

Remarks of James Russell Wiggins
prepared for delivery at the meeting of
Foreign Affairs Retirees of New England
at New Meadows Inn, West Bath
Saturday, September 27, 1986

The man who would achieve eminence as a maker of foreign policy needs to be in the right place, at the right time, with the right issues.

I wish to talk to you today about a 19th century American who missed this eminence. He occupied a position of great power in the United States government. He held that position at an important interlude. He advocated a policy that by the light of today's events seems prescient, but nevertheless he has never been accorded any particular recognition. Unless I am greatly mistaken, he is regarded by few if any of those gathered here today as an important figure in the making of the foreign policy of the United States.

I speak of Henry Winter Davis, chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the House in 1864. Perhaps I am mistaken in assuming that he is not widely known today among those interested in American foreign policy. I wonder how many of you know of his career. You need not feel embarrassed. I am sure he would be remembered by few people even among groups of citizens who are students of American foreign policy. No one has ever

written an adequate biography of him according to the Dictionary of American Biography.

Davis was born August 16, 1817. He graduated from Kenyon College and the law school at the University of Virginia and began the practice of law in Alexandria, Virginia. He moved to Baltimore in 1849. He began his political career in the ill-fated presidential campaign of General Winfield Scott, appearing on the platform in that campaign with Horace Greeley and Robert Winthrop. In 1855 he was elected to Congress, and quickly took a place among the leaders of the Know-Nothing Party. He supported Fillmore in the campaign of 1856. In 1860, he broke a deadlock over the speakership of the House by voting for William Pennington, the Republican candidate and enabled the new party to organize the House. He was a national figure from that day on. He was regarded as a strong candidate for the Republican nomination for vice president. He hoped to be a member of Lincoln's cabinet but was passed over for Montgomery Blair. On February 7, 1861, he made what many regarded as the greatest speech of his life when he denounced the doctrine of secession and said Maryland would not be dragged from the union. But on June 13, a southern sympathizer was elected to his seat in the House. Meanwhile, Davis called for the seizure of federal forts in Maryland by the federal government. He spoke for the Union throughout the country.

and was re-elected to the House in 1863, and was at once made chairman of the Committee on Foreign Affairs. In the election which returned Lincoln to the White House, Davis again lost his seat in the House. He fought Lincoln's reconstruction plans and later he was for the impeachment of Johnson. In December of 1865, he returned to Washington as a private citizen, and appeared at the door of the House, where, says the Dictionary of American Biography, "his mere presence broke up the session." At the height of his power and popularity, he fell ill and he died of pneumonia on December 30.

My attention was called to Davis by a paragraph in the Ben:Perley Poore's Reminiscences. Poore was for 60 years a Washington correspondent who wrote for a great many daily newspapers. Poore said that Roger A. Pryor, an editorial contributor to the Washington Union, in the Spring of 1853, wrote a "scathing review" of a book entitled THE WAR OF ORMUZD AND AHRIMAN, by Henry Winter Davis of Baltimore, which "set forth the United States and Russia as the respective champions of the principles of liberty and despotism, and claimed to foresee in the distant future a mighty and decisive conflict between these persistent combatants." Pryor denounced this prophecy and predicted the future would "consolidate and perpetuate the friendly relations" between the two

countries. Poore wrote that "it was the general belief in Washington that Pryor had been inspired by someone connected with the Russian Legation."

I obtained a copy of the book written in 1852 and was struck by its preface, which stated:

"Within the four score years of the life of a man two powers have grown from insignificance to the arbiters of the world. They occupy separate continents. They are actuated by hostile theories of political power. In each the principles of its system absolutely pervade every department of government, reach into every element of state and control the administration of its affairs. There is no formally organized opposition to the existing order of things. There is no serious difference of feeling or opinion among the citizens. The people are equally devoted to the form and to the substance of their respective constitutions. The foundations of both governments firmly rest on the assent of the people who are ready to signify that devotion on the field of battle.

"Each is the incarnation of one of the two great principles -- power absolutely unchecked and power constitutionally controlled and limited -- which have always striven and now still strive for the mastery of mankind. These two principles are Liberty and Despotism -- the Ormuzd and the Ahriman of the political world. Their purest incarnations exist in the Republic of America and the Empire of Russia."

In his book, Winters argued that "the European Revolution of 1848 is recoiled with disastrous ruin on the cause of human freedom." The reactionary monarchies of Europe, he argued, under the leadership of Metternich and The Emperor Alexander of Russia, had crushed the rebellion and were looking for more conquests. The struggle, he said had upset the balance of power in Europe in favor of Russia. The dictatorship of Russia, in Europe, he said, was devoted to "the ruin of all free government and is absolutely inconsistent with the existence of the English monarchy and the American Republic." Winters urged that the only alternatives were war in Europe now with allies and war hereafter on our own soil without allies. He said "Russia's agents flit like demons of the night around the skirts of English dominions" and "were felt and seen in the Afghan war."

