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RELIGION IN AMERICAN LIFE
ADDRESS BY VICE PRESIDENT NELSON A. ROCKEFELLER BEFORE THE
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SUMMARY

"The spiritual and religious forces that shaped life in America in its very beginnings were the inspiration for the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States...These forces have continued vitally to shape the American character... The contributions of America to religious freedom are as monumental as its contributions to political liberty and to economic freedom. There developed a general belief not alone in individual rights but an equally firm conviction of individual responsibility. (A man)...could take no refuge in blaming others or in blaming society for his actions. He expected to suffer the consequences of his own behavior. This is the unique essence of American life and character. It is the underlying force of our society.

"...In a period of accelerating change, we face an assault on our institutions from within as well as without. In the aftermath of Watergate, of revelations, respecting covert activities, of irresponsible leaks of national security information, of a series of impulsive, disastrous Congressional reverses of Executive initiatives in world affairs, there are strong pressures threatening the traditional balance of the separation of powers -- legislative, executive and judicial...Restraint and a return to fundamental values and basic roles is necessary...Our task today should be one of strengthening the basic structure of our federal-state system and reinforcing the separation of powers...

"Since ours is a society built upon individual citizen responsibility, it follows that the laws must be certain, clear and as uncomplicated as practicable -- and that our laws should be enforced and individuals held accountable for their acts... The objective in our welfare programs, our educational endeavors, our rehabilitative services, our criminal law enforcement and other such activities, should be one of buttressing the individual's capacity to shoulder his responsibility and make his contribution to our society.

"Today, the basic principles of America's founding and its growth -- its dedication to human dignity and the spiritual nature of man, its trust in free individuals taking responsibility for their actions -- are being seriously challenged...Centrally-controlled, Marxist totalitarian power is gaining ground, not losing it...We have faced no comparable challenges to our way of life -- our very existence -- in all our history.

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"...We see some striking failures of moral example among our leaders in public and private life...(which)...uncorrected, can weaken the moral fiber of our society. There is, for one example, a growing tendency in our times to excuse the criminal by blaming society, or to excuse immoral conduct because we think we understand the forces that produced it...No society can endure for long by allowing criminals to escape the penalty for their crimes by reference to some vague theory or concept of a collective guilt or personal stress, or because it is alleged that 'everyone does it.'

"...It is time for all of us, as individual American citizens, to reaffirm the basic concepts that a man's moral and religious assertions are judged by his performance, that he is answerable for his acts to himself, to his God and to his community.

"...The only way we are going to preserve our free society...is for each of us, as an individual American, to return to the basic concepts of individual responsibility for our own acts upon which this society was founded."

FOLLOWING IS FULL TEXT OF SPEECH

In 1835, one of the shrewdest observers of the American scene ever to reflect on the meaning of American democracy, Alexis de Tocqueville, wrote: "Upon my arrival in the United States, the religious aspect of the country was the first thing that struck my attention; and the longer I stayed there the more did I perceive the great political consequences resulting from this state of things, to which I was unaccustomed. In France I had almost always seen the spirit of religion and the spirit of freedom pursuing courses diametrically opposed to each other; but in America I found that they were intimately united, and they reigned in common over the same country."

This vital relationship observed by de Tocqueville was no accident. It was the product of deep spiritual convictions held by those who settled this land and the unique forces that combined to create the Nation. It is an essential element in the understanding of America and the true meaning of the American Revolution that began two hundred years ago.

The Declaration of Independence was far more than a proclamation serving notice that the American colonies were severing their ties to the Mother Country. It was a manifesto inspired by "the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God" calling for individual freedom and human rights. It stands today, as it did 200 years ago, as the most eloquent and forthright challenge ever to tyranny, totalitarianism, dictatorship or despotism of whatever stripe or purpose.

There is no quibbling, no reservation, no "yes - but" in the words: "We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness..."

The American Revolution was a struggle therefore not only for national independence but for individual freedom -- political liberty, economic freedom and freedom of conscience and religious belief. People had left Europe for the American colonies to escape political repression. They had left to escape economic bondage. They had left to escape from religions imposed by government -- in order to worship as they themselves believed.

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The thrust of the American Revolution was individual rights and freedom and practical steps to achieve them -- not an ideology based on doctrinaire assumptions and demanding obedience for the promise of some vague never-to-be obtained utopia. The spiritual and religious forces that shaped life in America in its very beginnings were the inspiration for the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States. And, most important, these spiritual and religious forces have continued vitally to shape the American character -- a character dominated by such qualities and beliefs as: respect for the dignity of the individual; kindness, generosity, neighborliness; equality of opportunity, equality before the law; restlessness, energy, willingness to take risks; and faith, hope and love.

II.

The contributions of America to religious freedom are as monumental as its contributions to political liberty and to economic freedom. Settled by people of many faiths -- Church of England, Catholics, Presbyterians, Baptists, Jews, Huguenots, Quakers and many others -- Americans through trial and experience developed not alone a tolerance but a mutual respect of one faith for another.

