

NEWS

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HAROLD STEINBERG
Director of Publicity

FOR RELEASE AFTER 9 PM, APRIL 16

ADDRESS BY
ATTORNEY GENERAL ROBERT F. KENNEDY
AT
AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE
HERBERT H. LEHMAN HUMAN RELATIONS AWARD DINNER
APRIL 16, PLAZA HOTEL
NEW YORK CITY

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I met this afternoon with members of the American Society of Newspaper Editors in Washington and we got along well, perhaps because some of them realized that I used to be a newspaperman myself. I don't think I can lay claim to quite as close a bond at this gathering. Nonetheless, I am pleased and honored to join with you. I am honored because of my deep respect and admiration for Herbert Lehman and for the personal and public qualities that served his state and his nation so well. To receive an award in his name tells us a great deal about the humanity, devotion and wisdom of this recipient. Mr. Leidesdorf, I am proud to be here to join in offering you my warmest congratulations.

For weeks now, almost every night the light on top of the dome of the Capitol in Washington has burned late into the evening. Many of the high school students who visit Washington at this time of the year know it means that the Senate is still in session. People all over the country know that the debate over the civil rights bill is continuing. However extended it may appear to be, it is sufficient to realize the significance of the debate.

There are great wrongs in America to be righted and there are millions who appreciate daily that civil rights are more of a goal than a reality. The legislation now before the Senate can do a great deal toward making civil rights a reality. The civil

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rights bill can help insure equal voting rights. It can help insure and extend their educational and employment opportunities. It can help remove the insult of segregating public accommodations. so irrational that in one community, a drugstore which allowed Negroes to be served required them to take Pepsi Cola instead of Coca Cola, to stand rather than sit; and to drink from a paper cup rather than a glass.

More generally, the civil rights bill can also demonstrate to all of our citizens that the Congress of the United States, like Presidents Kennedy and Johnson and like the Supreme Court, is committed to the pledge of equality on which this country is founded. Two centuries ago, Montesquieu wrote, "In the state of nature indeed all men are born equal, but they cannot continue in this equality. Society makes them lose it. And they recover it only by the protection of the law."

The Negroes experiences in America demonstrates the wisdom of his words and the deeds for the civil rights bill. But not this law nor any law can be a solution. The deep social wound of segregation was cut for too long by too many knives of prejudice to be healed by a single poultice.

The civil rights bill, like law in general, can give us an orderly framework for the resolution of discord and dispute among men. Each new outburst of racial fanaticism in our cities gives evidence of how important that framework can be.

One of the principal aims of the civil rights bill is that it elevates this conflict from the street to the courts. We must recognize that law can only provide orderly ground rules. It cannot play the game.

Law also can offer us a moral precept to the extent that laws are founded on morality and on logic. They can lead men's hearts and minds. but, once again, this aspect of law can have meaning only to the extent that the constituents of law are moral and are rational.

You and I, reflecting on our own heritage in America, know our forebears faced the realities of prejudice when they came to this country -- whether in signs proclaiming "No Irish need apply"

or in unexplained rejection of applications to medical schools. We know that systematic exclusion of Irish or Jews or Italians or any other ethnic group, has ended not only because laws change but because men's minds did.

"The problems of our society," President Johnson said last week, "will not automatically disappear with the passage (of the bill). They will still have to be dealt with by all Americans. The civil rights bill can only chart in law the directions that we must take as individuals."

So I come to you today as the chief law enforcement officer of the United States to talk not of federal enforcement of law but of individual obedience to their moral statutes. Such obedience must exist at many levels and like all responsibilities in a democracy, it must begin with the individual citizen. As John D. Rockefeller III observed in a recent speech: "America, we must remember, is no more than the sum of ourselves."

I think it is necessary for us to start by asking ourselves whether we are satisfied with the present ingredients of America's social arithmetic. I am thinking of two recent examples in this state.

The first occurred only this week in Albany. We all read about it. A distraught young man perched on a narrow 12th floor ledge ready to jump off for two hours. Friends sought to coax him to safety, but the crowd below had a different appeal. "Jump, jump, jump," it chanted. One spectator expressed the hope that the youth would jump on this side. We couldn't see him if he jumps over there."

The other case occurred one night last month. A young woman was stabbed to death over a period of a half-hour outside her apartment in Queens. Thirty-eight neighbors looked out and heard what was going on during that time. None came to her rescue. None even called the police. By way of explanation, one of the witnesses said later "I didn't want to get involved." No further comment is necessary.

Individual concern and individual responsibility deserve better homage in a land which prized individualism and whose greatest hero is Abraham Lincoln.

Charles Morgan Jr., the young Birmingham attorney, whose own conduct is an example of the point, tells an illustrating anecdote in his new book "A Time to Speak." "No one knows," he writes, "who will next be called to commit himself or in what way. It might be someone like the tall and lanky soldier in Jackson, Miss., the one with the long Southern drawl, who told a white man assaulting Negro Andrew J. Young: "Man, if you want to fight, fight me, I am your size and I am white."

