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Where is My America?

Yahya Armajani

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Macalester College Archives**Audio Reel #81****“Where is My America?” by Yahya Armajani, 5/12/1959****[00:33]**

[Speaker?]: [unclear], Dr. Rice, faculty members, student body, and friends. This morning we consider ourselves very fortunate having as our Cap and Gown Day speaker Dr. Yahya Armajani. In a few short minutes, I cannot do justice to Dr. Armajani's many accomplishments. However, I would like to take a few moments just to briefly touch upon some of the highlights of his career. A native of Persia, Dr. Armajani first came to the United States in 1930 as a student. Within three years he had received his Master's Degree and returned to Persia. Within a few years, he again came to the United States, and in 1939 received his doctorate degree in Oriental Culture and History from Princeton University. During World War II, he served as liaison between the United States Army and the Persian government. Following the war, in 1946, Dr. Armajani came to the United States on what he calls "a more permanent basis." Since this time he has made several trips to the Middle East. In the past four years he has made two such trips, spending one year, 1955 to 1956, in Iran. Last summer, he took a group of nine students to Russia. In addition to these activities, Dr. Armajani has been Professor of History here at Macalester. He has also served as Coordinator of Area Studies under the Hill Family Foundation. Not finding enough to do, Dr. Armajani has also published several books and articles, the most recent of his books being entitled *A Guide to the Study of the Middle East*. It is indeed quite evident it is more than an asset to have Dr. Armajani here at our college. Those

who know him will certainly attest to this fact. Therefore it gives me great pleasure to introduce Dr. Yahya Armajani, whose address is entitled, “Where Is My America?” [Applause]

[03:10]

YA: Thank you Bob, Mr. President, members of the senior class, students at Macalester College and my beloved colleagues up on high. [laughter]. The number thirteen is unlucky in all parts of the world. I remember my father used to count “ten, eleven, twelve, extra, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen.” But for some curious reason, our son from an early age, considered thirteen to be his “lucky” number. And by osmosis, I see that it has become my lucky number also. For this is the thirteenth year of my service, happy ones, at Macalester College. And in this thirteenth year, I’ve been lucky enough, very fortunate, to be so distinctly honored by the members of the senior class to speak on this occasion. Of course, a senior class, and that is, the best senior class to ever graduate from Macalester College. Indeed, ever since the class invited me to speak, I have reflected on the matter and I have come to think that I always thought from the time the class entered as freshmen, that the people were very distinguished from their freshman year.

[laughter]

[04:32]

Now, my subject, where is my America, is not a discourse in geography, and God knows that you need it. And the good lord [unclear] Professor Hildegard Johnson can testify [laughter]. Neither is my subject going to be a Fourth of July oration. Last year, on my way to the Soviet Union, in the city of New York, I stopped to see a friend of mine, who is the Counsel General of the government of Iran in New York. He is a very good friend of mine, and we had studied in

the same American school in Iran, and we shared the same ideas about the United States, and we also shared, as we found out, the same disappointments about the United States. And he told me that sometime he was going to write an article entitled, "Where is my America?" That is, where is the America about which we studied in Iran? Where is the America that was exemplified to us by the missionaries who were our teachers? Where is my America? I don't know whether he will ever write that article, for he is a diplomat and diplomats are not allowed to write such articles. And therefore, I have taken that subject, which is really his subject, and this is an opportunity for me to speak to you, "Where is my America?" For I share not only with him but with the people of the Middle East, with the people of Asia, and, if I may be presumptuous, with the people of Africa, with this idea, "Where is my America?" Where is the America about which we studied? Where is the America exemplified by the people about whom we studied, and whom we met in the flesh?

[06:40]

Recently, after having chosen this subject, by the way, I read an article by Mr. Boorstin, Professor Boorstin of the University of Chicago, Department of History, and the article is entitled, "We the People, In Quest of Ourselves." And that attracted my attention, and found out apparently the reason that I do not know where America is is that the people themselves, that the historians, do not know where America is. And this gentleman said, and I quote him, "We Americans are a people in quest of ourselves. Ever since our birth as a nation, we have been trying to find the mirror in which we can see our true image. Other people have had only to live up to a role assigned by their past, but we Americans try to guess the role demanded by the future." This is tragic to me, this is tragic to the people of Asia and Africa that the people of the

United States, and their historians, are really in quest of themselves, and that they feel that they do not have a past to live up to, and they have to only guess at what the future holds. To have to only guess, as leaders of the world, in order to lead them into the future.

