

“Iowa’s Moral Heritage and Leadership in Refugee Resettlement”

Keynote speech by Ambassador Kenneth Quinn at “Refugees in the Heartland Conference”, April 4, 2013.

[Begins by thanking and acknowledging people in the audience, sponsors and conference organizers]

When I was graduating from Loras College, my dream, Provost, was to come here. If only I could come to the University of Iowa and go to law school—that was what I wanted to do. And I didn’t have enough money to pay for the law boards and even apply and get a score. But you could take the U.S. Foreign Service exam for free. And even though it was an incredible long shot—18,000 people take the test, maybe 1000 pass, then you have to do an oral, they hire maybe 200 to become Foreign Service officers. And I—you know, people are critical of the U.S. government for inefficiencies and waste, but I’m thankful. Probably somewhere along the way somebody mixed up my scores with somebody else; they admitted me and I got in. And you can imagine, a kid from Dubuque—I had visions of diplomatic sugarplums dancing in my head. I was going to be in the chandeliered ballrooms, I’d be sipping the aperitifs, I’d be chatting about the nuances of international relations because I thought that’s what diplomats did and I wanted to go to Paris. Because I’m from Dubuque, named after Julian Dubuque, the first European and French fur-trapper to set foot on Iowa. I went to Loras College, founded by Father Matthias Loras, the French missionary priest who came here. And I took two years of French in college, Dean [Thomas].—it was a requirement. So, I thought, “I’m a shoe-in.” So I went to the personnel people at the State Department and I said “I want to go to Paris—no need to discuss anything else”. And they listened to me and kind of smiled and they said, “Well, okay—if you go and take the French test.” So, in the State Department we have a system—I’m sure you’re familiar with it—where you get graded on how well you can speak a foreign language and you get a score from 1 (which is you can do it a little bit) to 5 (you’re a native speaker)—and I’m sure you are a 5, Dean Thomas. So I go in and I’m sitting there with these very nice French ladies and they’re asking me questions and I think I’m responding and then they sent me out and they came back in and they said “Well, let us explain the scoring system. You know 0 means you don’t speak the language, 5 you’re a native speaker, and you got a 0+”. Then I went back to the people in personnel and they said “Let’s explain something to you—you’re under 26; you’ve never been in the military; you’re not married and we have this program in Vietnam. And before I knew what happened they were training me in Vietnamese and I’m in the back of a single engine plane landing on a dirt road in Sa Dec Province in the Mekong Delta in 1968 in the middle of the war. And thank goodness, because it was there that I came face-to-face with the human suffering of the war victims and refugees that were generated by that conflict and every other conflict in which people and countries engage. And the first job I had was to go to Phong Hoa village to help people who were returning home. And we went through the village and there were no structures left standing, just sort of the places where everybody had built their home before and now were coming back with some hope of re-establishing their lives now that it seemed that the military situation had settled down.

It's the most durable solution that you hope for in refugee work. People go back to where they're from, rebuild their lives. And we were there, taking a few basic things—some sheets and metal sheets of roofing, some thatch walls to build a basic structure with; a few months' supply of rice to keep them going until they could get their first crop in. And you saw then that they weren't just numbers. Here were families—and you'd look them in the eye and you see the suffering they went through and you talk to them and you hear their stories. One of the most important things you can do in refugee work is listen to the refugees. Find out what they need, what they want. And as we did that, I also came face-to-face with the corruption which is possible. And if you ever have the opportunity to give to money to support any of the NGOs that are here or working or the UN organizations you should do so because they're the difference between food and help getting to people and not having to going through those who might take it off the top. 'Cause that's what I found. They'd come out--“Oh, here, please sign these papers—say we delivered everything.” But they hadn't delivered it all. They'd taken off part of the rice for themselves, part of the supplies for themselves.

