

**Association of Americans Resident Overseas (AARO)
50th Anniversary Celebration**

**Acceptance Speech of Mr. David Hamod,
Recipient of AARO's "Outstanding Service Award"**

***George C. Marshall Center
Paris, France
October 6, 2023***

Madam Minister, distinguished guests. It is my great privilege to be here tonight to receive this very special award.

Thank you, President Doris, for your kind introduction.

I chuckled when I heard your quote from our dear friend, Ms. Michael Adler, about dealing with a "good, bad or indifferent" U.S. Congress.

A very important part of our work with AARO and the World Federation of Americans Abroad was earning the trust of Americans around the world, especially because we always worked to achieve success on a *bipartisan basis*.

There were times when Republicans Abroad felt that I was too far to the left. And there were other times when Democrats Abroad felt that I was too far to the right. "If that's the case," I said to my wife, Jean, "then we must be doing something right by staying centered!"

I am reminded of U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz, who famously said, "The problem with being middle of the road is that you get hit by traffic going both ways!" Been there, done that, Mr. Secretary!

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As some of you know, I grew up in the Heartland, in Iowa. It is a landlocked state, not generally associated with international travel.

In fact, what Iowa may be *best* known for is a little get-together that we hold every four years called the Iowa caucuses. Perhaps you've heard of it . . .

As a kid, I was painfully shy. So, I spent a lot of time alone with my stamp collection. Collecting stamps was my “window on the world.”

When I received a shipment of international stamps, I would track down those countries on my globe. In this way, I began to learn about the world.

At the same time, I came to appreciate an intrepid explorer from Iowa who starred every week on television. (More about him in a minute.)

Iowa has been blessed over the years with more than its fair share of what I call “swashbucklers.” Such as:

* John Wayne, who was born in Winterset, Iowa, a stone’s throw from the Bridges of Madison County.

* Herbert Hoover, perhaps the greatest industrialist of his time (who had more luck in industry than he did in the White House).

* And in more recent years: Danai Gurira, the spear-wielding military commander in Black Panther who was responsible for protecting her home, Wakanda.

But no one has ever embodied the “swashbuckling swagger” of Iowa quite like that intrepid explorer on TV: James T. Kirk, Captain of the USS Enterprise.

His mission was to “boldly go where no one has gone before.” Now *that’s* what I’m talking about! Not just international travel, but *intergalactic* travel!

Well, I never became an astronaut – at least not yet! – but the influence of Captain Kirk and stamp collecting instilled in me a lifelong wanderlust and desire to see the world. Fast forward to today: Over the years, I have been privileged to visit upwards of 150 nations and territories around the world.

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I thought about such “globalization” yesterday when I visited the Museum of Humanity (Le Musée de l’Homme) here in Paris.

How different we all are around the world, yet how much we *truly have in common*, especially as we tackle issues that transcend boundaries and are *global* in proportion, like Artificial Intelligence, pollution, and climate change.

I saw this quote at the museum: *Nous sommes tous les heritiers d'un patrimoine genetique et cultural qui nous est propre.*

There is a genetic and cultural heritage that binds us.

I believe that only by seeing the world can one come to understand how much our cultures have in common . . . to celebrate what we *share* instead of what *divides* us.

Sadly, the world is full of negative stereotypes. I don't need to tell you that this includes stereotypes of overseas Americans. (Does anyone in this room really believe that it was just a *coincidence* that legislation dealing with Americans abroad – the Foreign Account Tax Compliance Act – is known as “FATCA”? After all, isn't the purpose of the Act to pursue “fatcat” Americans all over the globe?!)

As Phyllis Michaux reminds us in her book, *The Unknown Ambassadors: A Saga of Citizenship*, Americans abroad are often regarded as “tax avoiders, living it up in the sunny climes of the Mediterranean or the Caribbean . . . As a consequence, they are often regarded with mistrust.”

I imagine that many of you have encountered this perception.

I can only speak from personal experience. I have traveled the world, and I lived overseas three times: Two years in Oxford, England; one year in Egypt at the American University in Cairo; and one year in Jerusalem at the Hebrew University.

These years helped to shape my world view. They transformed my life. I just wish that *all* Americans might have such opportunities.

AARO and overseas Americans have a *global perspective* that many Americans back home don't have because they have never lived or traveled outside the USA.

In fact, you are ALL ambassadors for the United States! Every single day, as citizen diplomats, you influence the way that the world sees our country, the United States.

American citizen diplomacy has always been important, but it may be especially meaningful these days, when so much coming out of the United States seems shrill and intolerant.

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For me, America has always been “a land of second chances.” Whatever your reason is for coming to the USA

- * Religious persecution
- * Political repression
- * Economic deprivation
- * Or simply because you have a dream for a better life for your family

. . . . the United States, unique in the world, gives everybody a chance to *start over*.

Around the globe, families are willing to risk life and limb for a second chance. Even today.
Especially today.

This may sound a little sentimental, but the way I see it, **America is *still* a beacon for the world.**

* Where we *celebrate* our heritage and ethnicity.

* Without regard to race, creed, color, or orientations.

I have experienced this firsthand through my charitable work with Rotary International and also in my capacity as President & CEO of the National U.S. – Arab Chamber of Commerce.

For most people around the world, America – despite our shortcomings – is still seen as the land of milk and honey.

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In the Arab world, they say, “One hand alone cannot clap.”

In other words, it’s all about the partnerships. Like the one that I have been privileged to share with AARO over the past three decades.

But I want to conclude my remarks this evening by paying my respects to another partnership: The one that I share with my wife, Jean Swift.

Tonight, I’m getting a lot of credit for my work with AARO and overseas Americans. *But none of this would have been possible without my partner, Jean.* We have shared so much – including AARO – over the years.

And for those who are unaware, Jean and I are celebrating our 32nd wedding anniversary this week. I can’t think of a more pleasant way to spend it than with you folks right here in Paris!

Thank you, Jean. And on behalf of Jean and myself, we thank you, AARO, for giving us so many opportunities.

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In conclusion:

Let us continue to carry the message to Washington until someday, the U.S. Congress and the White House, on a bipartisan basis, come to understand the vital role of Americans abroad as citizen ambassadors.

Let us continue the very important work of AARO . . . not just for the sake of Americans and America, but also for the rest of the world, which depends on us.

And let us continue working together to make this world a better place . . . for us – for today – but especially for *future generations*.

Thank you again for this very special honor, which I accept with great humility.

Merci beaucoup!