

PL16- SCENES FROM THE STATE OF THE WORLD FORUM

The State of The World Forum - a gathering of former political leaders like founder Mikhail Gorbachev, Oscar Arias, Jean-Paul Aristide, Raul Lubbers, Abba Eban, and Alan Cranston, the President of Mitsubishi USA, writers like Jane Goodall, John Naisbitt and Stephen Covey, activists like Mohammed Yunus of the Grameen Bank, the Children Defense Fund's Marian Wright Edelman, and 13-year old Canadian anti-child labor crusader Craig Kielberger, spiritual figures like Ram Dass, Acharn Sumedho, Sam Keen and Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg, and artists like Boston Philharmonic head Ben Zander and poet Edward White - recently met for 5 days at the Fairmont hotel in San Francisco for their second annual meeting.

An audience of some 600 persons attended over 100 plenary sessions and workshops, which also featured a forum of youth leaders from around the world The Forum's official purpose was sought promote several initiatives to halt the spread of nuclear weapons, conventional arms and toxic chemicals. Its overall goal is, in President Jim Garrison's words, to help "build a new world civilization."

What follows are some scenes from the event.

The Forum's overall theme was that today's tumultuous transition to a new world civilization poses great dangers, requiring that we halt the proliferation of arms and toxic chemicals, and do more to meet the human needs of an overpopulated world.

The meta-issue was whether we can do this within the existing paradigm, or need a radical shift. Speakers like John Naisbitt and Malaysia's Noordin Soopie felt that the Information Revolution would create enough wealth to solve our ills without a major spiritual shift. Stephen Covey emphasized that Fortune 500 leaders were as concerned about the environment as anyone else. Many others felt the West needed to shift to a new ethic that focused less on consumerism

and materialism, and more on the satisfactions of service to the poor and spiritual experience.

The Conference featured numerous activists who issued strong condemnation of globalization and materialism, and called upon the West to do more to help the poor. A major plenary was held to argue that wealth should be measured less by GNP and more by such indices as health, literacy, and the state of the environment.

Plenary sessions, as the menus (printed on "tree-free paper") explained, were preceded by meals prepared by Fairmont Executive Chef Katsuko "Suki" Sugiura. The October 5 dinner featured a Vegetable and Bay Scallop Ceviche appetizer, accompanied by a Carmenet Vienyard White Meritage 1994 wine, an entree of grilled marginated vegetables and seafood ragout in pastry accompanied by a Richard Graff Vineyard Morvedre 1993 wine (organically grown grapes), and was completed by a banana coconut tart with guava coulis.

Forum organizers clearly faced a dilemma. On the the one hand, they wanted to call for a new spiritual ethic. On the other, as Forum Chairman Alan Cranston explained to me, "to finance the Forum, we need rich people willing to give us \$5,000. And rich people like to stay at places like the Fairmont."

They resolved it by both catering to wealthy sensitibilities and promoting such initiatives as formation of a socially responsible investment fund, an attempt to raise \$34 billion which it was said would guarantee adequate water and vaccines for all the world's poor, and Dr Yunus's upcoming "Microcredit Summit" to spread the Grameen model around the world.

Gorbachev spoke for nearly an hour, covering a wide variety of environmental, social and arms issues. He reserved his greatest passion, however, for warning that "some" in the West wished to humiliate Russia, and that this threatened plans to reduce nuclear weapons. He condemned the U.S. attempt to freeze its nuclear weapons superiority in place, and repeatedly called for more aid, support and respect for Russia. Gorbachev has an extraordinary trait: a capacity to mesmerize people by looking directly in their eyes, even from across the room. I had heard of this, and experienced it myself when he responded to a question I asked him during a press conference. Another reporter told me of the extraordinary feeling he had that Gorbachev had singled him out across the ballroom. With a shock, I told him I had had the same experience. A confident told me that in private Gorbachev's major regret is that he let "democratization" get out of hand. In retrospect, he wishes he had tried the Chinese model: freeing the economy, but controlling the political process.

The story that moved me the most, from Susan Colin-Marks, a South African peace activist who had spent years moderating intense and sometimes dangerous meetings between Blacks and Afrikaners. At one meeting the Afrikaners arrived first, and sat at one end of the table. The Blacks then arrived, and sat at the other. Just as she was starting, one last Black walked in, a young peace activist. He looked at both ends of the table, hesitated, went over to the white side, nodded at one of the men there and shook his hand, and sat down next to him. Susan was one of the few who knew that the young Black had sat down next to one of the policemen who had most brutally tortured him.

The first day featured the appearance of former 4-star U.S. General Lee Butler, the man who was in charge of U.S. nuclear weapons and would have been in charge of obliterating the Soviet Union had the order come from President Bush. General Butler has

now joined the Forum initiative aimed at eliminating all nuclear weapons from the face of the earth. As he came to the podium, he and Gorbachev embraced.

