

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

MARCH 9, 1976

Office of the Vice President
(New York, New York)

REMARKS OF THE VICE PRESIDENT
AT THE RELIGION IN AMERICAN LIFE DINNER
WALDORF-ASTORIA HOTEL
NEW YORK, NEW YORK

(AT 8:30 P.M. EST)

Reverend Clergy, Mrs. Edens, thanks for your lovely invitation.

Arthur, you are right. But what you didn't mention was that we had the opportunity of earning money on the side in addition to our allowance.

So other than catching mice or shining shoes or growing vegetables, I was a very aggressive competitor in that field. Therefore, I was in funds to pay the fines. So I don't want you to think I was in bad shape.

To Paul, to Ian, to Gabe, to Dr. Harkins and to all of you distinguished ladies and gentlemen, I would like to thank you very much for including me in this really very significant and important occasion.

I know that you have been having these dinners for a long time, but I don't think there was ever a moment, particularly because of our anniversary or our Bicentennial celebration, where an occasion of this kind was more important as far as our country was concerned.

So I am deeply honored and deeply grateful for the privilege of thinking out loud with you for a few moments on this all important subject -- Religion in American Life.

In 1835, one of the shrewdest observers of the American scene ever to reflect on the meaning of American democracy, Alexis C. de Tocqu eville wrote, and I quote, "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, 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 that they reigned in common over the same country."

This vital relationship observed by de Tocqueville is 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 this nation.

It is an essential element in the understanding of America and the true meaning of the American Revolution that began 200 years ago.

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The Declaration of Independence was far more than a proclamation serving notice that the American Colonies were severing their ties with 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 or but in the words, and I quote, "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, freedom of conscience, and freedom of religion.

The people had left Europe for the American Colonies to escape political repression. They had left to escape economic bondage and they had left to escape from religions imposed by government in order to worship as they themselves believed.

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 beginning were also 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. The greatest of these is love.

The contributions of America to religious freedom are as monumental as its contributions to political liberty and economic freedom. And certainly this evening is a marvelous testimonial to that fact.

Settled by people of many faiths -- the Church of England, Catholics, Protestants, Baptists, Jews, Huguenots, Quakers, and so many others who are represented here tonight -- America, 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 legislating standards of individual behavior. There were struggles to

believe or not to 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 deepening commitment, both of leadership and of ordinary men and women, to freedom.

Indeed, there developed a general belief, not alone in individual rights but in equally firm conviction of individual responsibility, that survival depended upon individuals shouldering their responsibilities fully as much as asserting their ambitions and employing their energies in their own ways.

The individual is 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 blaming society for his actions. He was 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 that I would like to develop here tonight.

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

In this context let us look first at 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 that they created a government that had to stand the test of regular elections. For this purpose, they devised our system of shared powers between 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 government.

But today, in a period of accelerating changes, we face an assault on our institutions from within as well as from 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 and 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 law-abiding citizens if people don't understand the laws.

We cannot have a moral society if the laws are not enforced.

Since ours is a society built on individual citizen responsibility, it follows that 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 the 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 complicated and confused that they defy the ordinary person understanding them. It should not be so.

(Applause.)

Much of our regulatory legislation is so complicated that it deters economic growth and job opportunities. It should not be so either.

Our guiding principle in all legislation -- social, criminal and regulatory -- must be to encourage and enhance individual freedom, individual responsibility and individual self-reliance.

We must take a hard look at much of our existing laws and surely apply this test for future legislation.

The fact is, 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 is 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 the effort and money that we have committed to 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, and our understanding for the aged and the infirm, for example, surely we can devise a better system than the present unsatisfactory social welfare establishment of today.

The objective of 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 responsibilities and to make his contribution to our society.

The same is true for all those governmental activities relating to the enhancement of individual opportunity.

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

The Founding Fathers fully realized 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 this nation forward.

Thus, they created that special combination of individual rights, balanced by individual responsibilities, which were 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 embedded in our law and it is a basic moral and religious concept that individuals are free and that free men are responsible to God and to their fellow men 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, in 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 the 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.

This unity, with diversity, has characterized the broad spectrum of American society-- its ethnic makeup, its enterprise system, its social patterns, its religious and cultural institutions, with the widest of options, open to more people than any society has ever offered, America encouraged pluralism but maintained its essential but 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 bounteous society and a more secure one and, therefore, opportunity for a higher quality of life for all.

In this Bicentennial year, it is appropriate to ask ourselves whether we continue to subscribe to these precepts or are they being eroded through failure to practice or to 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 in health levels, high mobility, television, and the 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 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 economic freedom. They repress personal liberty. 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 super powers. 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 witnessed the most populous nation ever to be regimented according to preconceived plans, with no individual freedom. We have faced no comparable challenge to our way of life, our very existence in all our history.

From within, as well as from without, we witness a lack of appreciation, if not at times a derision of the values, the accomplishments and the 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 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 them.

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.

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 everybody does it.

Last week, John J. McCloy, that distinguished American, made a telling point, commenting on the illegal political contributions from corporations. Mr. McCloy said, and I quote, "It is just as improper for politicians to accept illegal, corrupt money" -- pardon me, "illegal corporate money, as it is for" --

(Laughter.)

Thank you. -- "illegal corporate money as it is for the companies to give it. There is a double standard here. It is the hypocrisy that bothers me," he said, "to which I say, "Amen."

(Applause.)

Basically, it comes 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, and if we do we must be prepared to accept the individual responsibility and the accountability that are essential for individual freedom.

Therefore, it seems to me that it is time for 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 is, that he is answerable for his acts, to himself, to his God, and to his community.

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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, and I quote, "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 today do less? I think not.

Thank you.

(Applause.)

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(AT 8:55 P.M. EST)