

**Independent Sector Speech
Washington, DC**

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Ladies and gentlemen. Good evening. It is an honour to be invited to address you this evening.

I must confess, however, that, it is with some trepidation that, I, as a European speak to an American audience about issues concerning The United States and its role in the world.

Four lines of poetry come to mind. They were penned by a poet who was asked to submit some verses to celebrate the royal wedding which took place in Great Britain some months ago. The poet's lack of enthusiasm for this event is evident from her very short poem.

My mother said say nothing
If you can't say something nice
So from my poem you will see
I've followed her advice.

Alas, Diana Aviv will not permit me to say "nothing" on a subject which offers so much opportunity for a foreigner to give offense to an American audience. So – here goes ...

Since 2001 I have lived in New York City to where I decamped from Dublin, Ireland with my wife and our dog. I am happy to report that the dog acclimatized to her new surroundings even more quickly than her owners.

But my experience of The United States did not begin in 2001. My love affair with this country started as long ago as 1969 when I joined the legions of Irish students who participated in the rite of passage known as the J1 visa programme.

I spent my summer constructing houses in Princeton Junction, New Jersey. And I experienced an America that was very different to that which I found in 2001.

In 1969, The United States was a dynamic and optimistic place. What impressed me most at that time was the moral leadership the country was offering to the world and the ease with which The United States bore the burden of that moral leadership.

The country had recently emerged from a period of extraordinary leadership achievement. Consider the following:

- The United States had twice rescued Europe from tyranny during the previous sixty years.
- This country had conceived and funded the Marshall Plan, thereby providing a solid foundation for the later development of the European Union.
- Japan and Germany had been rebuilt and democratized.
- The United Nations system had been created under the leadership of The United States.

What a record!

The United States I encountered in 2001 was, not surprisingly, very different to that country I had experienced thirty years previously. And not all the differences were welcome. Already in those early years of the first Bush administration tensions had arisen between The United States and its transatlantic partners, and examples of American exceptionalism were starting to occur with depressing regularity.

Let me tell you a story.

In January 2003 I found myself back in my home city of Dublin on business and while there took the opportunity to visit my dentist for a consultation. Now, I don't know my dentist very well. Indeed, I try to visit him as infrequently as possible as consultations are usually painful and sometimes expensive.

In the course of his examination my dentist asked me to close my mouth and grind my teeth and then to smile. Now grinding my teeth is no problem – I do it all the time reviewing grant recommendations. But smiling to order is something I have always found difficult. “No, that won't do” he said, when he saw my sneer. He paused, and then he said “Have you heard the news? George W. Bush has had a heart attack.” I am sorry to say I smiled. “Yes – that's better!” the dentist said.

Now, what was going on here? Don't forget – this was happening in Ireland – a country which is obsessed with The United States, and has closed links with The US. Almost half of the manufacturing jobs in Ireland result from US inward investment. And I think I am the only person I know in Ireland who doesn't have a family member or a relative in the United States. I didn't know this man well. He had no way of knowing what my political views are. And yet he assumed he could get me to smile by telling me that something seriously bad had happened to George W. Bush.

That incident spoke volumes to me about the disillusionment of the Irish people with the policies of the US government at that time (but does not, of course, mean they were disillusioned with the American people). I still have to confess to a lingering surprise at this encounter with my dentist.

That's just one, rather personal, experience of misunderstanding between the outside world and The United States. The opinion poll evidence for a lack of sympathy among most countries outside the US for the policies and positions of the current Administration is compelling. I propose to take it as read and ask two questions: Why? And what can our world – the nonprofit world - do about it?

So, why?

I think that the fundamental reason for the deterioration in relations between The United States and many countries in the world is what I believe is a dissonance between American rhetoric and American reality in recent years. This requires me to tread on some dangerous ground so I had better explain what I mean.

In a book review in The New York Times last month Anatol Lieven discussed what he described as “a conscious or unconscious belief in America's inherent goodness and benevolence.” He continued “too many Americans simply cannot understand why other nations might distrust The United States and be unwilling to follow its lead.”

You can see this in play when President Bush speaks, as he frequently does, about Arab, or Muslim, resentment of America's democracy. “They hate us for our freedoms” he has said. It is implied that democracy has reached its finest flowering on American soil. It is also believed, with remarkable naïveté, that America's version of democracy can be easily exported. A quick dose of regime

change, followed by one or two elections and *hey, presto!* the domino theory is reversed and tyrannies will be swept away by a rising tide of democracies. Would that it were so simple

I have to say to you that, looked at from the outside, the US constitutional system is less attractive than it may appear to the citizens of this country. Of course, at the end of the eighteenth century the US constitutional system was radical and path breaking. But measured against the constitutional systems of the other twenty-one countries that have been steadily democratic since 1950 the US system doesn't show up too well.

The Yale political scientist Robert A Dahl in his book *How Democratic is the American Constitution?* compares the constitutional systems of the world's 22 oldest democracies. In this study, he places the US in the top third of countries in only one category – economic growth - and even then it is ranked only fifth in the league table.

