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Commencement address at the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Middlebury Summer Schools

Good evening!

Let me first express my deep gratitude to President Ronald Liebowitz, Vice President Michael Geisler, the Board of Trustees and the entire body of the Middlebury Language Schools for inviting me at its hundred years' anniversary commencement today. I am profoundly moved by the great honor to address the graduates and their families, the teachers, administrators and representatives of this unique and much admired institution on this joyful day. As a long-standing member of the profession I am particularly thrilled to illuminate in a few words Middlebury's eminent role in America's strong though not always consequential engagement with foreign languages and cultures in the past century.

Most important tonight is that you are being honored and rewarded for your tremendous work towards a Master and a Doctorate in Modern Languages. You continue the line of about 11,000 graduates since the founding of the Language Summer Schools in 1915. Your and your teachers' endeavor confirm the fact that this school has rightly been praised as the premier academic institution of advanced language teaching and learning in the United States. You can and should be proud of having made it at this place since it carries the reputation of representing absolute and consistent first-rate quality. Congratulations, you will carry this distinction into your professional life!

Looking at the foundations of this success one can easily ascertain that it is less rooted in the academic decisions of some bow-tied New England men in the beginning of last century than in the pedagogical enthusiasm of hundreds, even thousands of language

teachers from all over the American map. From the beginning there were many women among them, exemplified in Lilian Stroebe, the inventive and much beloved German teacher at Vassar who started the whole enterprise with the German School at Middlebury College. She co-founded it together with Marian Whitney in 1915, followed by the French School in 1916, the Spanish School in 1917, and the other seven language schools in later years. The unique feature that has made this success possible is, aside from the enthusiasm and professionalism of the teachers, the total immersion of the students in the other language. Soon after the founding this radical concept was officially adopted as the famous Middlebury Language Pledge, the source of both annoyance and satisfaction inside the College and admiration and imitation outside.

Middlebury's top standing in language instruction owes much to the concept of total immersion and cannot be traced to a particular teaching method. However, methodological flexibility has always been an indispensable part of the resounding success in its various schools with their highly diverse linguistic agendas. This innovative and flexible spirit continued to guide it through those rough years after 1980 when most foreign language departments had to go through a difficult phase of reforming language instruction. These reforms were necessary to achieve a level of professionalization of language teaching that had never existed before. As a chair of a language department and board member of the Modern Language Association I saw the importance of this professionalization for the standing of foreign languages in colleges and universities. Often considered ancillary to the study of the humanities, the reforms helped reestablish the study of languages in their cultural context as an indispensable part of the humanities. Middlebury added to these reform efforts but never needed such an overhaul.

Instead the simultaneous teaching and practicing of very diverse languages in the Summer Schools has helped refine a concept that has much currency today: that of multilingualism in which underlying nationalities that so often hinder the full involvement in another culture fade away and something like a global citizenship takes shape. These kinds of global citizens, with special roots in one culture but command of a second and often a third language, have long been an ideal, especially after the events in Europe hundred years ago ushered into a century of wars between nationalities. Even Middlebury did not escape the effects of nationalism when the teaching of German was phased out in most American schools in 1917 and the German School went under for more than a decade.

It is all the more reassuring that at the same time, in 1916/17, a courageous young American writer from the premier intellectual journal, *The New Republic*, advocated an America that, if it wanted to assume world leadership, had to turn away from nationalism and become a *Transnational America*. Under this title, Randolph Bourne addressed the problems of insularity with a suggestion which, under the auspices of today's world-wide communications networks, holds even more promise than in his troubled years. Randolph Bourne spoke of "some form of dual citizenship" which, as an intellectual, cultural concept, should be established despite "so much articulate horror among us." He wrote: "Dual citizenship we may have to recognize as the rudimentary form of that international citizenship to which, if our words mean anything, we aspire."

In order to illustrate this concept as a practical formula, one does not have to go far in the halls of the Middlebury campus. In those years, and without such a vibrant facilitator in the mountains of Vermont, Randolph Bourne pointed to the dual citizenship

that France permitted its citizens and thought that the same was possible for Americans. He maintained that the American, enamored with France, “finds that this expansion [this dual citizenship] involves no shameful conflict within him, no surrender of his native attitude.” Bourne would unquestionably be pleased knowing that in the twenty-first century we are able to implement this with so many other cultures and languages and would be fascinated with what happens in Middlebury with the immersion in Chinese, Japanese, Arabic, Spanish, Portuguese, Russian, Hebrew, German, Italian, and, of course, French.

Let me illuminate this with a Middlebury graduate three years ago whom some of you might remember as one of the more unusual students in the long row of unusual students. A few weeks ago I was a guest in Aachen, Germany, the home of Charlemagne and, today, of one of the best-known equestrian competitions in the world. I must admit, I am less a connoisseur of horses than of classical music. I would have never thought that one can combine it in a big event in front of 5000 people. In Aachen, that horse-crazy town, it is done. Under the title, “Horse and Symphony,” an expansive choreography provides an amazing coordination of horses with classical and popular music. Who conducts such a concert with one of the best smaller German orchestras where once Herbert von Karajan started his career? It is a Middlebury graduate of 2011, Kazem Abdullah, one of the leading young American conductors, an African American musician from Indianapolis. When I asked him how he made it to this admirable position, he laughed and said: “Two things. First, my contract is generally directed towards conducting without horses, and second, I would have never made it without my German from Middlebury.” Kazem Abdullah’s is an amazing story of a dual citizenship in two

cultures thanks to his immersion in the Summer School. Without it, he said, he would have never made it through the German selection committee.

I might stop here. It has become clear, I think, what was meant by that kind of “dual citizenship” a century ago. Middlebury has hundreds of these stories. You are the most recent ones. We celebrate you and wish you the very best with your citizenship in more than one culture!