UNIVERSITÉ DE NEUCHÂTEL

**Discours de réponse au nom des récipiendaires de M. William E. Kovacic (version orale en anglais)**

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**Out of the Tunnel**

Mr. President of the University Council,

Mr. Rector, Deans, Faculty Members, students, and guests,

On behalf of my fellow recipients of the doctorate honoris causa, I thank this wonderful university community for bestowing this distinction upon us. We are most grateful for this honor, and we are deeply moved by your generosity and kindness.

My remarks today are mainly an address about a university address. To get there, I begin with one of the most famous train journeys in fiction. Sixty-five years ago, Friedrich Durrenmatt moved to Neuchatel and published his short story, *The Tunnel*. This masterpiece tells the tale of an aimless young man who on a Sunday afternoon boards a train for Zurich to continue, as Durrenmatt says, a nebulous course of study and attend a seminar he already had decided to cut. The protagonist strives to shield himself from his surroundings. He is well-padded with fat; an Ormand Brasil Number 10 cigar usually fills his mouth; cotton wads plug his ears, and sunglasses shield his eyes. Soon after he embarks, the train enters what is known to be a short tunnel, but the train never emerges. As the train rushes further into the darkness, the young man senses something is wrong. He persuades the conductor to accompany him to the front of the train to see the engineer. When they reach the locomotive, it is empty. The train speeds into the abyss, flinging the conductor and the young man around the locomotive cabin. The force of the descent rips away the young man buffers: the sunglasses, the cigar, and the cotton wads. The conductor shouts, “What shall we do?” The story closes with the young man’s one word reply: “Nothing.”

*The Tunnel* has fascinated readers for decades with its portrayal of humans in the grasp of unexpected, bewildering forces that shatter ordinary routines and throw everything into disarray. Durrenmatt’s work endures because he vividly captured the disorientation and helplessness of individuals in a world where, with increasing speed, current events take on the absurdist quality that permeates *The Tunnel*. The modern world robs our previously reliable timetables and routines of their meaning; it peels away the mental and emotional devices we create to cushion the blow of change. Deprived of these buffers, we confront the possibility that events are beyond our control.

How can we respond today to the upheaval and tumult that surrounds us? At times it appears that we are being flung about the cabin of a locomotive whose engineer is missing, and whose destination could be oblivion. In *The Tunnel*, the conductor asked, “What shall we do?” and the young man said “Nothing.” Was his gloomy response an expression of undue fatalism, or a frightening, accurate realism?

This brings me to the earlier university address. The occasion was 75 years ago on a June afternoon at Harvard University. At its annual commencement exercises, Harvard conferred honorary degrees. One recipient was George Marshall, the U.S.

Secretary of State. The honorees were invited to offer remarks. The safe and standard fare for these comments consists of soothing and swiftly forgotten platitudes for the new graduates. In a twelve-minute address, Marshall departed from the norm. His talk changed the course of history in the 20th century and beyond.

Marshall was a mundane orator. In the recording of his address, the delivery is so bland that it masks the significance of what he had to say. As Marshall began his speech, he seemed overwhelmed that Harvard would bestow honors upon him. Marshall was exceedingly modest. He doubted that his life's achievements – including his indispensable contributions to the Allies' triumph in World War II – warranted Harvard's recognition.

Marshall immediately took a serious turn. He described the human misery that afflicted Europe and detailed how its shattered economies could not satisfy the most basic human needs for clothing, food, and shelter. An unthinkable disintegration of society awaited a continent already battered by years of savagery and slaughter. Marshall recently had toured Europe and saw first-hand the crisis. He told his audience that "it is virtually impossible at this distance, merely by reading, or listening, or even seeing photographs or motion pictures, to grasp at the real significance of the situation."

After laying out the fast decaying conditions in Europe, Marshall made clear what was at stake. He said: "the whole world of the future hangs on a proper judgment" about how to proceed. To the conductor's question, "What shall we do?", Marshall said the United States had the means and the duty to provide assistance. "The remedy", Marshall said, "lies in breaking the vicious cycle and restoring the confidence of the European people in the economic future of their own countries and of Europe as a whole." He went on to observe: "An essential part of any successful action on the part of the United States is an understanding on the part of the people of America of the character of the problem and the remedies to be applied. Political passion and prejudice should have no part. With foresight and a willingness on the part of our people to face up to the vast responsibility which history has clearly placed upon our country, the difficulties I have outlined can and will be overcome."

So began the public revelation of the Marshall Plan. In the run-up to the Harvard speech, some of Marshall's colleagues had discouraged him from using a university commencement exercised to launch a major public policy initiative. Some asked: "Who ever listens to the graduation speeches, or recalls what was said?" Marshall replied: "They will remember this one."