Now the State Department said the deal for me was that if I stuck out my 18 months, and did my job, they'd come through for me. So they sent me my assignment and I was going to go to Harvard, I was going to study Labor Relations, and I was going to be assigned to Western Europe—they didn't say Paris—'cause I think they figured I hadn't gotten to Saigon much and I hadn't practiced my French. But, they were going to take care of me and I had my assignment. And then you have one of those moments that can change your life. I'm riding on a boat; I'm taking a journalist from Time/Life magazine—his name was Dick Swanson— never forget him—to show him Phum Wah village; show him what had happened, how people had come back, how they had started their lives again, how the refugee assistance had been helpful. And we're riding down the Mekong River and I can describe to you where I was sitting in the boat and he said, “What are you going to do?” And I said, “I'm going to Harvard, I'm going to study Labor Relations, I'm going to be assigned to Western Europe, I'm going to work in an embassy” and he said, “Well, why would you want to do that? Here you are—you're in the middle of the epic event of your generation. You speak the language.” (I was better at Vietnamese than French). “And you're able to step through the cultural veil—and look at this village! You're able to make a difference.” And I thought (they didn't have pause buttons back then)—it was like somebody pushed my pause button. And I turned to him and I said, “You know? I don't know why I'd want to do that.” So I went back that night and I wrote to the State Department and I said I don't want to go to Harvard, I don't want to study Labor Relations, I don't want to be assigned to Western Europe. I want to stay in Vietnam. Now if you know anything about international organizations and diplomatic institutions, you know when there's such clear signs of mental instability the first thing they do is bring you right home. But they were pretty desperate for people to be in Vietnam and I got to stay for 6 years, I met my wife and eventually ended up assigned up on the Cambodian border at a place called Chau Doc.

And I was standing on top of a mountain in June of '73, looking out into Cambodia as far as the eye could see, 15 or 20 miles—every village was on fire, smoke pouring up out of every village. Never seen anything like that. And the next days refugees poured across the border. And I went out

among them, I brought an interpreter and I interviewed them. I listened to the refugees, and they told this story of this organization called the Khmer Rouge who were implementing this radical new system of government. They had taken everybody and forced them out of their homes. And just like Phum Wah village they burned every hut, every structure, so people would have nothing to go back to. They made refugees out of everybody who lived in this entire area. And I wrote a report about it and sent it back to my government saying here are these radical, genocidal killers. And nobody in the U.S. government believed me. They didn't think that I had it right.

Shortly thereafter that single engine plane landed; gave me an envelope and said I was assigned to Washington, DC on the NSC staff. I was back there in '74. Then in March and April of 1975 as Vietnam began to collapse I was on a plane going to Saigon with a presidential fact-finding mission. And while there, I went out and here's a city of several million people, most of whom wanted to be refugees. They wanted to flee. Desperate. So I listened to them. And I was at the embassy and there wasn't anything being done. There were no real steps being taken to prepare to evacuate people, people to whom we had a great obligation, who had sided with us in the war and who would be at great risk. And so, I went and got a few of my friends together; we pulled our own little organization; we started alerting people; we had a safe house. And then when I got back to Washington I waited until about 9 o'clock at night when there wasn't anybody else around and then I went over to see the National Security Advisor, Brent Scowcroft. And I said, "General Scowcroft, there's not much happening in the Embassy. But there's a group of us; we have people who can be saved if you'll just give the authorization for planes to start going to Saigon and to bring people out." And he went to the president, got the permission, started that, and eventually we started taking 20- and 30,000 people a day out of Vietnam. Now I got to the last day and I came to work in the morning and I found out that the National Security Council, the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense had all met with the president and they'd stopped the refugee evacuation, so it's about April 27. And I was able to get on the phone and call Saigon and I talked to my friends who were there and they said "There's 20,000 people at the airport and there's no military attack; the planes can land. They're waiting. We can save these people!" So, what do you do? You're still a young member of the staff. I can't run in to see the president. So I ran across the street into the White House and found the White House photographer. He was a young guy named David Kennerly. He had been a war photographer, he'd seen the suffering, face-to-face, up close; he and I had traveled together and I said, "David, David—there's 20,000 people waiting at the airport in Saigon—it's still clear. But, the president and the NSC, they've turned off the evacuation." So President Ford thought of David Kennerly like his son. So Kennerly runs up to the Oval Office, and you know, he was a journalist, the President thought he had great sources...and the president turned the evacuation back on again and the planes flying in again.

