



CONVOCATION at The Lawrenceville School
The opening of the 209th year

Sunday, September 2, 2018 at 5:30 p.m. in The Circle

"SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER"

Address by Stephen S. Murray H'55 '65 '16 P'16 '21
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Faculty colleagues, students, parents, graduates, and friends – welcome to the opening of the 209th year of the Lawrenceville School.

(Pause)

You've probably never heard of Paul Klebnikov.

He was an American journalist who was shot four times as he left work one summer evening in Moscow 14 years ago. He was the editor in chief of Forbes Russia, and he had moved to Moscow to found the Russian edition of the American magazine. He was a staunch defender of a free and independent press, a courageous investigative journalist -- and he was a high school classmate of mine. In fact, my wife and I had dinner with him at our reunion three years before he was killed.

Paul spoke truth to power, to borrow a phrase attributed to civil rights leader and Presidential Medal of Freedom recipient Bayard Rustin. **And he died for it.**

As we kick off a new year in the life of this great school, I tell his story in order to connect it to something we may take for granted, something we do so routinely that it may begin to feel ordinary. If Paul's death teaches us anything, it is that the practice of civil discourse around the Harkness table and in the Harkness classroom is profoundly important. This daily Lawrenceville exercise in careful, respectful listening, this expectation that all voices have a right to be heard, is a fundamental value of our democracy, enshrined in the First Amendment of the US Constitution; it is the best protection of our concept of citizenship and of our free and open society.

If you look around the world and worry, as I do, that democracy may be losing ground;

- if you note example after example of increasingly autocratic governments;
- of disrespect for the basic rule of law;
- of attacks on a free and independent press;
- of dismissing opposing views as 'fake news;'
- and of purposeful campaigns of misinformation to sow discord and spread doubt;

...then you will perceive, as I do, a general erosion of faith in the democratic ideals that are core to our American system of government. And we must remind ourselves, in this regard, that these freedoms do not persist on their own; and that this erosion is inevitable if we do not work at these freedoms – practice them here at Lawrenceville around our wooden tables, and actively defend them out in the world. And this to me is why Paul’s story is relevant, even urgent at this point in time.

Paul’s family had originally fled the Bolshevik Revolution and emigrated to America in the early part of the previous century. His father was an interpreter at the United Nations, and Paul maintained a deep and abiding interest in Russian language and culture. His investigative reporting, critical of Russia as it emerged from the Soviet era, was guided by his strong moral compass, and was aimed at holding the country to a higher standard, holding the country accountable through the establishment of a free press during that very fragile transition period.

Some of his reporting was on the rise of organized crime in post-Soviet Russia, or what he called “gangster capitalism,” and he had a particular focus on a powerful and ruthless oil magnate, Boris Berezovsky. There was early speculation that this was where he got into trouble. He was also investigating corruption in Chechnya, which may well have led to his murder, and still another theory is that it may have been the mere publication of an article, which appeared the same month that he died, listing the net worth of the 100 wealthiest Russians. In the article, he writes about the accumulation of vast wealth in the few short years following the fall of the Berlin Wall, and he implies that it would be near impossible, through legitimate means, to become a billionaire in Russia at that time. This too may have been enough to have a contract put out on him.

His death occurred during a time of heightened restriction on news reporting that coincided with the coming to power in 2000 of President Vladimir Putin, former agent of the KGB. Knowing Paul, this likely would only have inspired him to push back harder against anything that impeded the free flow of ideas, especially if Russia was to have a shot at developing into a free and open society.

His murder remains unsolved and was hardly an aberration. The Wall Street Journal reports that during the nearly two decades of Putin’s regime, 36 Russia-based journalists have been murdered, including the courageous Anna Politkovskaya, also shot four times in what was also clearly a professional contract killing.

At dinner with Paul that evening in 2001, he told stories of investigative reporting with a kind of hard-nosed, determined idealism that drove him to take on the corruption that was undermining a precarious and faltering system.

