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Office of the Vice President

SUMMARY

In this speech, beginning a series, Vice President Rockefeller says:

"A distinguished predecessor in this high office I hold, Thomas R. Marshall, said 'What this Country Needs is a Good Five Cent Cigar.' I think that what this country needs today is a good loud alarm clock -- that will wake it from its lethargy and get it going on time to meet its problems."

"Let's face the facts. We've been on a national negative kick for four years. We've been looking backward and we've been rehashing the past. It's time we face the future. It's time to determine our enlightened national self interest. It's time we all devote our energies to positive efforts for this Third Century."

"We are not having an informed debate on the grave issues that face present day America...In the plethora of primaries we witness mostly personality contests -- candidacies based not on party programs or issues but on personalities and promises. 'With malice toward none and charity to all', they do not evoke the image of the Lincoln-Douglas debates."

"We have had piecemeal government and piecemeal politics for a long time now...It is becoming more and more difficult to identify authority and to focus responsibility in our government and in our party structure. In a world that requires adaptation to rapid change, decisive action is becoming increasingly difficult to achieve and certainty of policies already enumerated more hazardous to assure. It is time we as a Nation give major attention to the basic problems."

Among the problems the Vice President listed were:

1. Government is overloaded..."Not just as the source of the rules of law and the umpire to assure their fair application but more and more as a provider of goods, services and money... Groups organize to get 'theirs' and governmental processes resemble a contest among them for who gets what and when... As though 'Uncle Sam Needs You' was reversed to 'You Need Uncle Sam.'"

2. The pressures of special interest groups undermine the democratic process itself -- witness 'the stalemate on energy,' the Congress "seriously limiting the ability of the President to deal with key areas of international relations," and the difficulty of holding down federal spending and deficits.

The Vice President found political parties were being "seriously weakened" by piecemeal governmental intervention and eroded by special interests and special interest candidates.

The Vice President was critical of "the progressive elimination of confidentiality," and the "development of local vetoes of projects or programs already decided upon." Summarizing: "As a society are we getting so paranoid, so fearful of entrusting power to act, to anyone, that we face paralysis?"

"It is one thing for Congress to review foreign policy...It is another thing to try to conduct it." He was also critical of the present organization of Congress.

He warned both Congress and the Executive establishment that they had "better begin to do something" about bureaucracy and red tape, which he said were "building up a resentment that will be felt at the polls."

Office of the Vice President

TEXT OF REMARKS BY THE VICE PRESIDENT
AT THE
NATIONAL PRESS CLUB
WASHINGTON, D.C.

February 19, 1976

It is a pleasure always to meet with representatives of the Fourth Estate, and especially with members of the National Press Corps who contribute so much to the spice of political life.

Thank you for your many kindnesses and courtesies. And like other public officials, I appreciate your analyses, interpretations and diagnoses of my actions, motivations and state of mind.

According to your current reporting, this 41st Vice President is relaxed. I agree -- if you mean physically and if you mean I am not running a temperature because of Potomac Fever. Indeed, I enjoy an immunity to that malady after several bouts with the virus itself.

You are not correct, however, if you mean that I am relaxed about the condition of the Nation and the problems that confront us. I am not. This is the principal reason I welcome today's session.

A distinguished predecessor in this high office I hold, Thomas R. Marshall, said "What this Country Needs is a Good Five Cent Cigar." I think that what this country needs today is a good loud alarm clock -- that will wake it from its lethargy and get it going on time to meet its problems.

Unfortunately, we're again witnessing that national election year practice of putting off until tomorrow what we should be doing today. Hence, our energy situation deteriorates daily as we become more dependent on OPEC oil. The moratorium on facing up to the energy crisis enacted by the Congress in the compromise bill is as symptomatic as it is unfortunate. Detroit now reports the public isn't buying sub-compact cars and, believe it or not, they are going to have to build more gas guzzlers to meet demand.

We are not having an informed debate on the grave issues that face present day America -- energy, employment, inflation, transportation, crime, national defense, foreign policy, food and agriculture, health protections, reform of social welfare programs, the problems of our cities, and other areas. We are not really examining the strengths of our society and discussing how to maximize them and utilize them to bridge our shortcomings.

In the plethora of primaries, we witness mostly personality contests -- candidacies based not on party programs or issues but on personalities and promises. "With malice toward none and charity to all", they do not evoke the image of the Lincoln-Douglas debates.

This is, of course, not surprising, but it is disappointing. It is a matter of concern, not in itself so much, but as it evidences the much greater and more serious question of the fractionalization of our governmental and political system.

