

Memorial Remarks for David Rockefeller

By Henry A. Kissinger

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When David Rockefeller left us, all over the world, lives became emptier. Over the decades, we had come to think of David as a custodian of our aspirations, who would see to it that basic issues affecting freedom and governance, health and art would be appropriately defined and attended to. A counterweight to contemporary self-absorption, David provided leadership by unobtrusive humility.

David treated his family's wealth as an obligation to enable the most consequential issues to be pursued by the most talented and dedicated. He devoted a long life to forming them into study or action groups, and supplying the necessary means by a personal or family contribution and assistance in fundraising—a task in which his tenacity overcame the anomaly of a Rockefeller raising money.

What a trajectory for a life whose partial way stations embraced the Museum of Modern Art, the Rockefeller University, the Dartmouth Group, the Americas Society, International House, and the White House Fellows. David's activities amounted to a safety net for our national equilibrium and a permanent enhancement of our national purpose.

David and I first met sixty years ago at a Council on Foreign Relations study group seeking to discipline nuclear weapons with political and moral purposes. Shortly afterwards, he and his brothers originated the Special Studies Project which, over more than a decade, enlisted leading thinkers in fields ranging from politics to religion in the exploration of America's long-term purposes. In the same spirit, he developed the Bilderberg Group, an annual meeting of American and European leaders to foster a vital Atlantic community.

The formation of the Trilateral Commission is a good example of David's approach. When I was Secretary of State in the Ford Administration, he informed me that he planned to balance the traditional outreach to Europe with a commission engaged in a comparable effort towards Asia. He brought endorsements from Jimmy Carter, Walter Mondale, and Zbigniew Brzezinski. On one level this was, of course, the aspirant alternative government. In a deeper sense, it demonstrated that, for David, the essential national effort was always nonpartisan. The Trilateral Commission, which I was honored to join, thrives to this day in that spirit.

Service was one facet of David's life. Devotion to his family was another. In 1979 David, as Chairman of the Chase Bank, reluctantly refused appeals to find a refuge for the exiled Shah of Iran. He suggested his brother Nelson was better placed to help implement America's moral obligation. Nelson agreed. When shortly afterwards Nelson died, David, without another request or comment, actively and publicly helped to find a refuge, regardless of the business impact.

Among David's most moving attributes were his exquisite tact and his capacity for friendship. One example is the dinner he gave for Brooke Astor's 100th birthday, to which he invited the one hundred people for whom Brooke cared most. David's friendships were lifelong. He took pride in the achievements of his friends and sustained them in their setbacks.

In his final years, David would occasionally recall departed friends with whom he had shared a part of his life. They would emerge in his recital as if still part of a continuous, never-ending undertaking. Now, as he joins their number, this memory will be as a call to duty, and David's legacy will act as a reminder that our lives are ennobled by the values we maintain and the services we render.