We can reflect on the individual responsibility demonstrated by 200,000 Negroes and whites in the March on Washington last Summer. There was dire warning of angry crowds, of violence and of riot. All of us saw what happened instead. A London newspaper called it "the gentle flood."

Individuals can at another level help to flesh out the bare framework established by statute. Consider the example of leadership established by the hundreds of Southern businessmen who have acted to desegregate their establishments in the past year.

Last Spring and Summer, President Kennedy, then Vice-President Johnson and other administration leaders met with almost 1,500 businessmen, ministers, attorneys and other leaders from all over the country. The purpose of the meeting was to seek voluntary abandonment of discriminatory practices. The progress since then demonstrates that racial attitudes in many part of the South are not part of a monolithic irrationality.

A recent survey of 556 cities states that significant progress has taken place in the past few months in desegregation of such facilities as theaters, restaurants, hotels, motels and lunch counters. There now has been at least some desegregation in nearly 70 per cent of these cities and almost two-thirds of that progress has come since last May.

It is easy for us in the North to patronize the South. It is so much easier to see the morality of problems in Birmingham if you are sitting in Boston. What these Southern businessmen have done can serve as an example for us in the North in coming to grips with problems that are different only because they are our own. The desegregation of these public accommodations in the South

comes because their owners plainly acknowledge economic dangers of inaction. They also have recognized the moral need for accommodation.

For half a century the doctrine of "separate but equal" was perverted by citizens, communities and local governments into a license not for simple racial segregation but for racial discrimination. For example, the number of white and Negro students in Mississippi is approximately equal. In a recent year, this state spent more than 45 million dollars for white schools and 26 million dollars for Negro schools. And this is the case despite the fact that "separate but equal has been outlawed for a decade. The lesson is plain that law is not enough.

How can the law be enough when it requires that Negroes and whites not be served in the same room without a solid seven-foot partition between them. How can it be when it requires a motel not to turn away a weary motorist, or a hospital to reject an injured child. Whatever law is passed, whatever statute is enacted without public understanding, it is mere piety. Neither sober statutes nor individual responsibility alone are enough. Men and their laws must march together. What happens when they do not is evidenced from the experience of the past ten years. The cost of defiance touches every aspect of community and national life.

Five years ago, rural Prince Edward County, Virginia, closed its public schools rather than desegregate them. How can we measure the cost of that defiance? How did it effect the Negro child whose future has been permanently crippled because he cannot learn to read? How did it affect the white child sent to segregated private schools? How did it effect the citizens of the city who walked past the vacant public school building while children were left to linger in the streets and fields? And how did it effect Virginia?

The point is that the cost of defiance is beyond measure. They touch generations yet unborn. They scar our history.

The lesson of Prince Edward County is the lesson of the entire country. Where were we after the 1954 school decision? Where was the pulpit, the press, the public officials? The answer is that there was a vacuum and a weakness of leadership -- a

vacuum that existed until it was filled finally by demagogues, with strident slogans of "segregation forever" and "massive resistance." When a whole generation and a whole area is told by its leaders that a Supreme Court decision is a "nullity," how can it be expected that the mortar of public respect will be added to the bricks of law?

Rarely in history are nations presented with a second chance to atone for fundamental failure. I wonder, however, if that isn't exactly the opportunity America has today. When the civil rights bill passes this year, ten years after the Brown Decision, we can have a new leadership of the kind that Southern businessmen, public officials, newspapermen and clergymen have already demonstrated. And we can have a new slogan -- not "massive resistance" but "massive compliance" in the spirit of a nation governed by God's law and men of understanding.

The Prince Edward School Case is still in the courts, and public schools there are still closed, but Negro children are being educated in a free, private school system which resulted from the efforts of private individuals, private foundations, and leaders and citizens of Virginia.

Not long ago, one of the teachers in the free school system was asked how her students responded. It reminded her, she said, of her childhood on the farm. When you set a chicken on the ground after holding it in your hand, it sits motionless. Only after it is sure of its freedom does it dash away. Her students were like that for the first month, she said -- not moving. They moved only when they felt secure in their freedom. When they were secure, they leaped ahead in their desire and their capacity to learn. The freedom of those students -- and the spirit of the establishment of their schools, must be the freedom and spirit of our time.

We cannot solve our problems with a law or in an instant, but we can begin to weld laws and men together in an effort to provide a basis for the pledge that America makes to all men.

Benjamin Muse, the Virginian writer, says in his new book about integration in the past decade, "the unrest will end some-time because it is inevitable that in America justice and humanity in time will prevail."

Let us join today in His service. Let us join in the faith in law and in man that President Kennedy expressed last June when he said, "I ask you to look into your hearts -- not in search of charity for the Negro which he neither wants nor needs, but for the one proud, priceless quality that unites us all as Americans -- a sense of justice. This year of the E_mancipation Centennial, justice requires us to secure the blessings of liberty for all Americans, not merely for reasons of economic efficiency and domestic tranquility, but above all, because it is right."

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