



Department of Justice

ADDRESS OF
ATTORNEY GENERAL ROBERT F. KENNEDY
BEFORE THE
NATIONAL INSURANCE ASSOCIATION

STATLER-HILTON HOTEL
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I am extremely happy to be here with you tonight to participate in the 42nd Annual Convention of the National Insurance Association. I would like to join in paying my respects to President Theodore Jones and the past presidents of this fine organization.

In 42 years your Association has made an enviable record. Your progress and similar progress which we see all around us has convinced me that the day is not far off when no American will be denied full rights of citizenship because of the color of his skin or because of his beliefs. I say this because the record shows that gains are being made faster than at any time since the Civil War.

In the past year and a half, the Federal government has been able to move forward in the civil rights field with heartening success in at least four areas.

First, on the key issue of voting, a much greater effort is being made to win the franchise for Negroes in the South. This is basic to all the rights of citizenship and from it all other rights flow.

Under the Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and 1960, the Department of Justice has the responsibility of assuring that the ballot is not denied to qualified voters because of race, creed, or color.

A total of thirty court actions have been brought to uphold this right, twenty in the past fifteen months. Investigations have been carried out or are under way in over one hundred counties.

One striking example of voting rights action is Macon County, Alabama. This is a rural county, but it is the location of Tuskegee Institute, and thus, the home of many distinguished and well-educated Negroes.

Yet at the beginning of 1961, only a handful of Negroes were being allowed to register in Macon County. On March 17 of that year we obtained a voting rights injunction. Today more than 2,800 Negroes are registered to vote in Macon County and they are making their influence felt.

Progress of this kind takes considerable work, incidentally. In one voting case, for example, we examined in detail thirty-six thousand voting records; took testimony from one hundred eighty witnesses at the trial, and had four lawyers devote full-time for several months to prepare the case. But this kind of effort is necessary.

We found in a number of counties Negroes who were teachers, ministers, and scientists being denied the right to register on the grounds they were illiterate. Yet in the same counties white persons who had only second and third grade educations were being permitted to vote.

We sponsored a bill which would have prevented any states from using so-called literacy tests to prevent qualified individuals from voting. Unfortunately, this bill failed, but we will make an effort to have similar legislation enacted next year; and meanwhile, we will continue to investigate and bring cases where necessary.

A second area of progress has been in employment. More and more Americans are being hired on merit and not being denied a chance to work because of the color of their skin.

This has long been the policy of the Federal government, but we are taking action to see that equal employment opportunity is not just a pious declaration but a reality.

For instance, when we came to the Department of Justice, which is charged with enforcing the civil rights laws, there were only ten Negroes employed as attorneys. Now there are six times that number.

The United States Attorneys in two of our largest cities are Negroes, and for the first time Negroes are serving as lifetime district judges in the continental United States. Thurgood Marshall, one of the finest lawyers in the country, was appointed by the President to sit on one of the most important federal appellate courts in the land.

These people, and others throughout the Administration, were not given jobs because they were Negroes, but because we need dedicated, able people in government and we are not foolish enough to deny ourselves the services of such people because of their race.

Private industry is also coming to learn the folly and inefficiency of discrimination.

Eighty-five major companies who do business with the government have been persuaded to develop plans assuring equal opportunity in hiring and advancement for their employees. This has been accomplished in cooperation with the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity. This is

only one part of the Committee's activities. Its compliance program has been established on a strong basis and reaches far beyond anything of this type ever done by the federal government or any state. Where voluntary action is not forthcoming, the Committee is moving to see that discrimination is eliminated.

For example, the compliance staff of the Vice President's Committee has just completed an agreement with four refineries in Lake Charles, Louisiana. These plants, with the approval of the previous administration's committee on equal employment, had completely segregated facilities - even parking lots - and in job opportunities had excluded Negroes entirely from 15 out of 17 categories.

One of the categories open was that of laborer and for the other category, Negroes, but not whites, were required to have high school educations. Under the new agreement all seventeen of the job categories are open to Negroes on their merits, both by the refineries and by the unions involved, and Negroes are now working in jobs which had been completely closed to them before.

Another agreement was just concluded this week in Birmingham, Alabama, with the largest industrial unit in that city -- Tennessee Coal and Iron. Under this agreement a dual system of seniority is going to be eliminated for the first time and Negro employees are standing on the same footing in layoffs and promotions as their white fellow employees. The completely segregated employment offices have already been integrated.

A positive approach also is being taken toward school desegregation.

We are not waiting until violence occurs when the meeting of force with force is the only alternative. The Federal government is protecting the integrity of court orders and working with local citizens and officials to bring about desegregation peacefully and with respect for the law.

Last year, for the first time since the Supreme Court decision, school desegregation was accomplished without violence. This just didn't happen. The credit belongs to local officials and citizens but I am proud of the assistance the government was able to provide.

