

Inaugural address given by President Eisenhower at the first meeting of Heads of Government at the Geneva Conference (18 to 23 July 1955)

Caption: On 18 July 1955, at the opening of the Geneva Conference of the Heads of Government of France, the United States, the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union, the US President, Dwight D. Eisenhower, gives an address in which he stresses the importance of rapprochement between East and West.

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Inaugural speech by President Eisenhower at the first meeting of heads of government at the Geneva Conference (18-23 July 1955)

We meet here for a simple purpose. We have come to find a basis for accommodation which will make life safer and happier not only for the nations we represent but for people elsewhere.

We are here in response to a universal urge, recognized by Premier Bulganin in his speech of July 15, that the political leaders of our great countries find a path to peace. We cannot expect here, in the few hours of a few days, to solve all the problems of all the world that need to be solved. Indeed, the four of us meeting here have no authority from others that could justify us even in attempting that. The roots of many of these problems are buried deep in war, conflicts and history. They are made even more difficult by the differences in governmental ideologies and ambitions. Manifestly it is out of the question in the short time available to the Heads of Government meeting here to trace out the causes and origins of these problems and to devise agreements that could with complete fairness to all eliminate them.

Nevertheless, we can, perhaps, create a new spirit that will make possible future solutions of problems which are within our responsibilities. And, equally important, we can try to take here and now at Geneva the first steps on a new road to a just and durable peace.

The problems that concern us are not inherently insoluble. Of course, they are difficult; but their solution is not beyond the wisdom of man. They seem insoluble under conditions of fear, distrust, and even hostility, where every move is weighed in terms of whether it will help or weaken a potential enemy. If those conditions can be changed, then much can be done. Under such circumstances I am confident that at a later stage our Foreign Ministers will be able to carry on from where we leave off to find, either by themselves or with others, solutions to our problems.

No doubt there are among our nations philosophical convictions which are in many respects irreconcilable. Nothing that we can say or do here will change that fact. However, it is not always necessary that people should think alike and believe alike before they can work together. The essential thing is that none should attempt by force or trickery to make his beliefs prevail and thus to impose his system on the unwilling.

The new approach we of this conference should seek cannot be found merely by talking in terms of abstractions and generalities. It is necessary that we talk frankly about the concrete problems which create tension between us and about the way to begin in solving them.

As a preface, may I indicate some of the issues I think we should discuss.

First is the problem of unifying Germany and forming an all-German Government based on free elections. Ten years have passed since the German armistice and Germany is still divided. That division does a grievous wrong to a people which is entitled, like any other, to pursue together a common destiny. While that division continues, it creates a basic source of instability in Europe. Our talk of peace has little meaning if at the same time we perpetuate conditions endangering the peace. Towards Germany, the four of us bear special responsibilities. While any conclusions we reach would be invalid unless supported by majority opinion in Germany this problem should be a topic for our meeting here. Must we not consider ways to solve it promptly and justly. [?]

In the interest of enduring peace, our solution should take account of the legitimate security interests of all concerned. That is why we insist a united Germany is entitled at its choice, to exercise its inherent right of collective self-defence. By the same token, we are ready to take account of legitimate security interests of the Soviet Union. The Paris agreements contain many provisions which serve this purpose. But we are quite ready to consider further reciprocal safeguards which are reasonable and practical and compatible with the security of all concerned.

On a broader plane, there is the problem of respecting the right of peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live; and of restoring sovereign rights and self-government to those who have been

deprived of them. The American people feel strongly that certain peoples of Eastern Europe, many with a long and proud record of national existence, have not yet been given the benefit of this pledge of our United Nations wartime declaration, reinforced by other wartime agreements.

There is the problem of communication and human contacts as among our peoples. We frankly fear the consequences of a situation where whole peoples are isolated from the outside world. The American people want to be friends with the Soviet peoples. There are no natural differences between our peoples or our nations. There are no territorial conflicts or commercial rivalries. Historically, our two countries have always been at peace. But friendly understanding between peoples does not readily develop when there are artificial barriers such as now interfere with communication. It is time that all curtains whether of guns or laws or regulations should begin to come down. But this can only be done in an atmosphere of mutual respect and confidence.

There is the problem of international communism. For 38 years now, its activities have disturbed relations between other nations and the Soviet Union. Its activities are not confined to efforts to persuade. It seeks throughout the world to subvert lawful governments and to subject nations to an alien domination. We cannot ignore the distrust created by the support of such activities. In my nation and elsewhere it adds to distrust and therefore to international tension.

Finally, there is the overriding problem of armament. This is at once a result and a cause of existing tension and distrust. Contrary to a basic purpose of the United Nations Charter, armaments now divert much of men's effort from creative to non-productive uses. We would all like to end that. But apparently none dares to do so because of fear of attack.

Surprise attack has a capacity for destruction far beyond anything which man has yet known. So each of us deems it vital that there should be means to deter such attack. Perhaps, therefore, we should consider whether the problem of limitation of armament may not best be approached by seeking—as a first step—dependable ways to supervise and inspect military establishments, so that there can be no frightful surprises, whether by sudden attack or by secret violation of agreed restrictions. In this field nothing is more important than that we explore together the challenging and central problem of effective mutual inspection. Such a system is the foundation for real disarmament.

As we think of this problem of armament, we need to remember that the present burden of costly armaments not only deprives our own people of higher living standards, but it also denies the peoples of underdeveloped areas of [sic] resources which would improve their lot. These areas contain much of the world's population and many nations now emerging for the first time into political independence. They are grappling with the urgent problem of economic growth. Normally they would receive assistance particularly for capital development from the more developed nations of the world. However, that normal process is gravely retarded by the fact that the more developed industrial countries are dedicating so much of their productive effort to armament. Armament reduction would and should insure that part of the savings would flow into the less developed areas of the world to assist their economic development.

In addition, we must press forward in developing the use of atomic energy for constructive purposes. We regret that the Soviet Union has never accepted our proposal of December 1953 that nations possessing stockpiles of fissionable material should join to contribute to a "world bank" so as, in steadily increasing measure, to substitute cooperation in human welfare for competition in means of human destruction. We still believe that if the Soviet Union would according to its ability contribute to this great project, that act would improve the international climate.

In this first statement of the Conference, I have indicated very briefly some of the problems that weigh upon my mind and upon the people of the United States and where solution is largely within the competence of the four of us. As our work here progresses I hope that all of us will have suggestions as to how we might promote the search for the solution of these problems.

Perhaps it would be well if each of us would in turn give a similar indication of his country's views. Then we

can quickly see the scope of the matters which it might be useful to discuss here and arrange our time accordingly.

Let me repeat, I trust that we are not here merely to catalogue our differences. We are not here to repeat the same dreary exercises that have characterized most of our negotiations of the past ten years. We are here in response to the peaceful aspirations of mankind to start the kind of discussions which will inject a new spirit into our diplomacy; and to launch fresh negotiations under conditions of good augury.

In that way, and perhaps only in that way, can our meeting, necessarily brief, serve to generate and put in motion the new forces needed to set us truly on the path to peace. For this I am sure all humanity will devoutly pray.