

Address to  
Members of the A A U P  
present in San Francisco, June 1981  
by  
Morris Philipson  
on the occasion of his retirement  
as  
President of the Association

Ladies and Gentlemen:

You are all so knowledgeable, it may appear presumptuous to try to tell you anything. But that won't keep me from trying.

I would like to speak of things obvious and things invisible. If we look about us to see what's going on, it is obvious that this is a convention, national in scope, international by its implications. What rests invisible is what we share in common. We are all involved with scholarly publishing. If we look at the program for this meeting, what is obvious is that all of our concerns focus on methods of doing what we do better. We are trying to improve what we do, and all the topics which name all of the sessions have to do with how we might improve. What is invisible is the purpose of all that effort. What is the goal? What is the end? What is the raison d'être for trying? That invisible purpose is the contribution that we can make to the community of thought of an intellectual, a scholarly, nature ranging from the most detailed of empirical studies to the most speculative of theoretical propositions. In order to achieve that end, we produce material objects in the form of books and journals. They are obvious. There are words printed on paper. What is invisible is the goal of the entire enterprise: it is the communication of thought and feeling from an author to a reader. The invisible event -- the comprehension of what is published -- is the point of it all.

Everything we do is as middleman: we are the medium through which it is possible for the ideas of one person to be engaged by another person. We are in effect, then, servants of this process of communication, and guardians of the standards by which it is carried out.

Now, what is obvious is that we are trying to do this in a world which keeps changing. There have been many important changes in the world we live in since we last met one year ago. There are new governments in the United States, in France, in Japan, and the news from England is, according to the New York Times: their economy has bottomed out.

Economics is now the science for which it is most true to say that Doctors Disagree. There is a lot that we don't know about it. And the future is the ultimate invisibility that we have to conjure with. We do not know how the political and economic future of the world we live in will alter between now and the time we meet next year. We do not know how many more books might be burned in this country between now and then, or how much effort will be made to prevent certain books from being made available.

But of course you don't have to burn books to constrict thought. As Robert Maynard Hutchins said some years ago: all you have to do is to cultivate a population which is encouraged not to read them. Part of our responsibility must be to recognize the conditions of the world in which it may be hoped that we can contribute to the desirability of reading the books and journals that we publish. We should not mislead ourselves about the nature of that world, because it is in very bad shape. It has been put as succinctly as possible, as vividly as possible I think, by the new president of France. I quote from Mr. Mitterrand: "Let us speak of the forgotten man, abandoned, lost, delivered over to the powers that crush him. People in most places are dying of hunger, of misery, and solitude; a whole people was killed in Cambodia, and another is being killed in Timor; the children in Uganda awake to the consciousness of the wretchedness of having been born; and the birds of prey -- the world



powers -- are gnawing at the bones of two thousand million human beings. Where would the established order be on two-thirds of this planet without the machine-gun or the rope, torture or exile?"

It is the figure two-thirds that is of greatest importance. Two-thirds of the people alive on the planet today live in states of suppression. What we understand of the feudal principalities of Europe in the middle ages, characterizing the relationship between masters and servants, describes the conditions under which people in two-thirds of the countries of the world live today. The vast countries of South America or Africa and most of Asia demonstrate the condition of feudal principalities, writ large. We are in a state of self-hypnotic delusion if we think that the conditions under which we perform our functions, which are to publish contributions to scholarship, are safe. Part of our responsibility must be to protect that condition. It is naive of us to assume that that will be taken care of by the scholars who write the books we publish, or by the administrators of the parent universities that support the presses that we run, or by the trustees of those universities. In simple truth, it is not the responsibility of any one party. But we constitute one such party, and part of our consciousness should be devoted to the protection of those principles. The easiest way in which those principles can be undermined will be economic arguments, the argument that says (no matter who says it or who is described by the "we" referred to) will be that we can no longer afford to support such trivia. The powers of anti-intellectual and anti-scholarly thought must never be underestimated. There is a potentially gigantic threat to the continuance of what we do -- and take for granted; and my only point is that we must not take it for granted. It only appears to be granted.

One way of making that clear to ourselves is to question the cliché that we have lived with for a long time. We soothe ourselves with the thought that "the pen is mightier than the sword." I think there is precious little evidence for the assumption of truth in that saying. I refer to

the figure in Mr. Mitterrand's statement: for two-thirds of the people alive on the planet today, the sword is infinitely mightier than the pen. When the pen might be stronger depends on the people who maintain values in the quality of thought such as we try to publish. What we think of as necessary -- necessary to our well-being, necessary to our purpose, necessary in order for us to perform our functions -- is, from the point of view of the vast majority of humanity alive today, the ultimate luxury. The luxury of freedom of thought. We really must not forget that most people do not have that luxury, and if we for a moment forget that it is not granted in perpetuity, it is always challenged, we'll forget to protect ourselves and the purposes to which we are devoted.

A few months ago our fourteen-year-old daughter came home from school, obviously distressed about an assignment. In her course in social studies she was reading the history of the Civil War. The assignment was to write a paper on what the South might have done to win the war, I asked her why she was so upset. She said, "I didn't know yet that the South lost." Now that was a dramatic error in pedagogy on the part of her teacher. I mean, you're supposed to get the facts straight first, then you can speculate. Then you're concerned with the values by which you interpret the facts,

It applies to us, to what we do, as well. I call upon the subject of this anecdote only to remind all of us to learn the facts first. We are concerned with the obvious: how to do our jobs and we want to do them better; but never forget the invisible threats to performing our functions at all -- and to remember why we carry them out: the purpose, the values for which all our effort has meaning. Therein lies the lesson.

Amen.