Ivy on the Board. In that same year I went on the advisory editorial board of Foreign Affairs. After the lamented death of Isaiah Bowman I took his place as Vice President in 1950. With the departure of Allen Dulles to be the head of CIA, I became acting president and later backed into the presidency.

Now to be serious for a moment. The Council has held a unique place in my life. Nowhere else have I associated with so many interesting men with such widely diversified interests, united by a common public concern. Here I have met more people and formed warmer friendships than elsewhere, save among college presidents. There are three of those here tonight. Grayson Kirk, one of the warmest-hearted and wisest, is my successor as President of the Council.

I never learned to be a good clubman because I grew up in the country, so to speak, and there were no clubs in Appleton, Wisconsin, except golf clubs. The Council came to fulfil for me all the things most men find in a club. For this reason, over the years, I resigned from other commitments to center most of my extracurricular interests here. Since I retired from Brown nearly nine
years ago I have haunted Pratt House. It would be impossible for me to over-emphasize the rewards I have found in this association. Indeed, I have received so much from the Council that I should be giving this dinner to the Council.

In the bewildering and sometimes frustrating confusion of college administration, *Foreign Affairs*, other Council publications, its study groups and its committees gave me a steady diet of interesting, informative and challenging material. I came to admire and appreciate both the administrative and the professional staff who from the first, and up to this very moment, have combined rare ability with complete dedication. That goes for both executive directors, the research fellows, the librarians, and the whole group of able people (nearly 100) of whom we see virtually nothing, but upon whose loyalty and efficiency we depend so much—and so securely.

In the nearly forty years since I joined, one element has been changeless—the attempt to interpret America’s opportunities and responsibilities in the world. That sounds easy, but in the days of a "return to normalcy," the repudiation of the League and the pretence of isolation it was a very difficult assignment. Nevertheless, it was adhered to not alone with fidelity but with high intelligence, and always with the remembrance that while our primary concern was the policy of the United States, we were never confused into thinking that the United States was the center of the universe. If you read much of what is written and believed it, you would get the impression that the world should be ordered to our prescription. The Council never promoted that fallacy.

In other respects there have been great changes in the Council—in size, in program, in library resources, in staff, in this magnificent home with its essential addition, and its prestige. Most of the important developments came so quietly and without straining to be "different" that the changes were seldom dramatic. I
hope the Council continues to change with the times, without ever feeling any necessity to force the pace.

From time to time it should strike out, as in the past, into new programs such as, for example, the Committees in cities across the land. I have had a chance to visit many of those and joined with others to set up one in Providence. It is a great program. Other illustrations are the Root Lectures and the Short Policy Books, as well as special programs like the War and Peace Studies, the report for the Foreign Service Institute and the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, and the Atlantic and China Projects. All those things seem to have come naturally and yet they represent drastic changes in program from the modest beginnings many years ago.

From the first, one of its distinctive policies has been not to seek publicity; there has been no undue concern for its "public image." The hope was to win appreciation by action rather than press agentry. When the Council was finally "discovered" by over-strung guardians of our nation, who seem to feel they have a monopoly on patriotism, criticism inevitably followed. So far we have been fortunate even in that respect; we should be grateful that the many attacks have been so clearly incompetent. They copy each other and even plagiarize themselves! They have been met—somewhat nervously, I concede—by a policy of silence. Joseph Alsop, Senior—one of my authentic heroes—who taught me most of what I know of administration, insisted that silence would defeat critics more effectively than answers—as long as the critics were ill-informed. He was right. But sometimes it is uncomfortable to be right.

The Council is unique, though it bears some resemblance to academic institutions. Fortunately it is not cursed by one academic fault—the imitative spirit. The passion to do what everyone else does is shown currently in the rush toward emphasis on
research even at the expense of teaching—a fact just now begin-ning to come into public notice. Research on the present scale is necessary but to some extent a necessary evil.

I have intimate familiarity with it—from two points of view. As a young faculty member, working my way up through the grades, it was made clear that promotion required research as well as acceptable teaching; I did not gain a full professorship until I was thirty. I garnered facts in such vast profusion that a reviewer of my only scholarly work said it should be called an encyclopaedia, a comment of which I was reminded by my research associate who saved the reviews.

After fourteen years of work on one book I cannot be charged with not appreciating the importance of digging out facts, and I know at first hand, therefore, how much harder it is to think instead of simply compiling. A great many researchers get muscle-bound in the brain. They amass data forever and never say anything significant.

This was brought home to me by one of the most brilliant and influential men in American historiography, Frederick Jackson Turner. When he was only thirty-two years of age and had but recently abandoned the teaching of rhetoric and oratory, he delivered a paper on "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." It launched a revolution in the study and teaching of American history. There have been mountains of research sparked by it, and some of it has shown that part of the ideas that Turner projected were in error. That does not alter the fact that what John Williams would have called his "think piece" was a revolutionary force. Thereafter he never published an important book because he became overwhelmed with data. He used to come to lectures with an armful of folders literally bulging with data. Only when he was unable to find an item for which he was searching through his papers—while still lecturing—would he shove them
aside and speak with the voice of an angel. Too much material prevented him from ever writing a good book.

