

“Land Reform: An Ambassador’s Views”

by

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The following remarks were made by Ambassador Pickering at and RDI-hosted luncheon for business, political and community leaders in the Puget Sound Region. Pickering—in a diplomatic career spanning five decades—has served as U.S. Ambassador to the Russian Federation, India, Israel, El Salvador, Nigeria, and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, achieving the rank of Career Ambassador, the highest in the Foreign Service. He has also served as Executive Secretary of the Department of State and Special Assistant to Secretaries William P. Rogers and Henry A. Kissinger (1973-1974), Ambassador and Representative to the United Nations in New York (1989-1992), and U.S. Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs (1997-2000). Ambassador Pickering is currently Senior Vice-President International Relations for Boeing.

It is a special pleasure to be with you in Seattle today. I am pleased and indeed honored to be asked to talk to this RDI luncheon.

What RDI does is so important to the future of our world. Indeed, it is a special pleasure and honor to be here with Roy Prosterman who I got to know some nearly 20 years ago when I worked as Ambassador in El Salvador.

Perhaps more than others, I have had an opportunity to see around the world what a difference RDI makes. They made a huge contribution to change in a conflicted situation in El Salvador. Later on, I knew their work in Russia and met Roy frequently. I served for a brief time in India and have followed RDI’s work in several states of India and most importantly, in a country which I have gotten to know, but never worked in, in China.

Roughly half of the world’s population still makes its living on the land and depends upon the land not only for subsistence but also to feed, clothe, and to some extent house all the rest of us. An individual’s relationship with the land, a subject with which RDI is most concerned, remains crucial. This is true for several reasons. The most obvious have to do with economic and agricultural development. But history has shown, as RDI has frequently noted, that people living on their own land bring stability, increased production, and an increased sense of political and development commitment to their families, to their lives, and to their own country.

If we are worried about terrorism and its root causes, land reform is a powerful, indeed may be one of the most powerful long-term weapons in dealing with the causes that put

people into positions to use violence against innocent parties to achieve political objectives.

The U.S. had a long history of supporting land reform in Japan, Taiwan and South Korea after the Second World War.

In South Vietnam in the 1960's, recognition of the value of land came too late to affect the conflict and its outcome. But the land reform that RDI helped to design in that country did reduce the appeal of the insurgents to the farmers of the south. In a quiet and confident way, after the war it set the ground work for the break-up of collective farms in the north and established the family farm throughout the country in the 1980's. This brought striking results for agricultural productivity. In an unexpected and unpredictable way, land reform in south Vietnam did end up being one of the most significant long-term results in all of Vietnam of American involvement.

Personally, I had the opportunity to see the impact of land reform in El Salvador. Again, RDI played a critical role in helping to design it. Along with three, open and fair elections, land reform took the steam out of the unfulfilled promise of the guerilla movement. It took away from them their claim that they alone were concerned with the very large numbers of landless and rural poor. They assured support for the government and for the proposition that the guerilla movement could not succeed by using military force to impose its ideas on the rest of the country.

As you know now, a negotiated solution has the guerilla movement contesting democratically the future of the country in the polls and at the ballot box. Land reform contributed significantly to that outcome by giving poor, rural landless people a stake in the future of their own country.

In Russia, land reform has taken a different turn. Break up of the large collective and state farms has been slow in coming.

Interestingly enough, an idea that took root under the communists, but greatly influenced by outside ideas, including those espoused by RDI, of providing small garden or *dacha* plots to rural and urban households, has made a significant impact on the country. These small plots provided 20-30% of the total value of Russia's soviet-era agriculture production on perhaps 3% of the land. They now produce 50% of the total value of production and have expanded to comprise almost 5% of the arable land some dozen years later. They make the difference between hunger and minimum food sufficiency for many Russian households, both urban and rural. Reinforcing private ownership of these plots has remained an important objective supported by RDI.

Unfortunately, the break up of large collective farms is still tightly bound to the *de facto*, though not necessarily *de jure*, control over that land exercised by the leaders of the

collectives who are also leaders of the agrarian party. This party is an offshoot of the former communist party of the Soviet Union. Elections this year reduced the strength of the communists by a significant amount.

In India, where I also served as ambassador, the land reform problem is closely linked to rural poverty and the 2/3's of the population, now well over a billion, living in the countryside.

In India, the individual states of the Indian federation can enact land reform legislation. Slow progress has been made to date, but important new approaches are on the horizon.

RDI, drawing on past experience with small plots in Russia and house and garden plots in Indonesia has shown that homestead plots of 1/10th of an acre or less can help improve nutrition, income and status in the village for the landless poor. The plots need to be only a couple of thousand square feet larger than the footprint of their own small house to support an intensive garden infrastructure. This is certainly more achievable than trying to distribute so-called full-size farms of several acres to each landless family. This idea has now caught on in several Indian states. And its impact is growing within the central government as well – which is important because the central government, while it cannot legislate on land issues, can financially support good land distributive programs at the state level.

Land reform ideas have become so important that the U.S. Congress in the new Millennium Challenge Account, which sets standards to be achieved by countries who will be awarded greater amounts for development, includes as a fundamental goal the ownership by the poor of a plot of land sufficient to build basic shelter and a garden producing food and income.

China, too, has shown important new approaches to the rural land issue. Here again, RDI has been hard at work in that country.

In China, 2/3's of the people make their living from agriculture. China's rural population makes up one of every eight people on the globe.

China is the inverse of what has happened in Russia. China broke up collectives very early, and finished by 1983. It failed to give farmers firm rights to the land, however. They could be shuffled around at will by local officials.

This inhibited investment and facilitated abuses of power by local officials.

With RDI's help this problem was recognized.

China, on RDI's recommendation, now gives 30-year, so-called "one generation" land rights to all of its farmers.

This process is now about 40% complete among the 850 million people it has the potential to serve.

It promises to enhance productivity and income. It also sets a pattern that might be followed in a country like North Korea, the last major practitioner of collectivized agriculture.

RDI continues to work on various de-collectivization, privatization and homestead plot distribution and similar issues involving land law and policy. It is looking to have a positive impact on the rural poor in many key countries.

These include Indonesia, the largest Muslim country on earth; Ukraine; Nepal; and now, ever more importantly in Africa.

There are few tasks of higher significance in the world today with nearly half of the world's population still living on the land. An even larger percentage of the poor lives in the countryside.

If we want growth and stability on our planet, and both are necessary for our future success, we need to insure that the rural poor have a secure and profitable relationship with the land.

They must have a basis for living on and working the land which helps them achieve security, a livelihood, and status in their local community.

Time and again, the success of these endeavors has shown that the ideas that Roy, and RDI, have fostered and developed are central to the success of these programs. In turn, these programs are central to the success of achieving the policy goals which all Americans, in their own minds and hearts, strongly support. A world where the poor can advance, where they have a stake in their own land and therefore in their own and their family's future, and where that ability to work and improve their land provides them with the basis for success, growth, and support for honest and democratic government.

Again, it has been a pleasure to be with you and share with you some of my perspectives of the importance of the land, reform in the rural areas, and the salient and significant work of RDI and Roy Prosterman over the decades in fostering those remarkable achievements and laying the groundwork for so many more.

Thank you and now I will turn the podium back to Jim Pigott.