

Keynote Remarks
Armenian Genocide Observance
Capitol Hill
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Honorable congresswomen and congressmen and honored guests: I am privileged to be addressing you today as we commemorate the 90th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide and deportations, one of the darkest times of our era, and privileged to be representing the Near East Foundation which this year commemorates the 90th anniversary of its founding as America's first nationwide international relief and development effort, born in response to those tragic events.

On the wall of the offices of the Near East Foundation in downtown Manhattan hang framed yellowed front pages from *New York Times* editions of the autumn of 1915. In terms very reminiscent of what we read in the *New York Times* these days about Darfur, lead stories tell of almost unimaginable atrocities against innocent people and the determination of Americans to respond to the victims' needs. I pass these newspapers every day as I work around the office, just as I pass vintage posters by American artists of the early 20th Century with legends like "They Shall Not Perish," "Remember the Starving Armenians," and "Which Shall it be: Life or Death?" These artifacts are invitations to despair, for they simultaneously recall the subsequent human tragedies of the Nazi holocaust and of Cambodia, Rwanda, Yugoslavia, and Darfur – inescapable evidences of humanity's terrible propensity toward what we have come to call "man's inhumanity to man." The fact that we call such actions

“inhuman” indicates our deep desire that such murderous events remain unrepresentative of who we are essentially as human beings.

Yet, in a very real sense, those same newspaper pages and posters stand also as a monument to hope, heroism, and what is best in us as human beings. And, notwithstanding the beating Americans have taken recently in the forums of international opinion, I think we can feel comfortable in the assertion that they truly report something representative of us as Americans. For despite our vaunted isolationism and the warnings of our national founding fathers against international entanglements, Americans by and large understand the great privilege we have of living in a land of freedom and bounty; and we are motivated to bring to others in need the help we are able to give.

So it was that in September 1915, Henry Morgenthau, then U.S. Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, gave notice to President Wilson that the world was witnessing “the destruction of the Armenian race in Turkey” and that immediate assistance was needed. Despite the fact that the American government had determined to maintain neutrality with regard to the alliances fighting in the Ottoman Empire, the situation of the Armenians demanded a response. At the request of the President, a private relief committee was established in New York headed by industrial leader Cleveland H. Dodge “with the remote hope of raising \$100,000 for relief in Turkey” for hundreds of thousands of Armenians, Greeks and suffering members of other minorities. The committee received bipartisan congressional support, including the active assistance of President Wilson, who himself appealed to the American people for contributions.

The “remote hope” was not so remote after all. Between 1915 and 1918, hundreds of thousands of refugees were fed, clothed, housed and cared for in camps and orphanages in Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, the Caucasus and Persia.

After the Armistice, the committee was chartered by an act of Congress in 1919 as Near East Relief, and designated as the primary channel for U.S. post-World War I aid to the region. Foreshadowing its future name change, NER expanded its mandate beyond relief to address the resulting huge social problems of the vast numbers of refugees, including over one hundred thousand orphans. Help was for all “suffering people” on the basis of “need not creed” and under the slogan “Hunger Knows no Armistice.” As one of the founders of the organization observed, they could continue to give relief forever and nothing would change. If there was to be hope for the future, people must have their capabilities developed so they could build their own futures.

Based on population, each American town and city was asked to contribute, resulting in an unprecedented manifestation of American generosity to provide hope and reconstruction. Among the innovative fundraising approaches employed were the posters created by top American illustrators. Thousands of tons of used clothing collected on “Bundle Days” were sent overseas; and the “Milk Campaign” was spearheaded by 10-year-old child actor Jackie Coogan with movie theaters around the country used as “food stations” for the collection of cans of milk. Coogan even visited the Near East, traveling on a “milk ship” out of New York Harbor. On “International Golden Rule Sundays,” families across the nation ate a simple “orphanage meal” and donated the equivalent cost of an average American Sunday dinner.

By 1930, when it was renamed the Near East Foundation, \$110 million had been collected and dispensed for humanitarian assistance, including \$25 million in in-kind food and supplies in less than 15 years — at a time when bread cost a nickel a loaf. More than one million people had been rescued from certain death by starvation and exposure. Some 12 million people had

been fed, and at one point between 1919-20, an average of 333,000 people were fed daily. Forty hospitals were built as NEF provided medical aid to six million patients. Over 135,000 children were housed, fed and taught in orphanages and provided with medical care.