At the press conference following, he and a succession of speaker eloquently described the great dangers facing the world from nuclear weapon proliferation. I asked General Butler for his strategic risk assessment of the situation today vs. the height of the Cold War. "The situation is not comparable," he said, "we are far safer today than we were then." Phew!

In a private discussion afterwards a knowledgeable Pakistani explained that the key problem facing the attempt to eliminate nuclear weapons was India's fear of China. He felt they only used their fear of Pakistan as an excuse. The question in this area, as in so many others, is how willing the Chinese are to accomodate world opinion.

Former Nobel Prize winner Oscar Arias is, in a sense, taking on an even tougher task than nuclear weapons: eliminating the conventional arms trade which is, after all, responsible for almost all the hundreds of millions of deaths that have occurred since the end of World War II.

At his press conference he described plans to organize Nobel Laureates to make a moral plea to President Clinton and other world leaders to conclude a treaty on conventional arms reductions. I noted that Clinton would probably already agree with him morally, that the problem was the arms industry and Chinese desires to sell arms to the Third World, and wondered what other than moral pleas might convince Clinton to do something. "We will see if President Clinton is serious about his beliefs," Arias responded. Caleb Rossiter of the Democracy Project, whom Arias later introduced, said 40% of the House has already voted to reduce arms sales, largely because of Republican distaste for selling arms to dictators.

At one point Arias said, "it will take many years for this initiative to pass. But precisely because it will take many years, we must start now." I realized with a start that there had been a point when it seemed that the war in Central America would never end. And that having helped bring it to a conclusion, Arias had no doubt learned patience.

"You really should attend the Native American prayer ceremony tomorrow," the Buddhist monk Acharn Amaro smiled at me. "It's really something." So the next day I dragged myself out of bed and managed to get to a hotel room by 6:45 a.m., where for the next hour and a half I participated in an extraordinary ceremony.

Led by a Canadian Indian leader, we prayed to our ancestors for guidance. We moved first young people to the center of the room, then women, vowing never again to sanction their abuse. We did a ritual with sticks painted red, yellow, black and white, symbolizing not only the unity of the races, but the Indian tradition of placing your stick in the ground and tying yourself to it, so you would not run away in battle. We were introduced to two Indian elders who took it upon themselves to resurrect their tribes' culture after it had almost died out in 1945. We listened to the story of Custer's last stand from the Native American Point of View. Virtually every prayer or chant was built around the need to preserve our environment.

I walked out of the room stunned. Normally, I'm just wiping the sleep out of my eyes at 8 or 9 a.m., if I'm lucky. Today I'd traveled to realms past and present, near and far, that I rarely think about. I was reminded of how much the indigenous perspective offers the beginning of the 21st century, as our ability to preserve our planet and species will ultimately depend upon our reverence for it.

The Forum chose make its environmental initiative an attempt to halt the production of "endocrine-disrupting" toxic chemicals threatening our ability to reproduce, rather than more widely known issues like global warming. Theo Wilburn, chief scientist from the World Wildlife Fund and co-author of Our Stolen Future, heads the initiative. She began her speech by noting that each of us carried over 500 toxic chemicals in our body.

Another meta issue at the conference was the extent to which we should be hopeful or pessimistic about the future. Dr. Wilburn held up a large jar filled with ugly plastic and metal items. She explained that they had been taken from just 4 fish in the middle of the Pacific Ocean near Midway Island, and that their toxic residues were entering our bodies directly.

Jane Goodall, Tanzanian naturalist and author, also help up visual displays. They included a leaf from Nagasaki, a piece of lime from the quarry at Robbins Island where Nelson Mandela was imprisoned, a piece of the Berlin Wall, and a comb made by a leper with only the stumps of his arms and his teeth. She called it a "symbol of indomitable hope."

Perhaps the best-received keynote speech was that of Bangladesh's Muhammed Yunus, whose Grameen bank has provided millions of dollars in small loans, on the order of \$100, to the poorest of the poor, usually women. Yunus, a man of immense natural dignity and simplicity, basically told Grameen's story. He emphasized that his poverty-stricken borrowers have repaid virtually all their loans, and stressed that poor people are credit-worthy. Perhaps because his speech dealt with results rather than rhetoric, and offered so much hope, he received a standing ovation from everyone in the huge ballroom. In a private conversation he reported that the Clintons, who have praised Grameen publicly, have followed through and helped the bank expand its funding. I wondered what his alternative was to relying on economic development by multinational corporations. "Self-employment," he responded, explaining that Grameen's focus was on

helping people, particularly poor women forced to stay at home to care for their children. to find work they could do as individuals in their villages.

I noticed that one media person, a woman in her 40s, seemed to have a sarcastic edge to her voice. Finally we talked, and I learned why. It turns out that the State of the World Forum is a part of a worldwide conspiracy to rob America of its sovereignty and bring into being a world government. A small group of people - we have only to look at the foundations and corporations funding the Forum to know who - seek to control the world. Senator Alan Simpson has already explained that we have the technology to put a microchip on everyone's forehead or arm (the forehead is better, because it does not change as much), that will enable people to be tracked. The rich are already doing it so that their children will not be kidnapped. This will ultimately come to past, she explained with utmost certainty, because the Bible has predicted that the people of the world will be branded with the sign of Ham.