And lest I give the impression that this was only about Russian corruption, I should add that on that same evening, at that same dinner table in 2001, while Paul described his efforts to model a strong and independent press for a society that had never known one, another classmate spoke up, offering a very different, very cynical narrative. Hearing that the topic of discussion was Russia, he described his recent experience being paid

exorbitant sums as a management consultant to Moscow-based companies who were desperate to establish an international presence, particularly in New York City. With a laugh, he described setting up dummy phone lines in empty office spaces in New York, and paying people to pick up the phone and respond as the New York branch office. He described walking out of these Russian companies with shopping bags full of rubles, walking past people who hadn't been paid in months, heading straight to the airport with anything they could convert quickly into western currency.

If Russia's experiment with western-style capitalism and democracy failed, it was not only the Russians who were to blame. They learned hard lessons from certain Americans who were over there in the 1990's, sniffing around for real estate and energy deals, looking to take advantage of the chaos in order to turn a profit. There is little doubt that these opportunists disillusioned Russians already skeptical of Western ways and undermined efforts of those working for a more open society.

Paul's story came back to me, and the idea for this talk emerged, as I read an article this summer on Soviet dissident and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize Andrei Sakharov. Brilliant nuclear physicist, father of the Soviet Hydrogen bomb, courageous peace activist, and like Paul, one who spoke truth to power.

If President Ronald Reagan deserves credit for having the strength of conviction and resolve to give a final shove to an already teetering Soviet Union, then so does Sakharov, who, decades earlier, began to weaken the system from within, using the power of the written word and a bit of help from the Western press.

The author of the article, Natan Sharansky, a close ally of Sakharov who spent years in a Soviet gulag, or labor prison, recalls that Sakharov aimed a message at the conscience of countries whose free and open democratic political systems granted them a degree of moral authority. He challenged these leaders to use their platform to give humanity what it needed most: a message of hope and belief in a better world; and at all costs, not to squander the opportunity, not to fall into the trap of a transactional, opportunistic exercise of power.

At the height of the Cold War in 1968, Sakharov wrote an essay promoting human rights and peaceful coexistence. It was smuggled out of the Soviet Union and published in The New York Times. It is hard in this age of social media to understand how powerful it was to unleash his words, long suppressed and stifled, in such a free and open manner. In his essay, he spoke out against "*the crippling censorship of Soviet artistic and political literature;*" he wrote that "*intellectual freedom is essential to human society—freedom to obtain and distribute information, freedom for open-minded and unfearing debate... Such (...) freedom of thought is the only guarantee against an infection of people by mass myths...*"

Sakharov's message resonated with many Americans at the time because, as Sharansky reports, he "reminded them that, regardless of the guilt and defeatism of the Vietnam War or the shame and cynicism of Watergate, the country remained a beacon of liberty."

Presidents Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan may have been far apart on the political spectrum, but both presidents made human rights an issue in foreign policy, especially when dealing with the Soviet Union.

Senator John McCain understood the importance of Sakharov's message and of our responsibility as a nation, and he captured it beautifully in his recent farewell letter to his fellow Americans:

“We are citizens of the world’s greatest republic, a nation of ideals, not blood and soil. We are blessed and are a blessing to humanity when we uphold and advance those ideals at home and in the world. We have helped liberate more people from tyranny and poverty than ever before in history. (...) We weaken our greatness when we confuse our nationalism with tribal rivalries that have sown resentment and hatred and violence in all the corners of the globe. We weaken it when we hide behind walls, rather than tear them down, when we doubt the power of our ideals, rather than trust them to be the great force for change they have always been.”

So, I tell Paul's story not simply because the notion of a free press feels increasingly under siege, not simply because voices of authority are attacking the credibility and legitimacy of the press in our own country, but to echo Sakharov's appeal, to remind us of the voices that have served as a conscience, that have urged us to resist cynicism, to believe in freedom, to have faith in humanity.

Of course, as Paul understood, an independent press requires something of us. Unless we prefer to live as sheep with someone telling us what to believe, this independence requires us to be educated and discerning in order to sift through the sometimes chaotic range of perspectives. If this leads to frustration, especially when partisan views are strongly expressed, it is hardly a new frustration.

A recent New York Times editorial quoted Thomas Jefferson at two different points of his career. As a younger man, he wrote to a friend, “Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.”