There were struggles over the attempted establishment of religions. There were struggles over intolerance. There were struggles over legislating standards of individual behavior. There were struggles to believe or not believe as one chose. But the following combination of factors prevailed: the need for community in the face of the rugged life of the frontier; the ever-present memory of the European past; the immediate benefit from working together; and the deep commitment both of the leadership and of ordinary men and women to freedom.

Indeed, there developed a general belief not alone in individual rights but an equally firm conviction of individual responsibility. Life on the American frontier was rugged. Survival depended upon individuals shouldering their responsibilities fully as much as asserting their ambitions and employing their energies in their own ways. The individual was held responsible for his actions. He was expected to contribute to the community. On the frontier and in the struggling communities behind it, a man's moral and religious assertions were judged by his performance. For his acts, he was deemed answerable to himself, to his God and to his community. He could take no refuge in blaming others or in blaming society for his actions. He expected to suffer the consequences of his own behavior. This is the unique essence of American life and character. It is the underlying force of our society. It is the concept that has brought your organization into being. It is the theme I would like to develop here tonight.

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III.

Both the role of government and the role of the individual are indispensable to making democracy and freedom work.

A. In this context, let us look first to the role of government.

The Founding Fathers had no exalted view of human nature nor human behavior -- but they preferred to trust the responsible citizenry above any narrow oligarchy or singular party or person. It was for this reason they created a government that had to stand the test of regular elections. For this purpose, they devised our system of shared powers between the states and the federal government. With this in mind, they separated the roles and powers of the Executive, the Legislative and the Judicial branches of our government.

But today, in a period of accelerating change, we face an assault on our institutions from within as well as without. In the aftermath of Watergate, of revelations respecting covert activities, of irresponsible leaks of national security information, of a series of impulsive, disastrous Congressional reverses of Executive initiatives in world affairs, there are strong pressures threatening the traditional balance of the separation of powers -- legislative, executive and judicial.

True, our Constitutional system has always surmounted crises in the past. Exceptional situations should not be magnified out of perspective. The strength and soundness of our basic system should be reaffirmed. But restraint and a return to fundamental values and basic roles is necessary to assure the preservation of democracy and freedom. Legislators should not attempt to administer domestic or foreign policy; executive departments should not legislate in the guise of regulation; and the judiciary should exercise restraint in substituting its judgment for executive or legislative wisdom.

Our task today should be one of strengthening the basic structure of our federal-state system and reinforcing the separation of powers among the legislative, executive and judicial branches of government. Essential to this process is the reappraisal and delineation of our objectives and of the functions to be performed by government. Essential equally is to do this in a comprehensive, understandable and workable way.

We cannot have a free society if people don't know the rules. We cannot have a law-abiding society if people don't understand the laws. And we cannot have a moral society if the laws are not enforced.

Since ours is a society built upon individual citizen responsibility it follows that the laws must be certain, clear and as uncomplicated as practicable -- and that our laws should be enforced and individuals held accountable for their acts. For free people to honor the law, they must first know and understand it. Unclear law, varying interpretations, a sense of unfairness and the like undermine confidence in the integrity and certainty of the law.

When a premium is put on "beating the system," it generates more bureaucracy to enforce the law, which in turn encourages greater avoidance of the law. Our personal income tax laws, for example, are now so complex and confusing that they defy the ordinary person's understanding. It should not be so. Much of our regulatory legislation is so complicated that it deters economic growth and job opportunities. It should not be so.

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Our guiding principle in all our legislation -- social, criminal and regulatory -- must be to encourage and enhance individual freedom, individual responsibility and individual self-reliance. And we must take a hard look at much of our existing law and surely apply this test for future legislation.

The fact is that in our effort to meet specific problems in our society, we have engaged increasingly, in recent decades, in piecemeal legislation designed to remedy a vast number of particular situations. Well-intentioned though most of this has been, the cumulative effect of much of it has been to substitute bureaucratic determinations for individuals' decisions; to assign to government areas of service in such a manner that individual responsibility is eroded. And despite all of the effort and money we have committed in all these areas, we have not only failed to achieve our objectives but we have run out of funds at all levels of government.

But with our compassion for the handicapped and the sick; with our understanding for the aged and infirm, for example, surely we can devise a better system than the present unsatisfactory social welfare establishment of today. The objective in our welfare programs, our educational endeavors, our rehabilitative services, our criminal law enforcement and other such activities should be one of buttressing the individual's capacity to shoulder his responsibility and make his contribution to our society. And the same is true for all those government activities relating to enhancement of individual opportunity.

