

Response to President Trump's Remarks on Sweden

"look at what's happening last night in Sweden"

ASTRA Statement: February 22, 2017

We are an association of researchers, professors and teachers whose work focuses on teaching Swedish language and culture and communicating with North Americans about Sweden and its role in the world, both historical and contemporary. President Trump's apparently off-handed remark about an undefined "event" during his speech on February 18 set off ripples of confusion and then amusement among Swedes and friends of Sweden. The error provided international entertainment, but it was in fact no joke. When the Swedish ambassador to the U.S. asked for an explanation, he received none, though the President did issue a tweet, saying that his remark was "in reference to a story that was broadcast on @FoxNews concerning immigrants & Sweden." The broadcast to which he refers made use of the kind of footage and editing typical of propaganda, with repeated images of, on the one hand, peaceful public spaces populated primarily by anonymous white people, and scenes of violence, confrontation, and destruction with anonymous dark-skinned perpetrators. The Fox broadcast opened with an interview with two Swedish policemen's comments on an uptick in crime; Swedish Television, SVT aired a segment the following day in which the aggrieved officers asserted that they had been interviewed by Fox journalists under false pretenses about the topic of the broadcast and their remarks did not refer to immigration (see links below). As a group, we are well aware of the debates in Sweden surrounding immigration; indeed, our latest conference, held in Boulder in 2016, was devoted to the vexed topic of immigration and multiculturalism in Sweden. Our members have researched and published on these issues, which are unfolding in real time: on February 20th, two days after the President's incorrect statement, a violent confrontation between police and youth in a predominately immigrant neighborhood did in fact take place. In issuing this statement, ASTRA reaffirms its commitment to educating the North American public on Swedish society, both its triumphs and its troubles, from a position of expertise and experience.

Even off-handed remarks can have detrimental and lasting effects. In 1960, Dwight David Eisenhower also made a mistake in a speech. He said that he had read an article stating that a certain, unnamed "friendly European country" that had "a tremendous record for socialistic operation" had suffered an "almost unbelievable" increase in the rate of suicide. His listeners assumed that he was referencing Sweden, and promptly a tradition of associating Sweden with high suicide rates and despair became entrenched. Eisenhower was, however, misinformed. A Swedish scholar, Åke Daun, published an article in 2005 that examined historic statistics and disproved the statement. Today a search of the internet quickly reveals that the U.S. suicide rate ranks 50th internationally, and Sweden is 58th. But the coupling of "Sweden" and "suicide" remains a constant. Because inaccurate statements are so easy to make and so hard to undo, we feel that it is incumbent on us to speak out to support an image of Sweden that is backed by linguistic competence, solid research, and dedication to honesty and fairness.

Sincerely,

ASTRA (Association of Swedish Teachers and Researchers in America)

Additional resources and links:

Sweden's official response to Trump's remarks about Sweden:

<http://www.government.se/statements/2017/02/statement-on-president-trumps-reference-to-sweden/>

Aftonbladet's response:

(<http://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/a/g26Lk/after-trumps-last-night-in-sweden-here-are-the-errors-in-fox-news>).

SVT's segment including interviews with Swedish police officers

(<http://www.svt.se/nyheter/inrikes/intervjuade-poliserna-kanner-sig-lurade>).

For an account of Eisenhower's critique of the Swedish welfare state, see Fredrick Hale's article: http://collections.carli.illinois.edu/cdm/ref/collection/npu_sahq/id/4713

Åke Daun's research can be found here:

<http://www.psupress.org/books/titles/0-271-01501-2.html>