Twenty years later, having served as president and having endured attacks in the press, he wrote, “Nothing can now be believed which is seen in a newspaper, Truth itself becomes suspicious by being put into that polluted vehicle.” Clearly, over time, Jefferson grew weary of the press, felt their slings and arrows, and in a weaker moment, vented his frustration at this imperfect institution. And yet he never lost sight of his enduring belief that one of our cornerstone liberties, indeed a founding notion at the birth of this nation, is the free and unfettered flow of ideas.

Some of the most respected voices throughout history have valued this form of liberty above all else. Voltaire, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Frederick Douglass, Hannah

Arendt, Thurgood Marshall, E.B. White – the list goes on and on and on – and they all fiercely defended the notion of freedom of speech and the free exchange of ideas.

Nelson Mandela said, “a critical, independent and investigative press is the lifeblood of any democracy.” As he rebuilt his country from the ruinous effects of racist Apartheid, he saw journalists as crucial to the flow of information and the defense of freedom – and no one understood the soul-crushing effect of physical and mental captivity better than Mandela. And no one expressed it more beautifully than Maya Angelou in her poem, “Caged Bird”:

The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.

(pause)

So let me begin to wrap this up and bring us back closer to home.

If I had the ear of our current leaders, both at home and abroad, at least those who might listen, I would urge them

- to learn from Paul Klebnikov’s courage and sacrifice;
- to heed Andrei Sakharov’s call to action;
- and to take to heart John McCain’s deep faith in our nation’s ideals as a force for good in the world.

Since I do not believe my words will reach that far, nor do I believe they are inclined to listen, I can only urge all of you to practice, here on this campus, these same ideals, which are in fact Lawrenceville ideals.

We of course are not perfect. Engaging in candid dialogue in this diverse community is hard work and can go awry. Our imperfections were apparent last spring when a range of racial tensions and frustrations came spilling out into the light. Emotions were elevated, feelings were raw. But we paused; we worked at listening; we worked at speaking up; we worked at understanding.

When we peeled back the layers, we did not find malice in people’s hearts, no one was seeking to hurt, but we did find blind spots, we did find gaps in our efforts to be a more inclusive, just community. Some of this came about because voices among you were willing to speak truth to power, to challenge the status quo.

At one gathering aimed at fostering dialogue, a number of you described Lawrenceville at its best. You said:

- “When we agree to disagree and still support each other.”
- “When we are truly listening to and learning from each other.”

When I asked what gives you hope and optimism, you responded:

- “Continued dialogue.”
- “Steps taken to facilitate conversations.”
- “Student voices”
- “Students on campus who are not afraid to point out the issues our community struggles with.”
- “Honest conversation”
- “That we are engaging in lengthy dialogue and reacting by reaching out as a community.”

A great deal of work remains to be done, and the Task Force on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion has only just been launched, but the hardest step has been taken: the recognition of an issue that needs to be addressed, and we will move forward with resolve and good will.

For me, as difficult as some of those moments were last spring, as difficult as it is to learn of areas where we are not fully living up to our ideals, the events also laid bare a bit of our soul as a school and exposed some of our enduring strengths. The events revealed great loyalty and love for the school; an unwillingness to settle for less; a belief that Lawrenceville should be held to the highest standards; and a willingness to use our voices to hold it those standards.

And these voices were trained around Harkness Tables. The power of our daily, seemingly mundane activity of careful listening and discussing, of agreeing and disagreeing, was revealed quite clearly.

Paul Klebnikov and I, as high school students, both sat around Harkness tables and learned to listen, learned the importance of the free and respectful exchange of ideas. That was where Paul developed his voice, the voice he used to speak truth to power. He’d have been greatly reassured to know that we continue to uphold this core belief in developing strong voices, and that the free flow of ideas around the table remains a guiding principle at Lawrenceville. And he’d have been **proud** of all of you who work at this every day.

(pause)

I see in all of you such tremendous potential. And I too am reassured and I too am proud, because I know that you will learn here in this more sheltered context that the free and respectful exchange of ideas actually works and to echo John McCain, “is a great force for change;” and I know that you will then take this faith out into the world believing with optimism and a sense of idealism that if it can work at Lawrenceville, we have a shot at making it work out in the wider world.

Thank you very much.