[08:00]

This is tragic, and this is not true. It is not true because the people of Asia and Africa feel that you have the past, that you have a glorious past, and they know that because they are, right now, being inspired by that past. They are being enthused by the past of the United States of America, and they are guided by the past of the United States of America. For I like to tell you that the people of Asia and Africa believe that the United States is a country conceived in liberty. We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal, and that they are endowed with certain inalienable rights by their creator, and that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just power from the consent of the governed. This may ring dull in your ears, but it is the source of inspiration and enthusiasm for millions of people in Asia and Africa. The people of Persia, when they wrote their constitution in 1905, they wrote, the people God has created, people equal. When the people of Turkey started their revolution, they started with the idea that they wanted the government with the consent of the governed. Leader after leader today, in all parts of Asia and Africa, arouse the people with these concepts. And yet, it is tragic. It is very tragic, in that the people of this country have lost these concepts somehow, and they seem to be in quest of something to show them the way. As late as in 1945, the government of Vietnam, before it was pushed into the arms of the communists, wrote their constitution and they literally quoted the Declaration of Independence of America, that all people are created equal, and not only that, but they followed, and they listed down their grievances

against the French, as your forefathers had listed their grievances against the British. And it is sad, for such a people as this, with such a past as this, to be in quest of themselves, and to be saying that they do not have a past to live up to.

[10:55]

As I see in this country, this concept of freedom, this concept of liberty, is in danger. For as I go from place to place, I see that a small minority really know what freedom is and use it, for the advancement of others. A small minority, perhaps, abuse it, and for their own self aggrandizement. But the vast majority of the people, and may God forbid that you may be among them, but the vast majority of people take it for granted. And in the degree that you take it for granted, it is being obliterated from the memory of the people of this country. Justice Douglas wrote, a while ago, that very recently he was attending a meeting of lawyers in the Far West, and a person was speaking about the roots and the philosophy of the Bill of Rights. And when he got through, he heard one lawyer say to another lawyer, "There goes a Communist, if I ever saw one." And it was because of this whole idea of the fact that people in this country are forgetting this glorious past. That in 1953, the Presbyterian General Assembly issued a manifesto, which reads in parts like this, "Some congressional inquiries have revealed a distinct tendency to become inquisitions. Treason and dissent are being confused. The shrine of conscience and private judgment which God alone has a right to enter, is being invaded." In our own state of Minnesota, in this legislature, in the year 1959, they have a bill to deny a group of people called the Hutterites, from their rights, and a Lutheran minister, no less, wrote the *Minneapolis Tribune* this way, "Why must America be haven for all oddballs? If they, that is, the Hutterites, want to live, work, and worship like the rest of us, they have the opportunity. But

until they do, I believe legislation is a must. Already it is two years too late.” This past, this glorious past, that all the people are created equal, and that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, is in danger. This is the image that people of the world have of you, and it is up to you to live up to this past which has been created by this country.

[13:40]

Then there is another image that the people of Asia and Africa have of you. It is that this country is not a country conceived in liberty, but that this is a country born in revolution. Born in revolution, that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter and abolish it. This is not said by a Communist, this is part of your Declaration of Independence, which is the source of inspiration to millions of people in the world today who want change. I dare say that there is nothing in the world that the people of Asia and Africa want today than that change. For they want to alter and change their form of government, which has deprived them of all these rights, and of all the essential elemental rights of justice and livelihood. And therefore they have a right to look to you for sympathy. They have the right to look to the people who were born in revolution, to help them and to guide them. In 1940 to '48, the people of India used to say to the Americans, “We are doing what you did in 1776.” In 1953, the Persians were telling you, “We are doing what you did in 1776.” The Egyptians began to tell you, “We are doing what you did in 1776.” Today the people of Africa is telling that, “We are doing what you did in 1776.” This is not said in order for propaganda, they really believe that, and they really have taken that inspiration from this, and I wish you would hear their speeches, they are full of quotations from the Bill of Rights and the Declaration of Independence. A country born in revolution, and yet you seem to be afraid of revolution. You seem to be afraid of

nonconformity. You seem to call people who want change “rebels” and people cannot understand why you call Hungarians who fight against the Soviet Union “freedom fighters” but the Algerians who fight against the French only “rebels”. Listen to this: I hold it that a little rebellion now and then is a good thing, and as necessary in the political world as storm is to the physical. It is medicine necessary for the sound of government.

