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REMARKS OF THE VICE PRESIDENT AT THE  
BICENTENNIAL BISHOPS AND  
CONNECTIONAL CHURCH COUNCIL BANQUET  
SHERATON HOTEL  
PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

February 25, 1976

Over 200 years ago a remarkable American was born. His name was Richard Allen. And his condition at birth was slavery. Richard Allen won his freedom through his own iron determination. And as a free man, he went on to found one of the great spiritual institutions in this Nation, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the first black church in America.

The motive force of the Reverend Mr. Allen's life was "The Brotherhood of Man under the Fatherhood of God." It is altogether fitting to recall the life of the Reverend Richard Allen in this Bicentennial year, because his life exemplified the ideal which I have chosen for my text tonight -- the inseparability of America's religious freedom from individual freedom and civil rights in America.

I am deeply honored by the opportunity to speak on this subject before this audience, because my family has been privileged to march with you for five generations in your struggle for human rights and individual dignity.

Some of the childhood stories I remember most vividly were those told about my great-grandfather, Harvey Spelman. Harvey Spelman was an abolitionist who used his home in Ohio as a station on the underground railway to help fugitive slaves escape into Canada.

Later, my Grandfather, John D. Rockefeller, dedicated much of his concern to black educational institutions, which are so closely tied to black religious institutions. Indeed, there is not a Negro college in America today that does not have at least one building given by him.

And on the most personal level, I have carried through all the days of my life the gentle teachings of my mother. When my brothers and I were boys, she wrote us these words: "Out of my experience and observation has grown the earnest conviction that one of the greatest causes of evil in the world is race hatred or race prejudice: "You boys are still young," she advised us. "No group of people has ever done you a personal injury; you have no inherited dislikes. I want to make an appeal to your sense of fair play and to beseech you to begin your lives as young men by giving the other fellow, be he Jew, or Negro or whatever race, a fair chance and a square deal."

Those words have stayed with me for a lifetime -- just as these words of my father have served as a spiritual beacon: "I believe in an all-wise and all-loving God named by whatever name," he said. "And that the individual's highest fulfillment and greatest happiness and wisest usefulness are to be found in living in harmony with His will."

My father's acceptance that we are free to worship God "by whatever name" reflects a uniquely American conception of freedom. For this freedom to worship as we choose is at the core of our Nation's religious and political liberties.

America was founded by men and women who fled Europe in search of religious freedom. Indeed, we may assert without equivocation that religion has been the basis on which our sense of national identity was formed.

It was just 35 years before the Declaration of Independence when that powerful religious movement known as "The Great Awakening" swept through colonial America. This great revivalist experience emphasized personal piety -- which is the motive power of all religion. And this sense of personal piety -- wedded to the common sense faith in reason and morality, which America adopted from the Enlightenment of 18th Century Europe -- gave our Country the twin strengths of intellectual independence and spiritual faith.

From the very beginning, America saw itself as a people in covenant with God. The infant Republic saw itself as the new Israel, the servant-people of God's purpose -- a nation destined to bring to all mankind the blessings of liberty. America was widely regarded as the fulfillment of Biblical prophecies -- a nation preparing the way for a better and more glorious age for all humanity.

The birth of our Nation was regarded as a work of Providence, a vindication of justice, the victory of a new David over Goliath. And in a profound sense, this religious faith was different from anything that had gone before -- because America was the first nation in the history of Western civilization to espouse religious liberty.

Ours was the first society to proclaim the equal status of all religions before the law and the privileged status of none. And, as we shall see, this unique condition became the spiritual guarantee of our political liberties and civil rights as well.

The very first words of the Bill of Rights call for freedom of religion. The First Amendment says that the Congress shall "make no law respecting an establishment of religion," "or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." The genius and the glory of America is that while our founders wisely prohibited the formation of one national religion -- they deeply believed in a nation of religious people.

Washington, in his farewell address, gave wise counsel, not only for the America of his time, but for the America of all time. "Reason and experience both forbid us to expect", Washington said, "that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle."