I admit that one cannot think in a vacuum—though it has often been tried. But too many authors get lost amidst the plethora of their data and never discover the significance of what they have gathered. I saw this problem from the other angle as an educational administrator. In reports to governing boards I never supplied statistics of faculty publications because so many were mere compilations of data devoid of original thought; the numbers were meaningless, or positively misleading.

In this computer age there is an accelerating danger of discounting the importance of the "think piece." The kind of piece I mean is illustrated by Philip Quigg's in the current issue of Foreign Affairs. If you have not read it, do so—it is a first-class "think piece." I am ready to predict with a good deal of assurance that before the sixties are out someone will want to install a computer in this building. It may prove to be a valid suggestion; I would not want to assert otherwise. Nevertheless, in human affairs judgment will still be necessary. Part of a sentence in Lauris Norstad's Ditchley Lecture sums this up. He says, "the reasonable answer is frequently not the right one." The computed answer has to be reasonable or the electronic monster will balk and spit in your eye, so to speak; in matters of international policy the right answer comes, if it comes at all, from a human being.

The Root Lectures and the Policy Books illustrate this. Both are the work of men who have great reservoirs of knowledge and experience, but the virtue of those volumes is that data do not obtrude themselves and personal opinion regarding policy finds adequate expression.

There is a second difficulty that a good deal of current writing on international affairs reveals; it is based upon discounting the future—assuming that current trends will continue. That is
what Senator Fulbright was talking about in his Senate speech last week. People get so angry at some of the things he said that they do not pay any attention to his thesis. He was asserting that past validities continue to be regarded as present truths and future realities. That never happens.

Some of you can remember when a whole generation was for a time bemused by dreams of "a war to end war," "a world safe for democracy," "open covenants openly arrived at." Enormous amounts of writing accepted those bits of utopian rhetoric as descriptions of reality which would endure into—and shape—the long future.

Such illusions might well have been in the mind of Judge Learned Hand when, in that jewel of a book, The Spirit of Liberty, he wrote: "Wisdom comes as false assurance goes—false assurance, that grows from pride in our powers and ignorance of our ignorance. . . . Have no confidence in principles that come to us in the trappings of the eternal. Meet them with gentle irony, friendly scepticism and an open soul."

What a boon that gospel would have been if it had been read by some senators in 1918, or, for that matter, by the President of the United States. Instead, Wilson's hopes were met with acid opposition and were swiftly and ruthlessly destroyed—with resultant disillusion, cynicism, bitterness. After that great historical tragedy—and no one who lived through it can ever fully recover from its scars—one would suppose that the habit of over-discounting the future would have been finally discredited. Yet the process of accepting transient political phenomena as permanent still continues. The United States has just gone through one agonizing illustration: the mountain of writing and speculation about what President Kennedy would do in his second administration and who would succeed him in January 1969.

There have been enough assassinations in American history
and around the world, enough heart attacks and other disasters to validate a passage from another favorite author of mine, the late Carl Becker of Cornell. He said that nothing in human affairs is inevitable until after it has happened. Let us hope no scholar ever tries to parse that sentence and destroy it, for it contains a profound truth in compact and comprehensible form.

Now may I leave the Council for a moment and take advantage of my anecdotal, to digress for a moment and comment on the treacherous nature of eloquence in modern statesmen. Woodrow Wilson—I have just been quoting some of his sayings—had no ghost writers; he composed all his own speeches and most of those without advice, at least any that he took. Moreover, he spoke, preferred to speak—and spoke best—when he spoke extemporaneously. His mind had a natural—and I say this without any criticism whatever, a carefully cultivated—sparkle which produced memorable phrases of rare eloquence. If one reads how he spent his evenings with his family, one can see how that quality was there cultivated.

When they were taken out of context the very brilliance of some remarks made serious difficulties. The most conspicuous of all was "too proud to fight." If you read the phrase in its full context and in the temper in which it was given, it is perfectly understandable. But it was never read that way after the first day or two. Unhappily, some of his rhetorical gems were mistaken for statements of policy at the time they were uttered. Now they are the only residues of his thought that linger in the public memory. Yet his was a rich and varied mind.

We have been through the same situation again, to some extent. President Kennedy had a gift for felicity of expression which evoked admiration at its brilliance. On the negative side it must be said that epigrams can awaken hopes beyond the power of the United States to fulfil. One example was a statement published
at the head of the Herter Committee Report: "For our Nation is commissioned by history to be either an observer of freedom's failure or the cause of its success." It would be difficult to find a more felicitous sentence or a more sweeping declaration of our presumed power to shape the destiny of mankind. It makes de Gaulle's concept of "grandeur" pale by comparison. It is as comprehensive as Khrushchev's promise that our grandchildren will all be communists.

