



United States Mission to the OSCE

OSCE Conference on Racism, Xenophobia and Discrimination Introductory Remarks for Session 1

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I do have a letter from the President of the United States and it reads as follows:

“I send greetings to those gathered for the Conference on Racism, Xenophobia, and Discrimination, hosted by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. The United States is proud to participate in this important forum.”

“The United States stands firmly against bigotry of all kinds. Our country was built on a foundation of liberty and equality for people of all races, religions, and backgrounds. The principles of tolerance and equality remain the core of our identity as a nation.”

“OSCE-participating countries have demonstrated an ongoing commitment to countering racism, xenophobia and discrimination. This conference promotes understanding and peace among people of different religions and different nations.”

“I applaud all those participating in this conference for your dedication to rejecting racism. I also call on you as government leaders, members of civil society, and individuals to develop legislative measures, institutional mechanisms and public policies to combat all forms of discrimination and intolerance. Together, we will work to defend liberty and the democratic principles that are the pillars of a peaceful world.”

“Laura joins me in sending our best wishes for a productive conference.”

- George Bush

Mr. Chairman I visited a couple of days ago with the Secretary of State Colin Powell and due to all that's going on and that's on his plate he obviously could not attend but he was gracious enough to send a video tape and at this time I would like to share that with you.

(Taped remarks played)

Mr. Moderator, Ambassadors and Delegates I want to begin by thanking President Bush and Secretary Powell for asking me to lead the US delegation to this very important conference. And I also want to say how grateful I am to Ambassador De Visser and the OSCE for holding this very timely conference on racism, discrimination, and xenophobia.

I would also like to thank Ambassador Minikes and the members of the U.S. Delegation for their help and support.

It's a topic that's had an important impact on my own life. Although the decisive battles against racism in the United States were fought by brave men and women before I was a young man, I still experienced its humiliating vestiges: white-only seating in my local movie theatre, a white-only pool in the town where I grew up, and a brick wall of racial assumptions and stereotypes. That wall has crumbled quite a bit during my lifetime, but the rubble remains. I am encouraged that the other countries represented here have sent such distinguished delegations to discuss these extremely important issues.

Several years ago, I stood at the Door of No Return on Senegal's Goree Island. The Door of No Return was just that for as many as a million slaves that passed through that doorway in chains, never to set foot on African soil again. In the doorway, I stood next to a good friend, Congressman Pete Hoekstra: A descendant of slaves and a descendant of slave traders standing side by side without any ill-will, but rather joined by the bonds of friendship.

Those moments staring out across the Atlantic reminded me of two very different, but very important points. The impact of racism and discrimination can inflict terrible suffering on its victims. But racism's legacy – even the legacy of slavery – can be overcome. As we discuss the evils of racism, xenophobia, and discrimination today, we must be sober, but we need not despair.

I deliver these remarks to you as a representative of the United States, a country that knows much about the subjects we've gathered to combat. Sadly, much of this knowledge was purchased at a terrible price. Our history – so noble in parts – will nevertheless always bear the scars of slavery and our treatment of Native Americans.

To ignore this history, to deny it, to whitewash it, to revise it, would be the gravest insult we could inflict on those who have already suffered too much at our country's hands. And it would be one of the most dangerous ways to invite racism's resurgence. I trust that our open wounds will continue to heal, but the scars will remain. America has come a long way. But at too slow a pace and at too high a price.

If my country's history has taught us anything about racism and discrimination, it's this: No one is immune to this disease. Many of those who helped construct our

greatest political documents – our Declaration of Independence and our Constitution – personally practiced slavery. Learning and insight do not inoculate any of us against the evil of racism.

In the 1930s, few countries could match Germany's cultural accomplishments in music, art, literature, and architecture. Yet this is where Hitler rose to power, and where Jews, Gypsies and many others were soon tortured and murdered by the millions. High culture does not inoculate any of us against the evil of racism.

There are many good ways to fight racism. But I suspect the single most important protection is to recognize that there is no *certain* protection against racism. No country represented here today – no country – is more than a generation away from unleashing the worst of racism's horrific potential. Racism isn't just about "them" – the fanatics, the neo-fascists, unbowed bigots – it's about me, it's about you, it's about our neighbors, and it's about our children.

But while I challenge all of us to approach racism, discrimination and xenophobia with realism and humility, we should also approach it with hope. The United States has managed to come a long way on racism since *its* birth. In fact, I can personally attest that it's come a long, long way since *my* birth.

Forty years ago, one of our greatest Americans, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered what has become one of the most famous speeches on racism and discrimination. How did he galvanize the American civil rights movement, setting it on a firm, unstoppable course toward freedom? With the words, "I have a dream." A message of hope.

Our job, in large part, is to give all our people hope. But how can we do this?

An obvious but essential way is by reforming any laws that encourage discrimination. Few laws today in any of our countries are likely to be explicitly racist or xenophobic. But that doesn't make their impact any less pernicious. In the US, many states used literacy tests as a condition for voting – at the same time that black segregated schools received just a fraction of the funding given to schools for white children. Race was never mentioned in these laws. Yet their impact was perhaps even more profound than the so-called Jim Crow laws that sanctioned racial discrimination.

But we must go well beyond removing laws that reinforce racism. We must give those suffering under racism the tools to succeed, and thereby discredit racial stereotypes by their very success. We must work tirelessly to give every member of our societies equal opportunity, an incentive to work hard, and the hope that they can reach their goals.

This, in turn, suggests that if we are going to attack racism at its roots, we have to focus on education, on economic empowerment, and on rewarding hard work.

But where does the United States stand today? The most recent threat to our slow but steady progress against racism was the 9-11 terrorist strike against our country. Amongst the mix of emotions on that devastating day, many of us feared that in the aftermath of the attacks, Arabs and Muslims would be in great danger of an indiscriminate, violent backlash.

Regrettably, the best estimates indicate there was a clear, significant backlash in the initial months after the attack. But, without diminishing the significance of these attacks, these same reports indicate that by 2002, the number of such attacks began a steady descent to relatively low, pre 9-11 levels.

Why did the number of hate crimes against Muslims and Arabs fall back in 2002? In part, I believe it's a testimony to how far we've come as a country in facing up to the evil of racism.

But another part of the answer testifies to the proactive role that governments can play by firmly confronting racism in any form. US federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies reacted swiftly to the threat. At the local level, many city police departments immediately began monitoring incidents of hate crimes within hours of the attacks. In several cases departments swiftly implemented standing plans – developed with Muslim community leaders – to send extra police units to safeguard Arabs and Muslims most at risk.

The Department of Justice was also quick to implement a streamlined reporting system with federal prosecutors sending reports of hate crimes directly to Attorney General Ashcroft. The US Justice Department has also been aggressively investigating reported hate crimes – in over 500 cases to date – and has maintained a 100% conviction rate in cases where it has filed charges.

Many worry, however, that, balanced against these successes, many of the actions taken by the US government to protect against further terror attacks have systematically stripped Arabs and Muslims of fundamental rights.

These are clearly important issues, and I believe the right way to approach them is in this context. We in America don't face a choice between security and liberty. Instead, we must enhance our security to preserve our liberty.

I'd like to conclude these remarks with a challenge – a challenge born of America's failures and her successes. All of us here today share a duty to guard against racism in all its forms, and with the utmost vigilance. At the same time, we must remember that the sure antidote to racism is to have a better dream, and a firmer hope. As Rev. King understood so well: where hope, education, and opportunity reign, racism withers.