In the almost 90 years since the Near East Foundation's founding, calls like that of Ambassador Morgenthau have continued to come. Though they are usually less dramatic, they are no less critical to people in the extremes of crisis, poverty and need. And NEF still answers these calls, seeking to accomplish its mission of helping people in the Middle East and Africa build the future they envision for themselves. Whether it is a village woman in the mountains of Morocco learning to read, a young man in Lebanon disabled by a landmine getting a job, a family in Darfur getting food to celebrate a holiday, or a man in Egypt turning his life from drug use to contributing citizenship – NEF continues what it started by helping people one by one to have a better life today and tomorrow.

What this continuing work demonstrates is that something of long term benefit has come from the terrible malice perpetrated in the Armenian Genocide. The work of NEF argues that humanity can respond to evil with good, to despair with hope, and to destruction with rebuilding. Perhaps more than anything, the Near East Foundation's continuity recalls that while human beings are capable of extreme self-interest, we are also capable of great generosity – and we celebrate the choice of generosity.

Another lasting impact of the work of Near East Relief is the creation of the idea of international development. One of NEF's early leaders noted that "everything we know we learned from the orphans." What these philanthropists learned is that if we are to truly help those in need, we must move beyond relief into development, building their capacity through

education and supplying technical assistance and resources. In this way they can build their own better future in independence and self-reliance. Thus the work with the survivors of the Armenian Genocide became through Near East Foundation the model for the Marshall Plan of post-World War II recovery, Truman's Point-4 Program, the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the Peace Corps, and the United Nations Development Program. Good has come from evil; hope, from despair.

Perhaps most importantly, the notion that the Near East Foundation learned its approach from dealing with the orphans of the Armenian Genocide reinforces the value of dealing with recipients of our philanthropic concern, not as projects, but as fellow human beings. In the best spirit of our country, America's citizens, not its government, took responsibility for rescue and relief efforts among these people they did not know, and formed an organization that has lasted nine decades. The organization pioneered an approach its leadership called "practical citizen philanthropy." By this they meant assisting people to gain the skills and resources they need, using an approach that seeks partnership and equality with "no sense of domination or superiority." It is this approach the Near East Foundation has continued to use throughout its history and still employs, one which encourages participation of the people we seek to assist and listens to their needs and plans, treating them with the dignity and respect they deserve.

The reward of this approach is not only that the projects we work on together are more likely to be successful but, in the process, we build friendships and we build human beings. Our staff has seen repeatedly over the years that dealing with people as dignified and honorable equals builds their capacity more than any training sessions or educational programs. By insisting on building the capacities of its local partners and on programs that will be

sustainable after NEF has moved on, the Foundation has, over the decades, built local community-based organizations that still exist. There are numerous village organizations throughout Egypt; cooperatives and women's associations in Sudan and Mali; larger scale non-governmental organizations birthed by NEF and then spun off as independent organizations like GROW in the Mokhotlong province of Lesotho; a cooperative for women who raise goats and produce and sell goat cheese in Morocco continues today, fifteen years after NEF's work introduced such goat raising in the Atlas mountains.

The Near East Foundation was truly an *American* response to the Armenian Genocide. This is true not simply because it occurred in the United States, but because it combined private, independent entrepreneurship with Americans' great commitment to humanitarianism. These values came together and developed a creative approach in a successful venture which saved over a million lives and then went on to find new places of need. Further, NEF values the American commitment to investment rather than simply spending, understanding the time and energy needed to help people learn new ways and change old approaches in a manner that preserves what is most valuable in their culture. Ironically, this very approach which gave birth to USAID has largely been abandoned. In an effort to streamline their approach and supposedly become more cost-effective, USAID and other government agencies which fund international development now fund almost entirely short term, very large, tens-of-million dollar projects. This approach has given birth to large contractors whose sole purpose is to manage such grants, often leaving organizations like ours – with our hands-on, people orientation -- out in the cold.

I ask those of you in Congress to remember today not only the past, but the living legacy of America's response to the Armenian Genocide, first in the

people who survived it and went on to become valuable citizens in our own and many other countries, and then the living legacy of those Americans who helped them to survive. While we recall the horrors of which humankind is capable, recognize the need to demand justice and commit ourselves to preventing the recurrence of such inhumanity, let us also recall the philanthropy and heroic generosity of which we are also capable and commit ourselves to ensure its continuity as an American value.