

Youth for Understanding (YFU)

Reception

September 26, 1995

It is a pleasure to have so many guests this evening who share my deep interest in meaningful student exchange programs. Chairman Whitehead and Chairman Okawara are the force behind a concept that is indeed dear to my heart. They are supported by generous contributions from the many corporate sponsors represented here as well.

So let me begin by expressing my personal appreciation to each of you for your efforts -- the result of which is greater understanding among an entire new generation.

Youth for Understanding has an impressive history. While the total number of Japanese and American students -- about 15, 000 -- who have been exposed to the other's culture through YFU programs (since 1951) is significant, the program is focused on one young person at a time. Each participant is given a very personal opportunity to absorb new surroundings in a comfortable yet initially exotic environment.

The goal of "understanding" comes when this exotic environment ceases to seem so foreign. Youth are very adaptable to new surroundings. A "foreign" language becomes a practical mode of communication, "exotic" social habits become familiar, and the ability to appreciate a new perspective on life itself becomes second nature.

A participant comes away knowing that his or her counterparts around the world share many basic goals, but may have a totally different way of looking at them. Self-discovery and a renewed appreciation for one's own heritage are extra benefits.

And a student comes away with a quiver of practical skills that will come in handy in future academic and professional endeavors. Foreign language ability is one such skill. But language is no more important than the acquisition of cross-cultural social skills -- the ability to sit down to dinner with international friends and feel totally at home. That is the feeling that I so much appreciate in my home here tonight.

These are all wonderful objectives, but they do not come cheaply. Everything from airfare to school books cost money. Lots of it. Making sure that the resources are available is a big part of planning these programs, and I am impressed by the YFU concept of a Corporate Scholarship Program, for example, which celebrates its 20th anniversary this year. Over 100 Japanese corporations have been particularly generous in supporting this program.

As we work to increase available resources, we must also pay attention to the need for more American students in Japanese schools. The imbalance now is over 20 to 1, with only one young American learning in Japan for every 20 Japanese students in the U.S.

I hasten to add that YFU programs foster a more balanced ratio, and I salute you for your commitment to continue in this work.

I would like to briefly mention another very satisfying effort -- the JET program -- which is geared to college graduates hired to teach English throughout Japan. These youthful Americans are immersed in the professional culture of Japan, and my experience has been that they come away with commendable practical skills and a desire to make Japan an integral part of their professional future.

Youth for Understanding targets a younger audience, which in many cases prepares high school students for subsequent travel to Japan through other programs. These "returnee" students are able to dive deeper into their Japan experience due to early initial exposure

through YFU. I will continue to encourage the expansion of all such programs, which complement each other so well.

In conclusion, I simply wish to thank you again for your commitment to helping youth from our two countries feel more at home with each other -- much as we feel at home together here tonight. We will continue to see the payoff as a new generation of Americans and Japanese work even more naturally together.

Thank you.



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