Superficial reforms to meet special problems have been chipping away at the fundamental concepts and structure of our political system. There is need for an overall review of their impact on the system as a whole.

Concern is being expressed, and with merit, over the ability of democratic government to really govern here at home and function effectively abroad if the splintering trends continue. It is becoming more and more difficult to identify authority and to focus responsibility in our government and in our party structure.

In a world that requires adaptation to rapid change, decisive action is becoming increasingly difficult to achieve and certainty of policies already enumerated more hazardous to assure.

It is time we as a Nation give major attention to the basic problems. We should seek ways to shape and strengthen our governmental and political structures so as to promote the kind of political consensus upon which democracy depends and to insure governmental capacity to perform upon which our national survival depends.

This is no mean task. We have had piecemeal government and piecemeal politics for a long time now. I should like briefly to look at the problem in three interlocking areas: Our concept of the role of government; our federal government; our political parties.

This being our Bicentennial, a reference is appropriate to the concept of government held by the Founding Fathers. They generally subscribed to a role for government that would establish a rule of order and a frame work of policies in which individual and private activity would have wide freedom to pursue their own interests. They looked to "a government of law and not of men."

The role of government, however, was not just negative -- nor passive. They looked to government from the early days of the republic to encourage economic growth through positive government action -- national roads, postal services, granting homesteads on government lands and other public works and services.

They expected government to provide a climate for development, and to set the basic legal guidelines for economic activity. But they did not expect that individual's lives would be subject to detailed regulation by government.

Quite the reverse -- and hence there was real appeal in that phrase of Thomas Jefferson's "That government governs best which governs least." Or as Abraham Lincoln put it 100 years later: "In all that the people can do as well for themselves, government ought not to interfere."

By contrast, for some considerable time now there has been a looking to government for the answers to most of our social and economic problems. This has taken the form of requests for more and more detailed and restrictive regulations. In addition, there has been an insistent and rising demand for government to provide more and more services -- traditionally the province of private, voluntary and individual effort.

Government is being looked at not just as the source of the rules of law and the umpire to assure their fair application but more and more as a provider of goods, services and money. Indeed, we are living in a period when groups organize to get "theirs," so to speak, and governmental processes resemble a contest among these groups for who gets what and when. It is as though the old slogan "Uncle Sam Needs You" was reversed to "You Need Uncle Sam."

In this process, the pressures of special interest groups make it increasingly difficult to achieve the kind of compromise and consensus necessary to operate democratic government. It is demonstrated in the field of domestic legislation -- witness the stalemate on energy to which we have already referred.

It is demonstrated in the field of foreign policy, where the Congress, in response to such pressures, is seriously limiting the ability of the President to deal with key areas of international relations. It is dramatically illustrated in the difficulty of holding down federal spending, controlling federal deficits, and having a rational federal fiscal policy.

President Ford's fight to keep down inflation has run smack into this basic difficulty with special group pressures on and within the Congress and indeed the Executive and the Administration, as well.

We know from the experience of other democracies what failure to recognize this basic problem and to deal with it can mean, not only in personal economic hardship but in the demise of democracy itself. Our concept of the role of government is involved and needs to be faced squarely.

The Founding Fathers established a representative government and they looked to the members of the legislative body to represent the national interest as well as their own constituencies. They depended upon the ability of reasonable men to come to a consensus by compromising their respective positions or views.

But today, pressure group activity has made compromise more difficult. The power of such groups is exerted not only directly in the halls of Congress, but also by using highly sophisticated computer techniques to mobilize a flood of communications from key constituents back home -- particularly at election times. Under these circumstances, premature commitments on issues are difficult to avoid.

Some of our changing concepts of government add to the difficulty of compromise. The progressive elimination of and refusal to recognize confidentiality impede decision making. The drive for openness in government, however, well intentioned -- sunshine laws and the like, the insistence that all deliberations be open to the public -- stifles expression of thought and makes the achievement of compromise more difficult.

We need to examine in a more systematic way the whole concept of openness as it relates to the ability to govern. The public interest is surely served by the people being informed. But this does not mean that the public interest is served by every public servant, legislator or administrator, speaking, acting and writing always as though he were in the lecture hall or on a TV show coming into everyone's living room.

The sad saga of illegal acts, secrecy and deception of Watergate is understandably in the minds of all of us. But the fact remains that, for democracy to work, trust and confidence must be placed by the people in their representatives. These representatives must act for the people in ways that are worthy of that trust.