[16:20]

Will you say that, “There goes a Communist if you ever saw one?” Well if you do, you’ll be surprised because you have a monument to this Communist. His name is Jefferson, he wrote this in a letter to his friend Madison, “Listen to this again: this country, with its institutions, belongs to the people which inhabit it. Whenever they should grow weary of the existing government, they can exercise their constitutional right of amending it.” And listen to this, “Or their revolutionary right to dismember or overthrow it.” Will you say that, “There goes a Communist if you ever saw one?” Well, his name was Abraham Lincoln, and he wrote this in his first inaugural, “Yes, these are the rights, the constitutional rights of man to amend his government, or his revolutionary right to overthrow it.” And the people of Asia and Africa are enthused by these concepts, because they want the constitutional right to amend it, and if that is not possible they want your sympathy and your help and your leadership for their revolutionary right to amend and change it, for you have a past to live up to.

[17:43]

And the third thing and the last thing that I would like to say, and the people of Asia and Africa think of the United States, is that not only is that the country conceived of liberty, born in revolution, but living under law, under the rule of law rather than the rule of men. The people in

this country who were used to the idea that men can live under law, they had the further idea that it is possible for states to live under law, for states to come together and unite under law if only they would give a part of their own sovereignty, so that it would be possible for them to live under law rather than under force. Many people said it was impossible. People would come from Europe, and if my fellow historians would forgive me, I'd like to say that the history of Europe in the past five hundred years is a history of war, and then alliances, and then balance of power, until someone toppled the balance of power, and then there would be war again, and then after war they would have some more alliance and some more balance of power until the next war. And somebody said in this country, "Let's change it." Let us have thirteen states banded together under the rule of law and let's have each state give up a bit of its sovereignty so that it will be possible for us to live under law. And many people said that it was impossible, but it was done. Thirteen colonies, states, became twenty and still many people said it was impossible. Twenty became forty and still people said it was impossible. Forty became forty eight and still people said it was impossible. And only last month, when the fiftieth was added, still people were saying it is impossible. But it has become possible. It has become possible for states, rather than fighting against each other, to live under law, rather than the whims of individuals.

[19:52]

This is what you have experienced, this is what you know, and this is what you should proclaim to the people of the world. Why not, why can't you say to the people of the world that, "It is possible because we have done it, and therefore, let us live together in a federal union of the world, under law?" Why isn't it possible for you people to say, "Let us create of this United Nations that we have, a union, a federal union under law?" This you have experienced, and I

cannot understand and I cannot see, any more American which is more hundred percent, hundred percent American, than to say these things to the people of the world. Some time ago, a very discerning Persian student, and he should have been Persian, to be discerning, [laughter] he told me this about America, that, “America is like a giant, that is tired, like a boxer who is in the ring in spite of himself.” This reminded me of a story that I read some time ago, of course, in *Reader’s Digest* [laughter], this story that a sudden storm blew up in the sea, and a young lady that was leaning on the railing of a ship was blown overboard, and immediately another figure plunged into the sea, and held this young lady, until they lowered the boat and rescued both of them. And to the astonishment of the people, the passengers, they found out that this gentleman was an old person, an octogenarian. And that evening there was a great banquet in his honor and there were many speeches on his valor, and they at last called for, “speech, speech” from this hero. And this old gentleman got up and looked at the audience and he said, “What I’d like to know, who pushed me?” [laughter] And it seems that in this world arena, the Americans are looking around and asking the question, “Who pushed me into this place of leadership?” Here you are, and what are you going to do about it? And sometimes I feel, sometimes I feel that you need crises in order to bring you to your senses.

[22:25]

And therefore I’d like to offer for you a prayer, and I’d like to wish for you certain things as parting gifts. I’d like to wish you sickness and hunger, not so much in that it will sap all your energy, but enough that you will realize that the vast majority of the people of the world today are sick, physically sick, and hungry. I’d like to wish for every one of you anxiety, anxiety for your family, anxiety for lack of jobs. Not so much that you will become hysterical and lose your

senses, but enough, enough to discover the inner resources and power which God has created in every one of you. I wish for every one of you, I wish that you will become victims of injustice, not so much that it will frustrate you totally, but enough that you will realize that you have to pay a price for justice, that you cannot have justice unless you stand and work for universal justice for all. I wish that every one of you will become victim of the rule of man, when your rights and your personality are trampled underfeet because of the color of your skin or the manner of your speech, or just because the person likes to do these things. Not so much that you will become utterly bitter, but enough, enough that you will hold the rule of law high, and will do everything that your intellect and power allows you to do, to continue this rule of law. And I wish for every one of you disappointment. Disappointment in people and in quarters from whom you expected much. Not so much that it will turn your hope into cynicism, but enough to realize what the people of the world are thinking of you, when you disappoint them, in not being heirs of a country conceived in liberty, born in revolution, and living under law. And in all, in all places and in all good works, I wish you God's richest blessings. Thank you. [Applause]

[Band plays]