That scintillant sentence raises profound questions whether we really believe in "self-determination," if I may cite one of Wilson's dangerous phrases (as Robert Lansing called it); whether we are willing to see other nations make mistakes at least as serious as those we make, though we resent anyone else calling attention to our errors. That quotation from President Kennedy carries overtones about a recognition policy, an aid policy, and involves dangerous relationships with nations that hate not only the reality but even the word "intervention." Cold analysis, in a word, makes it obvious that by ourselves we cannot "cause" the success of freedom. In making that assertion, however, the President was giving voice to what a great many members of Congress, and of the American public, believe in their subconscious minds. The American messianic temper still survives.

We are now harassed by the inconsistencies apparent between action in one area and action in another, between eloquent words and grubby deeds. It is a reminder that a statesman's need to awaken the public to grave issues is often in tension—if not in conflict—with the necessity for precision when one is speaking, not alone to the American people but to the whole world.

I do not want to overstate the case against eloquence. Anyone who has lived in the era of Winston Churchill would appreciate that, and of course the Gettysburg address comes to mind—though, as you all know, its significance was not observed at the
time of its utterance. Nevertheless, the position of the United States in the world today lays upon its spokesmen, whoever they may be, a demand for precision and lucidity. When eloquence contributes to those it is a jewel beyond price; when it runs beyond those bounds it becomes a serious danger to our policy.

But to return from that excursion back to the Council where I belong and to the argument against discounting the future. We have special projects such as the Atlantic Project and the China Project. Both have had to be reshaped because some of the postulates upon which they were properly begun have since altered radically—particularly as a result of the activities of General de Gaulle. It will do no good to scold the French statesman, though that has been a favorite occupation in a good many quarters. It is futile to scold a man who will not listen.

Instead, we must reshape our approach, taking appropriate notice (but not an inordinate account) of his reality. We should remember all the while that the "discount scholars," who have been taking de Gaulle's reelection and his continuance in office for five years thereafter for granted, omit the fact that an assassin's bullet or some other physical disaster can make all their extrapolations not only invalid but foolish and utterly dangerous as guides to policy.

The temper that I have been expounding is exemplified in Foreign Affairs. As an editor, Ham Armstrong always had a flair, as did Archie Coolidge with whom he worked at the start. Through the years Ham has achieved status as well as stature. Now the doors of virtually all responsible statesmen—and some who are irresponsible—swing open to him. Yet the magazine has never become pontifical, much less does the editor let authors reach for the deceptively clever phrase; at least if they reach he strikes the hand away. Moreover, the editor, one of the severest—as well as
the kindest—critics I have ever known, does not hesitate to apply his own critical standards to himself. Recently when I asked him why more had not appeared on Cuba, and he found only ten articles in forty years on the card—two by Cosme de la Torriente and one by Ambassador Guggenheim—with not a smile he said: "I am ashamed of it."

The appropriate temper is shown also in Richard Stebbins' annual account of *The United States in World Affairs*. Year after year those volumes are full of sound judgment as well as rich in information. I think it is because his perspective is controlled by an irenic irony, which never degenerates into abrasive sarcasm. Sometimes when I have commented on a passage, still in manuscript form, with a hint of a smile about his lips he has said: "I have already taken it out." He seems to know instinctively not only the dangers of a clever phrase but the absolute folly of assuming that human events will move in a straight line.

I see this same essential element in the *Political Handbook of the World* which Walter Mallory has edited so long and with such precision. But it is far from a routine performance; for recent numbers have significant changes such as the Atlas, the altered format of the page (an item dear to the heart of a scholar) and moving the "Other Countries" from the back up into their alphabetical place and giving full data about each of them.

The best of the books and papers which have come from the Studies program (and here I dare not cite specific instances at the expense of others) have revealed awareness of the significance of the human element and its unpredictability. We are watching that human element now in the apparently smooth but substantively drastic transition from Kennedy to Johnson. I am reminded of the change which took place when Wilson left and Harding came in. Only two people left the State Department: Norman Davis and Banbridge Colby, and only one politician came in: Charles E.
Hughes. There was meticulous care for form, but what a change in substance!

I hope the Council will continue to be unique by sticking to its own last without being nervous because it does not fall into some conventional classification. It has some of the qualities of a university; it has some of the characteristics of that modern device, the "think tank." But the Council has both a definition of field and a flexibility which no university can have. Unlike both it has steered clear of federal funds. It has the priceless asset of continuous involvement in its regular work of men of affairs who have to reach responsible decisions day by day. That feature no "think tank" and no university can possibly have but it serves as a corrective to the abstractions to which scholars are necessarily prone.

The Council can perform its reasonable service by continuing to be itself with neither arrogant pride in its uniqueness nor apology for its difference from other institutions.

Finally, I must pay special tribute to two men. (I have to be careful what I say and not embarrass them, since I am the one who is supposed to be embarrassed.) The patience, the good temper and the wisdom of our Vice President and Secretary and of our Chairman, with whom I have worked so long so closely, have been one of the most rewarding experiences of my life.