Another factor in our changing concepts of government that needs mention is the development of local vetoes of projects or programs already decided upon. Again, in an understandable concern for local communities (that were ridden over roughshod by highway departments, or ignored in programs that otherwise threatened them), we have built into our laws and procedures unprecedented ability by a few -- and not necessarily an elected few -- to stymie essential programs and projects for the many.

The role of the courts in this respect is also significant. Accordingly, achieving majority support and fostering the common good or majority interest has become difficult. Unless we find a way to consider local interests early in the planning process, and to expedite decisions and action, we face severe economic constraints ahead. How and why we have reached this situation is understandable but a democracy must really depend upon a majority consensus and vital national concerns must prevail over individual or special group interests.

This brings us back to the federal government of today. First, let's consider the relationship of the Congress and the Presidency as it affects the conduct of our foreign policy. Five hundred and thirty-five persons can't be at the wheel of the Ship of State. Before they framed our Constitution, the Founding Fathers, out of their experience with the Continental Congress, learned that Congress couldn't conduct foreign policy, serve as Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces or provide executive direction to the administrative departments of the federal government. I trust the Nation will not have to learn this simple truth out of bitter experience again.

It is one thing -- and a very appropriate and essential one -- for the Congress to review foreign policy. It is another to try to conduct it.

It is also surely appropriate for the Congress to inquire into the conduct of agencies engaged in the gathering of intelligence information and that shadow area of clandestine operations. But again, if it needed to be demonstrated, we have now proved that Congressional committees are not the vehicles for the handling of confidential intelligence information relating to national security -- and are hardly in a position to direct intelligence activity.

As one who looked at domestic aspects of our international intelligence agency activities and who pointed out defects, irregularities and violations of the law, I must tell you again that the overwhelming mass of the intelligence work was conducted legally and that the American intelligence effort has been and is an essential arm of foreign policy -- including clandestine operations.

The relationship of the Presidency and the Congress in foreign affairs must be one of mutual understanding. But it must not tie the President's hands in the difficult tasks of world affairs today. And this requires also a recognition by the people and the Congress that not all members will necessarily approve, condone or support the foreign policy of the United States as any President may conduct it.

The Congress has a formidable task to organize itself for both foreign and domestic affairs to carry out its grave and far-reaching responsibilities in the national interest.

Here, too, power has been dispersed and special interests or the interests of a minority of the people have thereby been given far greater weight. To find focal points of authority and responsibility within the Congress is more difficult now than heretofore. The competition, overlap and duplication of Congressional committees adds to the confusion. If seniority and the old traditions are not to be hallmarks of authority, some other means must be found.

This brings us to consideration of the Executive Establishment and the huge administrative machinery of the federal government. In the Town Meetings I conducted around the country for President Ford, I found a universal outcry against federal government bureaucracy and red tape. Frankly, both Congress and the Executive had better begin to do something about it. The number of forms people have to fill out, the number of permissions they have to obtain, the difficulties they have in getting answers to their questions are building up a resentment that will be felt at the polls.

And the people are right. Why should our federal tax laws be so complicated that the average taxpayer can't fill out his own return? Why should he have to pay someone to do it for him out of its complexity or fear he may make a mistake and get into serious trouble?

Why has the number of lawyers in the federal government increased 180 per cent since 1970? Why has the number of federal government accountants gone from 47,000 to 75,000 in these same five years?

As a society, are we getting so paranoid, so fearful of entrusting power to act to anyone, that we face paralysis? This may be what has happened to our political parties. Our major parties served a real purpose over the years by uniting different groups, encompassing different regions of the Nation and helping bring about compromise on difficult issues.

But they have been seriously weakened as effective instruments, once again by well-meaning, piecemeal governmental interventions -- direct primaries, initiatives and referenda, recalls, financial constraints on political giving, conflict of interest rules and the like. They have been eroded by special interests and by candidacies that owe their being not to party affiliation or activity but to individual special interest identification.

It is time to look at our party machinery as a whole and to ask ourselves: How are we going to attract the leadership potential for the future into political activity. How are we going to get sufficient consensus to avoid a multiplicity of parties and give the voters meaningful, understandable choices?

We face a real challenge in providing the political means of developing leadership, developing the consensus and avoiding political paralysis. We can meet all these problems. But first we need to wake up and realize time may not run in our favor -- wake up and eliminate the thought that somehow, someday we'll make it -- with someone else doing the heavy lifting.

Let's face the facts. We've been on a national negative kick for four years. We've been looking backward and we've been rehashing the past. It's time we face the future. It's time to determine our enlightened national self-interest. It's time we all devote our energies to positive efforts for this Third Century.

That's what I'm going to talk about in the weeks ahead: I sure hope others will, too.

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