He thought the subjection of Europe permanently to any one power would be of serious import to the United States. He urged an alliance with England to fight this despotism. He was alarmed at the subjection of Poland and of Hungary. He thought domestic discord exposed the United States to great risks at the hands of a skillfull enemy. He added:

"Nor are these the only sources of foreign danger. We are surrounded by feeble and factious republics -- the prey of eternal war, delivered over to the horrors

of civil discord, and the very points an ambitious, active, and malicious power would seize on, to annoy us. The protection of distance is destroyed when nations at our door sufficiently numerous and powerful of themselves to harrass if not serious to endanger us, may be stirred up by foreign intrigues, and by foreign money, led by European science. We found the invasion of Mexico no child's play, and from it we may estimate how troublesome would have been her accession to an armed league in Europe."

In the turbulent years preceding the Civil War, Americans apparently did not pay much attention to the dire warnings of Davis. The reactionary leaders of Europe, meanwhile, did not press a war to regain their former colonies. Ferdinand of Spain had appealed to the Quintuple Alliance to intervene in South America. Henry Steele Commager said the European regimes had the "good sense" not to try to turn back the revolutions in the Western Hemisphere, much as they hated them. Ferdinand Scheveill in his history of Europe, said "the co-ordinated action" of England and the United States, "ended all further talk on the part of the European champions of absolutism to interfere in the affairs of the western continent."

Alexander of Russia, far from seeking profit in American discord, sent the Russian fleet to New York to

show his support for President Lincoln and the Union. The fleet, including the Almax, dropped anchors in New York harbor and stayed from October 1863 to April 1864. On board the Almax was Rimsky-Korsakov, the great Russian composer and friend of Moussorgsky, who finished Boris Gudinov while on duty as a Russian Naval officer. Moreover, Russia in 1854, on the outbreak of the Crimean War, believed her Alaskan territory in danger and proposed selling it to the United States. A treaty was concluded in 1867 making Alaska U.S. territory for \$7,200,000.

So the threat feared by Congressman Davis was eclipsed by domestic war and, at least temporarily removed, by the collapse of the menace of the Quintuple Alliance, and made more implausible by the friendly gestures of the Russian Empire.

Now Congressman Davis, a century later, has events on his side again. The government that has succeeded the Russian Empire of the Czars is once again in the center of Europe. Zbigniew Brzezinski, writing in his recent book, again sees a Russian Menace. He says: "The distinctive character of the Russian Imperial drive is derived from the interconnection between the militaristic organization of the Russian society and the territorial imperative that defines its instinct for survival. As often noted by both Russian and non-Russian historians, from time immemorial, Russian society expressed itself politically through a state that was mobilized and

regimented along military lines, with the security dimension serving as the central organization impulse. The absence of any clearly definable national boundary made territorial expansion the obvious way of ensuring security. Such expansion bred new conflicts, new threats and a further expansionary drive. A relentless historical cycle was thus set in motion: insecurity, in turn fueled further expansionism."

Alexander Solzhenitsyn now outdoes Henry Winter Davis, attributing the menace not to the Russian character but to Communism. He wrote in 1980:

"Two mistakes are especially common (in dealing with Soviet affairs). One is the failure to understand the radical hostility of communism to mankind as a whole - the failure to realize that communism is irredeemable, that there exist no 'better' variants of communism; that it is incapable of growing 'kinder,' that it cannot survive as an ideology without using terror, and that, consequently, to coexist with communism on the same planet is impossible. Either it will spread, cancer-like, to destroy mankind, or else mankind will have to rid itself of communism (even then face lengthy treatment for secondary tumors). The second and equally prevalent error is to assume an indissoluble link between the universal disease of communism and the country where it first seized

control -- Russia. This error skews one's perception of the threat and cripples attempts to respond sensibly to it, thus leaving the West disarmed."

Henry Winter Davis was born a hundred years too soon to lead the West against the Soviet Union -- he was not on the scene at the right time. He was not in the right place either -- the chairman of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs does not often greatly influence foreign policy. Davis was in the right pew, but in the wrong church -- he should have been Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee of the Senate, where he might have had more leverage. Did he have the right issue (a hundred years too soon)? At least he anticipated some of the measures with which his successors have tried to meet that issue. He was a precursor of the late Clarence Streit, in advocating Union Now with the enemies of Russia. He thought in terms of an alliance like NATO. He perceived that unstable governments in South America would form a platform for subversion and attack on the United States.

Perhaps when he died he was open to a reproach seldom justly visited upon American statesmen: He looked too far ahead.