

December 4, 2013 Ambassador Mussomeli joined the Study Center for National Reconciliation for their annual public discussion in honor of International Human Rights Day on December 10.

Ambassador's remarks:

Thank you all for inviting me here today to discuss human rights. Both our countries are struggling with a variety of human rights issues and this is a good time to reflect on them. In the United States, of course, we have more human rights issues than I would like to admit. For example, even 60 years after the onset of the civil rights movement in America, we are still sometimes failing to ensure fair and equal treatment for all our citizens, and certainly the failure thus far to close Guantanamo is more than just disappointing. But the primary issue in America right now has to do with balancing security needs and privacy rights. This last year, particularly, has highlighted the need for Americans to review and reconsider just how far government should be allowed to intrude into the private affairs of its citizens. I will not dwell too much on this matter, but it is useful to always keep in mind Benjamin Franklin's warning that those "that give up essential liberty to obtain temporary security deserve neither liberty nor security."



In Slovenia, on the other hand, human rights issues arise from two seemingly distinct political camps. Primarily on the Left there is concern for better treatment of the Roma, justly resolving the issue of the Erased, and advancing equal rights for gay couples. Primarily on the Right, there is an overriding concern

for reconciliation, and ensuring a just accounting of the mass killings after WW II and the economic and social discrimination that ensued under the Communist regime. As an American, however, I see no clear distinction. Human rights are human rights, and we strongly believe that there is an urgent need to address all these concerns. We do not see it in stark terms of Left and Right, but rather simply what a just society should do.

Today I will focus my remarks on reconciliation because after three years in your country I conclude that this issue is the biggest stumbling block to Slovenia's unity and national consciousness. Without a full and objective accounting of WW II and the Yugoslav era, it is difficult for Slovene society to progress as well and as rapidly as it should. Every aspect of Slovenia's politics and economics is handicapped by this lack of reconciliation.

I would set forth four guiding principles. First, we cannot ignore the past. If we try to ignore the past, we get trapped by it. The only way to really move forward is first to look backward and come to terms and to peace with the past. It is now almost a cliché to say that "those who forget the past are doomed to repeat it." But it is truer, I think, that those who try to forget the past are enslaved by it. They can have no future until they come to terms with the past--until they break the chains of the past.



Second, we must always keep in mind the old adage that the victors write the history books. This is true in every country in every age, including my own. Here is one small example: just last week Americans celebrated Thanksgiving. It is a holiday we have been celebrating off and on for over 200 years, and most Americans still believe that the very first Thanksgiving was in 1621 and was celebrated by the Pilgrims who had immigrated to Massachusetts. Only very recently have Americans started to accept the reality that the first Thanksgiving was really held two years earlier by a group of colonists in Virginia. But then we remember that it was in the middle of our own Civil War that President Lincoln declared a national day of thanksgiving in 1863. It was convenient at that time to associate the day with the Massachusetts event since that state is in the North, and it would have been more than a little inconvenient to note that the first real Thanksgiving was in Virginia, since at that time that state was the center of the “southern rebellion” against the Union. Then, even after the civil war, with all the bitterness and distrust it engendered, the Virginia event slipped further and further into obscurity and was almost completely lost to our national consciousness. I use this simple example to demonstrate that those who win all too often and too easily distort the historical record for their own benefit.

Third, we must passionately embrace a dispassionate view of the past. One of the problems with having suppressed or distorted the past is that it makes all of us paint it in terms we find most comfortable. We demonize those who disagree with us and we lionize those who are on our side. I’ve talked with many Slovenes who tell me that as children, night after night they were regaled at the dinner table about “their side”: honorable, heroic, and with pure motives versus “the other side”: evil, rapacious, untrustworthy. To paraphrase Abraham Lincoln, Slovenia is a house divided against itself. But if you have a passion for being dispassionate, if your highest objective is to be objective, you can make great progress. Nothing is black and white. We all say this, but we don’t usually believe it. We come to distort history in our own ways, often to compensate for the distortion by those who went before us. But fearlessly accepting hard truths is crucial to reconciliation. Talleyrand once famously remarked that “the truth is too good a thing to be spoken every day.” That may be good advice for diplomats, but not for historians. The historian should always be insisting that truth is too good a thing not to be spoken every day. I think the Hindu poet Tagore was more right when he said that “truth comes as a tiger only to those who do not accept him as a friend.”

And fourth, we must also be passionately compassionate. History is more than just facts. History has a human face. People suffer in many different ways and people lie—even to themselves—in different ways. We must be kind, we must be understanding, even as we brutally explore and evaluate the past. Even in the most loathsome of humans there is usually something deserving of admiration. Even in the most horrible of historical events there is usually some good on both sides. We must not be afraid to find fault with our own side nor fear finding good in those we have been taught to hate. No American, for example, could excuse the slave system of the South, but any fair and compassionate reading of history would suggest that many Southerners fought against the North for reasons having nothing to do with slavery. We must be willing to respect the reasons and good motivations of those on every side of every argument. Without a keen sense of compassion and mutual respect all efforts at reconciliation ultimately fail.



And to fail at reconciliation will have dire consequences for Slovenia. As we all know, but rarely admit, there is a willingness by some politicians to exploit these societal divisions for short-term political gain. Instead of working together to reform the economy and strive for a more civil political discourse, they choose to exacerbate the divisions. Very few politicians talk publicly about the need to reconcile; very few practice the kind of self-reflection they always demand from the other side. Slovenia's political and economic progress is held hostage, and there are even some who benefit economically from these old divisions. The resignation of Goran Klemencic and his colleagues from the anti-corruption commission is a symptom of this. Too much of the economy is still run the old way. The chain of corruption, failed privatizations, and insider dealing will not go away overnight, but they will never go away completely until politicians--and senior officials in the government and at state-owned enterprises--make a better effort not to revert to the old ways, including exploiting old divisions.