And I used to get Christmas cards from people whose families got out on the last day. Eventually there were maybe 130,000 people who got out of Indochina and came to the United States and that was it. Now this is where, sort of, my relationship with Governor Ray begins because I was loaned by the State to Department to Iowa. And here's the great stories about Governor Ray who deserves to be a legendary figure in our state. Republican governor, popularly elected, and

Governor Ray was interested and followed the Vietnam War. And as the refugees came out of Vietnam and were processed and arrived in the U.S., there was one group of them called the Tai Dam, separate ethnic people from northern Laos who had their own language, their own culture, their own traditions, and they were about to be scattered all over America because refugees couldn't pick, we all want to go to California, we want to go to Florida; no—every state has to have their share and you just get assigned. And they were about to be scattered, their culture dissipated. And they wrote to every governor in America and they said, "Please, please, won't you take us as a people?" Only one governor responded—Bob Ray of Iowa. He read the letter, said "Maybe we can help." He went to Washington. He lobbied the President and the Secretary of State and he got permission for the Tai Dam to come to Iowa and be kept together as a people, and they're still here today, doing well.

A few years later—1979--the "boat people" starting escaping from Vietnam. They would get on small, frail boats, meant really to be on rivers or canals, and at night go down the rivers and out into the South China Sea, and navigating as best they could by using the sun and the stars, try to find their way to Malaysia or Thailand or Indonesia or the Philippines or wherever you could make it. Some would run out of gas, some would run out of water, some would be attacked by marauding pirates; killed; women raped; robbed. And then those who were fortunate enough to make it to shore had the terrible fate of being pushed back out to sea by local officials who didn't want to be overwhelmed by refugees that no country in the world would take. America was taking no refugees; all of the countries of resettlement, traditional resettlement, nobody was taking any more refugees from Indochina. And Ed Bradley of CBS went and captured the scene on film for CBS Reports. And here, on a cold January night we watched in horror in the governor's office to see this show and see this boat filled with Vietnamese boat people and watched this boat being pushed back out and starting to break up in the heavy waves and people falling into the sea and drowning before your eyes, some washing up on shore. It was transfixing. Now no one in the world expected the Governor of Iowa to do anything about international refugee issues. And I remember-- it's 10 o'clock at night and there's only a couple of us in the office with the governor and he said the question that you always have to ask yourself. He said, "We have two choices. We can do nothing—we can turn our back—no one will be critical of us. Or, we can try somehow; try to reach out a hand, to help, to save a life." And he wrote a letter that night to President Carter and he said, "If you, Mr. President, will just reopen America's doors, Iowa will double the number of refugees we've resettled." So you can imagine it was not necessarily the most popular thing to say, politically, then or at any time. So here the first governing official anywhere in the world to step forward and say "we will take the boat people refugees" was the governor of this state. And he went to Washington, and he addressed a roomful of all of America's governors and he implored them, "Join with me."

I don't know what we were thinking. We thought that maybe, they all would stand up and say, "Yes—let's do it!" And there was this terrible silence. Nobody put up their hand. Nobody volunteered. And finally, one Republican and one Democratic governor said, "We'll be with you, Governor Ray." They went to the White House, they went to the President, and urged them to

change our policy and six months later, in Geneva, at UNHCR Headquarters, they had the International Conference on the Boat People and Walter Mondale, the Vice-President of the United States stood up and said, "America is reopening its doors; we'll take 168,000 refugees a year." And people, almost all the delegations, stood up and cheered for America. And as Walter Mondale walked back to his seat, Bob Ray (Governor Ray was there, I was there) ran up to the Vice-President and said, "This is the proudest moment of my life as an American." It was a great, proud moment for all of us, but it should be an especially proud moment if you were from Iowa that it was our governor who did this.