On matters such as inflation, unemployment and budget deficits the United States is placed in the middle third but it performs badly, compared with the other advanced democracies, on variables such as the distribution of wealth, voter turnout, incarceration rates and foreign aid.

Thoughtful observers in other countries respect the power and the economic performance of the United States, but they don't like many other features of the system.

Take the field of human rights. This country has shown remarkable leadership in human rights. Eleanor Roosevelt led the effort to proclaim the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and The United States has been consistent since the 1970s in calling to account countries which depart from internationally accepted norms of human rights. But since the exposure of the present Administration's activities in Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib and elsewhere, it will be hard for this country to regain the moral authority which has been squandered by these policies. And equally serious, the possibility of The United States holding tyrannical regimes to account because of violations of human rights has now been diminished for the next few years, if it has not disappeared entirely.

What then, can the nonprofit sector in this country do to tilt the balance and promote more understanding between The United States and its fellow inhabitants of this planet?

How can we contribute to a new thinking in The United States about its role in the world? How can we encourage relationships of trust, rather than of suspicion, between this country and those other countries with which, in this increasingly interdependent world, The United States must collaborate?

Since my particular experience lies in the foundation sector, I will confine my thoughts to the potential contributions of foundations rather than those of the wider nonprofit world.

There is of course no magic bullet which can be deployed by foundations anxious to repair the breach of trust and understanding that exists between The United States and other countries. But I have two thoughts which I want to offer you.

My first proposition is that the US nonprofit sector needs to become more engaged internationally. Relatively few nonprofit organizations operate international programs.

Foundation Center statistics show that international giving by US foundations has not grown in recent years and that giving to overseas recipients actually fell in 2003. What seems to be happening is that a greater share of the international giving of foundations is being directed through US based organisations. The direct engagement of American foundations in foreign lands has thus reduced.

This is a particularly unwelcome development because there is great appreciation in recipient countries for the vital work which American foundations undertake. Indeed, this is one dimension of America's international engagement which is without controversy.

The generous and speedy American response to the tsunami disaster at the beginning of this year, well illustrates the contrast between the international reaction to America's private engagement with the wider world and its public engagement.

There were telling images from the tsunami relief operation. We saw emergency supplies – sometimes provided by American nonprofits – delivered with speed and efficiency by US military helicopters to stricken areas of Indonesia.

Meanwhile, other military helicopters were to be seen in Iraq on combat operations. Soft power brought hope and admiration. Hard power engendered suspicion.

I was recently in South Africa with Atlantic's Board, reviewing the work we have been doing in that country. In that country we collaborate with a number of US foundations – including Mott, Ford, Carnegie, Kellogg and Mellon. Strong feelings of gratitude to those foundations were frequently expressed to us. But not a few people mused to us how differently they felt about US foundations as compared with the US government.

My second point concerns the media.

I referred earlier on to that first summer I spent in The United States in 1969. One of my memories from that time is of the incident involving Senator Edward Kennedy in Chappaquiddick. I was struck then by the strong performance by print and broadcast journalists in pursuing that story to the discomfort of a powerful family.

Fast forward to today and what do you find? Anyone who believes that independent and critical journalism is essential to the protection of democratic freedoms can only be depressed:

- Investigative journalism is on the decline.
- It is sometimes hard to discern the difference between news and entertainment.
- Thoughtful debate has been superseded by partisan ranting.
- There is little coverage of international affairs.

In a run-up to the invasion of Iraq, and in the early days of the occupation of that country, I gave up reading or watching the news that was available to me locally. Instead I relied on the websites of foreign publications to make sense of that disturbing period. And I am struck by the frequency with which friends tell me that they have given up on network and cable news services and have decided to get their news from the BBC. Now, I think it's a welcome development that BBC news bulletins are now widely available in this country. But is it acceptable that

intelligent people anxious to follow world events cannot do so from locally available news broadcasters? Surely not.....

This gloomy landscape must provide fruitful opportunities for foundations concerned to improve America's relations with other countries. The training of journalists, the underpinning of journalistic ethics, the encouragement of media coverage of international affairs and - -above all – support for public broadcasting; at least some of these should feature on the agenda of any foundation which is concerned about the relations between this country and the rest of the world.

On 19 March 2003 Senator Robert Byrd, the longest serving member of the Congress bemoaned the nation's unstoppable march towards war. What he said on the Senate floor bears repeating

...today I weep for my country. I have watched the events of recent months with a heavy, heavy heart. No more is the image of American one of strong yet benevolent peacekeeper.....Around the globe, our friends mistrust us, our word is disputed, our intentions are questioned.

He said ... "America's true power lies not in its will to intimidate, but in its ability to inspire."

Senator Byrd is right. "America's true power lies not in its will to intimidate but in its ability to inspire." That is the prize. This increasingly dangerous world needs to experience – as it has experienced in the past – that unique ability of America to inspire.

Thank you.