

Remarks on George Hubbard Blakeslee
on the 100th Anniversary of Abdu'l-Baha's Visit to Clark University

Paul S. Ropp, May 23, 2012

It's my great pleasure to be with you here today and to represent Clark University at this celebration of the 100th anniversary of Abdu'l-Baha's lecture at Clark in 1912 at the invitation of Professor George Hubbard Blakeslee. It's my task today to give you a little background on Dr. Blakeslee who was certainly one of the pillars of this university for the first half of the 20th century. I spoke with Mott Linn, our University Archivist last week, and he mentioned that he thinks Clark's President G. Stanley Hall was also very likely involved in the decision to invite Abdu'l-Baha to Clark as President Hall had a strong interest in religion and spirituality. I might just mention that G. Stanley Hall was one of the pioneer creators of the academic discipline of psychology, and he literally defined the concept of adolescence, the transition between childhood and adulthood, as an identifiable stage of life. And near the end of his career Hall also studied senescence, the gradual decline of mental and physical abilities in the aged, and the return, in many very old people to a childlike state of dependence on others.

George Hubbard Blakeslee was born in 1871 in Geneseo, New York. He received his BA degree from Wesleyan University in 1893. He received his MA degree in 1900 and his PhD in 1903 from Harvard University. And between receiving these degrees, he also studied at Johns Hopkins University, Berlin University, Leipzig University, and Oxford University. Having studied at many of the best universities in the world, he came to Clark in 1905. Prof. Blakeslee combined a deep knowledge of the past with a keen interest in informing policy makers in the present. He also departed from the conventions of the historical profession in taking the non-

Western world as seriously as the Western world in the study of history. On his recommendation, the Department of History at Clark was renamed as the Department of History and International Relations. In his four decades at Clark (he retired in 1944) he helped to create a new discipline, the study of international relations.

Blakeslee was a product of his own time, and had a somewhat paternalistic attitude toward the non-Western world, but he was far more progressive than most historians in urging the study of non-Western cultures and histories with the same level of linguistic skill as in the study of Western history. The early 20th century, we need to remind ourselves, was a time of rampant imperialism, with Western nations sending and stationing armies around the world to conquer and rule over non-White peoples, in the supreme confidence in Western racial and cultural superiority. In his book, *Changing the World: Clark University's Pioneering People, 1887-2000*, former Clark President Dick Traina writes of Blakeslee, "This son of a Congregational minister was committed to the idea that education, mutual understanding, and negotiation were always preferable to the use of force."ⁱ Soon after Blakeslee's arrival at Clark, the History Department offered undergraduate courses covering the history of Russia, Liberia, China, Japan, Turkey, Siberia, the Philippines, and the Congo Free State. And graduate courses were offered on Russia, the Far East, the Near East, Africa, Latin America, and the colonies and dependencies of Great Britain. This kind of international focus was extremely rare in any Western university in the early 20th century.

Beginning in 1910, Blakeslee initiated and coordinated a remarkable series of six major conferences over the next decade on contemporary international relations. Blakeslee edited

the papers from these conferences resulting in these six books: *China and the Far East*, *Japan and Japanese-American Relations*, *Recent Developments in China*, *Latin America*, *Problems and Lessons of the War* (in 1916), and *Mexico and the Caribbean*. He founded the first scholarly journal in the United States devoted to the study of international relations. Originally titled *Journal of Race Relations*, it was later named the *Journal of International Relations*, and it eventually became today's prestigious journal, *Foreign Affairs*.

Professor Blakeslee developed close ties with the United States Department of State, and Clark trained over fifty men who went on to serve in the American diplomatic corps. He also traveled widely, often on official missions for the U. S. government or for the League of Nations that was formed after World War I. In 1921 and 1922, he was a technical advisor for Harding's Secretary of State, Charles Evans Hughes, and in 1931-32, he served on the League of Nations Lytton Commission sent to investigate the Japanese seizure of Manchuria from Chinese control in 1931. He worked closely with the U.S. State Department on many occasions, and was a political advisor on the Far East Commission to plan the U. S. occupation of Japan from 1945 to 1952. During his long career Blakeslee served in one official position or another under five American presidents.

For forty years, he served as a trustee or officer of the World Peace Foundation, and he was also active in the Lake Mohonk Conferences on International Arbitration, and the Institute of Pacific Relations. In his book, *Changing the World*, Dick Traina concludes his essay on Blakeslee with carefully measured praise. "Never fully rising above the cultural and racial attitudes of his age and class, Blakeslee's practical idealism nonetheless advanced the American

people's understanding of other cultures and the enduring hope for a peaceful world.

Described as an 'action intellectual,' he clearly stands at the center of that Clark University tradition."ⁱⁱ

ⁱ Richard P. Traina, *Changing the World: Clark University's Pioneering People, 1887-2000* (Worcester, MA: Chandler House Press, 2005), p. 39.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p. 44.