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UNTIL 8:25 A. M. , EST

JANUARY 28, 1975

Office of the White House Press Secretary

THE WHITE HOUSE

TEXT OF REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT
TO BE DELIVERED TO THE
NATIONAL RELIGIOUS BROADCASTERS'
32nd ANNUAL CONGRESSIONAL BREAKFAST

I am grateful for your invitation to this Congressional breakfast, which I attended fairly faithfully when I was a Member of the Congress, and from which I derived not only a good deal of religious inspiration but also that powerful encouragement which is described in the familiar hymn as "the fellowship of kindred minds."

I might say, in a secular way, I am still hoping for some of that spirit with the new Congress.

Last year I had the privilege of being with you as Vice President, and I guess the first thing I ought to assure you this morning is that I am not going to do any more job-hopping.

As President, I have been cautioned to be very careful what I say about religious matters. But the separation of church and state, although a fundamental principle to which I fully subscribe, was never intended in my view to separate public morality from public policy. It says that the power of government shall not be used to support or suppress any one faith, but in the same sentence protects the profession and propagation of all faiths.

I took a minute to re-read the First Amendment to the Constitution before coming over here. This is what it says:

"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."

Now that says an awful lot in one sentence; it sustains some of our most precious rights; it also underscores how inter-related they are. Freedom to exercise one's religion would be meaningless without freedom of speech and assembly; without freedom of the press there could be neither religious books nor religious broadcasters.

As we proudly enter a period of celebrating our Bicentennial of independence as a nation, we must remember that our great traditions of freedom did not suddenly start in 1776. For more than two centuries before the Liberty Bell rang, the processes of conflict and compromise were working on this continent, and the impassioned extremes of religious and political rivalry were tested and found wanting.

In the end, our Founding Fathers sought to establish a new order of society embodying the principles of tolerance and freedom, of unity in diversity, of justice with charity. So the First Amendment was written to ensure the perpetuation of the hard-learned lessons from our colonial history that religious belief can neither be coerced nor suppressed by government; that a free people must retain the right to hear, the right to speak, the right to publish and to read, and the right to come together -- all of which had been denied the early American settlers at one time or another.

(MORE)

As for the other freedom, the right to petition the government for a redress of grievances, it is hard for any of us who hold public office to imagine a time when this was not permitted. But it was dangerous in America 200 years ago, and it is in many parts of the world today.

I am told that the total listening audience of the National Religious Broadcasters exceeds 40 million persons and that religious broadcasting in this country and throughout the world is growing at the rate of 20 to 30 percent per year. This can be a tremendous force for good, for freedom, and for peace.

While the Founding Fathers never dreamed of radio or television, the personal freedoms they protected make your work possible. The electronic era of communications which is only beginning, as the age of books was only beginning when Gutenberg printed his Bible, holds unlimited opportunities for those who today tell and re-tell the Good News of God's love for man.

As President, I am no less concerned than George Washington was when he observed in his Farewell Address to his countrymen:

"Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. . . . The mere politician, equally with the pious man, ought to respect and to cherish them. . . . Reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle."

You will note that the First Amendment is stated entirely in the negative; it forbids Congress -- because its authors were much more fearful of the tyranny of Parliament than of the King -- to make any laws in certain areas of individual freedom.

But President Washington urged all "mere" politicians to respect and cherish the principles of religion and morality. And it has been my experience in the Congress over the years that most of us "mere politicians" really do.

In my first speech as President to my former colleagues in the Congress, I had dedicated groups such as this one in mind when I said:

"On the higher plane of public morality, there is no need for me to preach. . . . We have thousands of far better preachers and millions of sacred scriptures to guide us on the path of personal right-living and exemplary official conduct. If we can make effective and earlier use of the moral and ethical wisdom of the centuries in today's complex society, we will prevent more crime and more corruption than all the policemen and prosecutors of the government can ever deter. If I might say so, this is a job that must begin at home, not in Washington."

Through your broadcasts, you reach into the homes of America, and bring to young and old the ageless axioms of Divine truth. All of us need the sure guidance of God in whatever we do. Although there are many faiths and denominations represented at this meeting, a common goal brings us here: recognition of the need to keep strong the spiritual and moral ties that bind us together as a nation. I will not join the skeptics who say Americans have lost faith, hope or love. But I know that each new generation must rediscover these redeeming qualities and translate them into its own way of living, or lifestyle as they now say. You are helping in this renewal and nurture of our deep religious roots.

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When I was young, I learned a couple of verses from the Book of Proverbs, third chapter, which have stuck with me all my life. When I took the oath of office as President, the Bible was open to this passage:

"Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct thy paths."

That is what I have tried to do, and will try to do, as your President. I think it does no violence to the separation of church and state to commend these words to my countrymen. If it does, I am in good company, starting with George Washington.

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