A few months later, Pope John Paul II visited--great humanitarian message and a month later, we (Governor Ray and I) were in Thailand at the Cambodian border when we saw 30,000 Cambodian refugees who had stumbled out of the Khmer Rouge rule. Imagine it's like the entire student body of the University of Iowa strewn about an open field, dying at the rate of 50-100 a day, their bodies being pushed with bulldozers into mass graves. And the governor came back with pictures and descriptions of that that sent an electric current around the state. And we formed Iowa Shares which stands for Iowa Sends Help to Aid Refugees to End Starvation and rushed doctors and nurses and food and medicine from this state and into Cambodia to help sustain life. But perhaps the most iconic moment of all of my experiences with the governor came in a place called Nong Khai in Thailand which was a camp for Tai Dam refugees waiting and hoping to be resettled, hoping America might take them. And we came to the gate of the camp and there was a big sign saying "Welcome Iowa Governor Ray" and we're being escorted in and being treated very nicely and the refugee leader said, "Governor, we want to show you our symbol of hope." So we thought, what could this be? These are an ethnic people, maybe there's some sort of a carving of a spiritual symbol. And they took us into this thatch hut. And up on the wall, they had tacked the Iowa Department of Transportation highway map with the pins stuck in it where all of the other Tai Dam were settled. And they said, "This is our symbol of hope." So I'm so proud to think that our state would be that kind of symbol to people located 12,000 or more miles away, never been here, probably never heard of Iowa much before but the legacy that we have. People say, well, what is it about Iowa that it would have such a--would give it such a foundation? I said, well, we have a very rich history, a wonderful humanitarian legacy not too many people know about. Twenty miles or so from here is West Branch--Herbert Hoover's Presidential Museum. You know, most people think of Herbert Hoover as a failed president who was somehow responsible for the Depression. But Herbert Hoover is, in my estimation, the single greatest humanitarian in the history of the United States of America while working for a Democrat. While working for Woodrow Wilson he took food from America--not money, because there wasn't any money--he took food from America to Europe to feed 8 or 900 million people at the end of World War I. Henry A. Wallace, Vice-President, the man who took American agricultural know-how beyond our borders; Jessie Field Shambaugh, the woman schoolteacher from Clarinda who started 4-H. Maybe our most significant refugee to ever come here was George Washington Carver, emancipated from slavery at the end of the Civil War; turned away from school in nearby states, he ends up in Winterset doing laundry, the kind of job that probably many refugees would find themselves

doing. A sponsor family befriends him; provides him an educational opportunity at Simpson College and he goes to Iowa State. Never had a black student and probably could have turned him away but to its everlasting credit, emulated the great legacy of this university and admitted George Washington Carver and he became a scientist, went to Tuskegee and one of the great American agricultural scientists of the first half of the twentieth century. And, and, the man to whom Mahatma Gandhi turned in 1929 as he began the struggle to free India of colonial rule and fearful that he wouldn't be strong enough for this long, difficult journey asked George Washington Carver for advice about his diet, which Carver gave. Isn't it terrific that in a small but perhaps not insignificant way, that an Iowan would have this role in helping India become independent and free? And of course, the founder of the World Food Prize, Norman Borlaug, farm boy from Howard County. Only mistake in life was going to the University of Minnesota. (I say that at Minnesota, too). But who developed miracle wheat, took it to India and Pakistan as they faced imminent mass starvation, credited with saving a billion lives, of whom it is said saved more lives than any other person who's ever lived in all human history. And whose statue will next year be placed in the U.S. Capitol as one of Iowa's and the world's greatest heroes. That's the legacy we have in this state.

I want to finish by just you telling a story about my son's wedding which we held in Des Moines in the Hall of Laureates of the World Food Prize in honor of Dr. Borlaug. I told you my wife is from Vietnam-- her family were refugees twice, they all live with us, 2 bedroom, one bath house, 14 people in Northern Virginia. So they were all there for my son's wedding. He was marrying a young woman from Thailand (Chinese) I got up to give a toast and I said, you know, I hadn't thought of this before but everyone here is from an immigrant family. His wife's family were economic refugees from China during terrible times, went to Thailand; my wife's family were refugees; even if you go back far enough to my Irish ancestors, left as refugees to come to America. Governor Ray was there—so wonderful that he came. And, my wife's brother-in-law was also there. He was one of those boat people refugees who Governor Ray saved. And I brought him over; his name was Twung (spelling??). I brought him over to meet Governor Ray and he reached down and shook Governor Ray's hands and he said, "Thank you. You saved my life." That's the story of so many refugee efforts. Refugees would say "thank you—you saved my life—you gave me this new opportunity." I'm so proud to be from a state that has that kind of legacy. And I'm so pleased that you're having this conference here. It's so appropriate to have it here given that history of our state.

Thank you for having me here.

[Followed by questions and answers.]