In the months that followed, Marshall appeared several times before committees of the United States Congress to provide details of the program for European recovery. He faced an isolationist Congress with little appetite for new, costly foreign policy commitments. Marshall did nothing to sugar-coat his prescriptions for the skeptical legislators: the program would be expensive; it would take a long time; and there was no guarantee of success. He restated the themes he had set out at Harvard: the

European situation was desperate; the human suffering was terrible; and only one country had the means to avoid an apocalypse that, should it occur, would be as catastrophic as the war itself. Marshall emphasized that, if the sole question was the economic self-interest of the United States, the program still demanded approval because calamity in Europe would endanger America's well-being. In effect, Marshall confronted a modified version of the conductor's question: What shall we do to arrest Europe's plunge into the abyss? Many elected officials were inclined to say "nothing." Marshall responded: "Plenty."

Taken together, the short story by one of Neuchatel's most famous residents and the short university address by an American statesman offer a way to think about our own condition, where the speed and direction of events, with unwelcome surprises and dangerous portents, sometimes resemble Durrenmatt's journey into the endless tunnel. One theme implicit in *The Tunnel* and explicit in the university address is the need to confront developments as they are. Durrenmatt suggests that, sooner or later, our defenses are peeled away, and we forced to face the world as it is, no matter how absurd it seems to be. Marshall told his Harvard audience that an unflinching comprehension of the causes and extent of disintegration was not only inevitable, but also essential to start the journey toward a constructive response that promised any possibility of success. Marshall not only pleaded for a clear-eyed recognition of the imminent disaster, but he was honest in setting out what it would take to spur a recovery. He demanded realism in understanding the problem and in estimating what it would take to devise a solution. He had faith that an honest portrayal of existing circumstances and a candid presentation of proposed cures would rally a nation to do what it must. That he proved to be correct shows that it can be done, and that, with courage and intelligence, can be done again.

Candor and realism have value, but do they elicit an appropriate response to crisis? The conclusion of Durrenmatt's short story poses a disturbing possibility: do stark and difficult problems, when understood with perfect clarity and without self-delusion, sometimes defy correction – where the only sensible response to the conductor's query is to answer, "Nothing"? Marshall's response to the conductor's question displayed the realism of Durrenmatt's young man, but his full reply in the Harvard address added doses of ambition, hope, and obligation. The ambition stemmed from an awareness of what would be lost through resignation and inaction – in Marshall's words, "the whole world of the future". The ambition reflected the knowledge that the United States could bring formidable economic resources and ingenuity to bear upon the problem. Marshall's hope drew heavily on the fresh recollection that a world, which seemed in 1941-1942 to be descending, perhaps irretrievably, into an abyss of tyranny and destruction, had been rescued. Marshall understood that a response that combined courage, creativity, perseverance, and sacrifice, even in the bleakest circumstances, could prevail. Marshall's appeal to obligation recognized that individuals are able to comprehend, at some basic level and even for a fleeting moment, that the sacrifices of others and the benefits of prosperity create duties that must be fulfilled. Marshall reminded his countrymen that their nation, and other nations, had paid a frightful price to preserve the possibility for a better world. To

ignore Europe's distress would dishonor a commitment paid in blood. He emphasized that the United States, which had been spared the ravages of total war within its own borders in North America and was buoyed by extraordinary economic capacity and resilience, alone had the means to spur economic recovery. The debt to the war dead and the possession of means for restoration created duties to use these means to act. Marshall did not guarantee success; he said there was a duty to try. There would be no shame in failure, only in complacency and neglect.

As we progress on our own turbulent and disorienting journey, *The Tunnel* and the Harvard address admonish us to examine ourselves carefully – to assess our circumstances as they are and to avoid the distortions created by filters that we use, by choice or inadvertence, to bend facts to conform to an image we find more pleasing. The Harvard address goes further and urges us to mark our possibilities for greatness – not in the expectation that even our best efforts will always realize these possibilities, but that a decision to do nothing ensures failure. Inaction cheats us by denying us the opportunity to see what happens – to surprise ourselves – when we strive for the fullest expression of our human mix of ability, ambition, resilience, and resourcefulness. In doing so, we can be inspired by our understanding of how these traits – combined with perseverance – have enabled us in the past to overcome appalling conditions that invite despair.

In *The Tunnel*, the conductor asked: "What shall we do?". The young man replied: "Nothing." Marshall's university address suggests there is another option: we can examine ourselves, see our path to greatness, and let nothing deflect us from it. This mix of realism and ambition can provide a path away from the abyss. It can guide us out of the tunnel.