Our forebears knew that without a religious vision, a sense of divine purpose and larger meaning, civilization succumbs to apathy, anarchy and despotism. Indeed, civil and religious liberty in America are but two sides of the same shield.

Religion is the guarantor of our civil liberties because of what our religious belief says of human equality and individual dignity. Believing all men equal in the sight of God, then we must also believe that they are equal in the sight of other men.

And since the whole of America's religious history teaches us that the individual is in communication with his Creator, we value the worth and the dignity of the individual over the abstraction called the state which was created to serve the individual, not the reverse.

Yet, during the first four score and seven years of our existence, which Lincoln spoke of, there was a stain on our national conscience. The stain was slavery. It was inevitable that this stain would one day be washed away. It was inevitable because that hateful institution made America untrue to itself. It mocked our Declaration of Independence and maligned our Constitution. It was a contradiction of our belief in God's universal design.

As Abraham Lincoln said in an eloquent address against slavery: "What constitutes the bulwark of our own liberty and independence? It is not our frowning battlements, our bristling sea coasts, our army and our navy. These are not our reliance against tyranny. Our reliance is in the love of liberty -- which God has planted in us." Let us mark those words well -- "which God has planted in us."

This association of religious conviction and political freedom explains why religious leaders have traditionally been in the forefront of movements to advance human rights. It is no coincidence that clergymen launched the abolitionist movement. Abolitionism began as a religious revival in Western New York in 1824 and in six years swept the North -- principally through church pulpits.

It is no coincidence that our own civil rights crusade of the 1960s was launched by religious leaders -- the martyred Martin Luther King, Jesse Jackson, and your own Bishop Nichols and Dr. Robert Pruitt and Bishop Spottswood, to mention a few of these champions of freedom. Your church can take immense pride in the historic role you have played in the long, hard march toward freedom.

We know that, from the beginning, the black churches have been the most stable, on-going force in the lives of Black Americans. Yours has been a leadership not only of the spirit, but of the social, political and economic life of your brethren.

Yet the struggle to secure full equality of opportunity for all Americans goes on. We must work and we must pray for all our children, that they come to classrooms with minds opened and not poisoned with prejudice. We must cure the Nation of indifference to the wrongs around us.

We must open the doors wide to the professions, the trades, the offices and shops where all with the ability and the determination seek to work. We must have a growing economy that will create more job opportunities for all Americans. Let's hear no more of the so-called "no-growth" school of economic thinking, the "no-growth" school which tries to tell us that more economic growth will destroy the environment and ruin the quality of life.

How can anyone enjoy the beauty of the environment, how can you experience a life of quality when you are out of work with a family to support? We need some 2.5 million more jobs in this Country just to get employment back up to normal. We need from 1.6 million to 2 million new jobs every year to accomodate the young people entering the work force. A large proportion of these young job seekers are going to be young blacks -- who today suffer the cruelest levels of unemployment.

The "no-growth" mentality says "no" to millions of Americans still trying to better their lives. "No-growth" thinking allows the "haves" to say to the "have-nots", "You can pull up the ladder, now brothers, I'm on board." This is not the American way. The American way is to provide equal opportunity for all -- and that includes job opportunities.

The truth is that we can have both -- we can have an expanding, job-generating economy, and we can have a wholesome, natural, livable environment as well. In fact, we can create jobs in both spheres -- both in expanding the economy and in restoring and preserving an environment of quality.

And, finally, we must show a loving compassion toward one another. We must truly live that Brotherhood of Man which the Reverend Mr. Allen preached and lived in the early years of our Nationhood. As it says in John 3:18: "My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue, but in deed and truth."

As we begin our Third Century as a Nation, let us rededicate ourselves to that equality before God and man that our forefathers inscribed forever in the American soul. For, in the final accounting, God will not ask our race, our creed, our place of birth, but only this -- what have we done and left here on Earth.

Let us live our lives so that we can answer in this way: We have tried to be worthy of the blessings which God has showered upon this Nation, by insuring that an equal opportunity to share in those blessings is open to all God's children.

Let us heed the words of the Prophet Isaiah, when he said: "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint."

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