I was struck by how calm and self-assured she sounded, and well-informed to boot (I had not known about Senator Simpson's comments, apparently aired in the context of controlling illegal immigration.) Why was she at the conference, I asked. Did she think it could be stopped? She explained that it could not be stopped, because it was predicted in the Bible. She followed all of this only because it interested her, not because there was anything that could be done about it.

The first night featured speeches by Mahatma Gandhi's nephew, Yael Dayan, the daughter of Moshe Dayan and an M.P. in the Knesset, former Israeli Information Minister Shulamit Aroni, and Anwar Sadat's widow. It was extraordinary to realize that both Israelis, who are from Labor and were close to Yitzhak Rabin, felt far more anger towards the

Israeli right than the Palestinians. Time and again they condemned Benjamin Nethanyahu in the strongest possible terms, accusing him of megalomania, a desire for war, and fanaticism. Afterwards, I talked with Mrs. Aloni and noted that Rabin's assassin had murdered him by turning him into an object, by denying his humanity. Now they were doing the same toward the right. Where does it end, I asked? She responded that they were willing to have a "modus vivendi" with the right, but the right was not willing to do so with them. She said compromise at this point was impossible.

Craig Kielberger, the 13-year old crusader against child labor, gave one of the most moving speeches at the conference. His overall call to end child labor was interwoven with moving personal stories like that of the 10 year old Bengali girl who worked from early in the morning till late at night unpacking surgical needles, not realizing that they could give her AIDs, for a few dollars a week. He ended to a standing ovation by calling for an end to the kind of "globalization."

A few speakers later Noordin Soopie responded to the panel's attacks on globalization by saying that it was an overall positive phenomenon, and the only hope for prosperity for the poor of the world. He ended his speech by saying, "and if you do not want the multinational corporations in your country, please send them to mine. We will welcome them with open arms."

That evening I asked Mr. Soopie what he had felt while Kielberger was talking. He responded that at first he had been turned off, but then he had come to appreciate the youth's "showmanship" and professional delivery. "We are all showmen after all, are we not?" he said softly with a wink.

Mr. Soopie, whom I had met a decade earlier at a conference organized by Senator Gary Hart in Seoul, is one of the keenest observers of Asian developments I know. He explained that the real issue for Asia now is to integrate China into one economic bloc. He exuded great optimism about the future. I noted that whereas ten

years ago there was a great hue and cry in the West about the Japanese threat, there was relatively little talk of the Asian challenge. "It's better that way, no?" he winked again. "We've learned there's no point in getting the West upset."

I happened to be standing near Mr. Kielberger when several adults came up to him and said "I hope you'll run for office one day." At the end of the conference, I went over to him, and said "I sure hope you don't run for office. It will just rot your soul." "I know that," he answered. "My goal is to become a doctor and work for `Medecins Sans Frontieres'. You can't trust the politicians."

The Youth Forum running simultaneously with the Conference was encouraging. I was struck by how much the youth sought consensus, seemed sincere in their goals, and distrusted politics and politicians.

It encouraged me when I remembered back to when I was engaged in politics as a teenager, nearly 40 years ago. They seemed light-years ahead of where we were in terms of sophistication, understanding, lack of ego, and skills. I guess the ultimate test for optimism or pessimism is whether the younger generation seems to have learned anything from the mistakes of we elders. I felt they had.

In the end, I was struck by how much one's optimism or pessimism about the State of the World is a function of one's temperament more than "objective reality".

Cause for pessimism was certainly prevented at the Forum. At times the specter of conventional and nuclear arms proliferation, the discovery of a new environmental hazard that I hadn't even known I was supposed to be worried about, and being reminded of child labor and other indications of misery for billions in an overpopulated world,

nearly half of whom would be under 20 by the year 2000, were overwhelming.

But there were also so many signs of hope: Dr. Grameen's bank helping millions already, and possibly becoming a model for the whole Third World. The fact that we have managed to step back from the brink of nuclear destruction, which one participant rightly called a "miracle" to those of us who grew up believing that "humanity has never invented a weapon it hasn't used," and that it's "1 minute to midnight" on the evolutionary clock. That we have made some progress on ozone layer depletion, acid rain, and even global warming, so much so these are regarded as models for the work that must now be done on acid rain. And, above all, seeing young people with an environmental consciousness that we never had in our youth, who cared and seemed to have the skills needed to move things forward.

In the end, one realized, it is not really given to us to know if the world is hurtling to self-extinction or on the verge of a new post-industrial Renaissance. And even if we did know, we probably wouldn't act any differently. Seeking to improve the world is ultimately an act of biology not reason, as much a part of our evolutionary past as our tendencies towards overpopulation, resource-exploitation and war.