B. Now let us turn to the role of the individual in making our system work better.

The Founding Fathers fully recognized that democracy and the fledgling republic they proclaimed 200 years ago could function and develop only through responsible citizenship. They counted on the drive, the energy and the creativity of free people -- and their willingness to shoulder responsibility -- to carry the Nation forward. Thus they created that special combination of individual rights balanced by individual responsibilities which was so uniquely American.

There was no special caste, no favored religious group, no hereditary privilege in our infant Republic. Each man was equal before the law to work, to build, to create, to produce. And the price of his individual freedom and his individual opportunity was his personal individual accountability.

This concept is imbedded in our law and is a basic moral-religious concept -- that individuals are free but that free men are responsible to God and their fellow man for their actions. The pervasiveness of this concept in the daily practice of American life is the basis for the paradox noted by de Tocqueville.

America, without any state-established religion, conducted its affairs in a moral climate; indeed, a more truly religious climate than nations openly professing and supporting a particular religion. In this environment, the several religious faiths not only existed but flourished. They added to the diversity and richness of American life. But in this special American setting, with its emphasis on the individual and his responsibilities, they added as well to the unity of the Nation. For though differently expressed, and indeed not always even articulated, there was a general and abiding faith in a Divine ordering of the universe and the special nature of man.

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This unity with diversity has characterized the broad spectrum of American society -- its ethnic make-up, its enterprise system, its social patterns, its religious and cultural institutions. With the widest of options open to more people than any society had ever offered, America encouraged pluralism but maintained an essential and basic unity.

Our system of government has been based on the same basic premise -- that freedom of choice, individual freedom and individual responsibility will produce both a more bounteous society and a more secure one and, therefore, the opportunity for a higher quality of life.

At this Bicentennial, it is appropriate to ask ourselves whether we continue to subscribe to these precepts. Or are they being eroded through failure to practice or appreciate them? There is no doubt that ours is a far more complex society than that of 1776.

Industrialization, technology, urbanization, population growth, changes in life expectancy and health levels, high mobility, television and other pressures on traditional family and other social patterns -- all these have made ours a vastly different world. So, too, has the problem become vastly more difficult for the American enterprise system, competing in a world of economies increasingly controlled by central governments. All these factors have created unprecedented problems and stresses which called for, and continue to call for, positive actions to resolve them.

Today, the basic principles of America's founding and its growth -- its dedication to human dignity and the spiritual nature of man, its trust in free individuals taking responsibility for their actions -- are being seriously challenged. Totalitarian socialist societies have developed that ignore the concept of man as a spiritual human being. They deny individual economic freedom. They repress personal liberty and they forbid religious freedom.

In the present world, centrally-controlled, Marxist totalitarian power is gaining ground, not losing it, supported by subversion, sabotage, and so-called wars of liberation. The Soviet Union in some 60 years has become one of the world's major industrial, political and military superpowers. The Soviet leadership has decried our system as bound to fail -- while predicting world supremacy for their own doctrinaire regimentation of human life supported by their growing military-economic power. In China, we witness the most populous nation ever to be regimented according to preconceived plans -- with no individual freedom.

We have faced no comparable challenges to our way of life -- our very existence -- in all our history. From within as well as without, we witness a lack of appreciation, if not at times a derision, of the values, accomplishments and promise of our way of life. Furthermore, we see some striking failures of moral example among our leaders in public and private life. This is unfortunate. It can be dangerous. Uncorrected, it can weaken the moral fiber of our society.

There is, for one example, a growing tendency in our times to excuse the criminal by blaming society, or to excuse immoral conduct because we think we understand the forces that produced it. One suspects there is a connection between this kind of thinking and the movement away from the basic American tenet of individual responsibility for one's life and actions.

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Every society in the history of man has had its strengths and its weaknesses. But no society can endure for long by allowing criminals to escape the penalty for their crimes by reference to some vague theory or concept of a collective guilt, or personal stress, or because it is alleged that "everyone does it."

Last week, John J. McCloy, that distinguished American, made a telling point in commenting on the illegal political contributions from corporations. Mr. McCloy said that it is "...just as improper" for politicians to accept illegal corporate money as it was for companies to give it.. "There's a double standard here. It's the hypocrisy that bothers me," he added. To which I say, Amen!

Basically, it comes back to each one of us here in America. Do we continue to accept the challenge to be free, to have economic freedom, to have political liberty, to worship as we choose? If we do, we must be prepared to accept the individual responsibility and accountability which are essential for individual freedom.

Therefore, it seems to me that it is time for all of us, as individual American citizens, each in the discharge of our several responsibilities, to reaffirm the basic concepts that a man's moral and religious assertions are judged by his performance; that he is answerable for his acts to himself, to his God and to his community. For only in this way are we going to preserve our free society, its values, its opportunities, its blessings.

Each of us, as an individual American must return to the basic concepts of individual responsibility for our own acts upon which this society was founded. For this commitment to secure and enhance human dignity, the men of 1776 declared: "With a firm reliance on the Protection of divine Providence we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor." Dare we do less today? I think not.

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