Segregation has virtually disappeared from interstate transportation.

In the past year and a half, the "For White Only" signs have come down in hundreds of rail, bus and airline terminals.

This has been done without the passage of new legislation. The Justice Department, upon the basis of existing laws, asked the Interstate Commerce Commission to rule that segregation in all interstate bus facilities, including terminals, is unlawful.

The Commission has done so. And the carriers have cooperated.

All the railroad terminals have been desegregated because of quiet efforts made by representatives of the Department of Justice. In every instance the railroads voluntarily desegregated and I do not know of any railroad stations still segregated. More than a dozen airport terminals have been desegregated voluntarily through the Department's efforts. Only two airport terminals in the country still are segregated and we have brought lawsuits in those two cities to end it.

You should be fully aware that over the past eighteen months, officials and citizens of many southern communities have moved themselves to end segregation. Incidents such as have occurred in recent weeks in Albany, Georgia get the headlines. Virtually unnoticed, but more far-reaching has been the work of the Justice Department in consulting local officials when evidence of a violation of a federal law is uncovered. We have sought to persuade the local officials to remedy the situation themselves. In many cases, this has been successful and as I say, it has received little publicity, but it has been a major development in advancing civil rights within the framework of the law.

However, much remains to be done and this Administration understands its responsibility to continue working hard to remove racial discrimination in other areas. The job will not be completed until every American has full access to all rights of citizenship in every corner of the land. I am firmly convinced that this day is coming because the vast majority of American people in the South, as well as in the North, East and West, want to make progress and they are not satisfied to accept the status quo.

On Washington's birthday in 1861, President-elect Abraham Lincoln spoke in Independence Hall on his way to Washington. He spoke of the men who wrote and fought for the Declaration of Independence. He said its essence was its promise "not only of liberty to the people of this country, but hope of the world . . . that in due time the weights should be lifted from the shoulders of all men and that all should have an equal chance."

This is more true today than it was 186 years ago. On my recent trip around the world, wherever I spoke -- in every meeting with officials, students, businessmen, and labor leaders, I was asked about the civil rights problems here in the United States. We are not going to be able to convince people in other lands that we mean what we say in the Declaration of Independence and in our Constitution if a large number of our citizens are denied their full rights.

So we have a clear-cut responsibility, I as Attorney General and you as businessmen who have been highly successful in your careers. First and foremost, we must work to attain the vote for all our fellow citizens. But the problem is greater because the achievement of full legal and political rights will create new challenges. And these cannot be met by legal action or by the courts or even by legislation. Essentially, these challenges involve our young people.

With automation and the increasing demand for higher and higher skills, the young people who have not completed their schooling will be at a great

disadvantage. From this group will come the greatest number of malcontents, criminals and persons who will have little faith in freedom and democratic ways.

A high percentage of the drop-outs come from Negro and other minority groups. A recent study of youth employment problems in New York City shows that while the overall unemployment rate for high school graduates and school drop-outs is between 15 and 20%, in some low income minority neighborhoods, the number of unemployed-out-of-school-youths is as high as 70%.

President Kennedy recently said:

"Our youth are our greatest resource and the social and economic implications of protracted unemployment among the one million young job seekers today the many millions who will enter the labor force in the next few years demand immediate attention and action."

I urge you to interest yourselves in this problem, which is so important to the future well-being of our youth and our country. As men who have been successful, you can command attention and respect. Businessmen in every community -- working with social, educational and religious organizations -- can make a great contribution by helping our young people as they prepare themselves for the world of the 60's and the 70's. Here are a few things that you can do specifically and which I pledge tonight to work with you in trying to accomplish:

- Work for better schools and job training in your communities;
- Encourage high school students to stay in school and encourage those who have left to return, even to night classes;
- Arrange for loans for students who need them;
- Give high school students guidance as to the trades to prepare for and the training needed for these trades;
- Provide both high school and college students with information and guidance on possible future careers and help with the selection of schools and courses to prepare for these careers;
- Help graduates find jobs by providing guidance and contacts.

These are just a few suggestions, and I'm sure you can find many, many more.

I hope that those Americans who are desirous of doing something for their country will give increasing attention to the millions of young people who need guidance and assistance. The federal government, under the President's leadership, has taken a number of steps to widen employment opportunities for youths and to assist local communities in employing all their resources to meet this problem. We want to make sure that every

American has a chance to develop his talent. Education is basic but the federal government cannot do this job. It must be done at the local level by men and women like yourselves.

And that is why I feel it is a privilege to come here and talk with you about these problems because they involve us all.

The great French marshall, Lyautey, once asked his gardener to plant a tree. The gardener objected that the tree was slow-growing and would not reach maturity for one hundred years. The marshall replied, "In that case, there's no time to lose. Plant it this afternoon."

Our youths have long lives ahead of them. Today an America of equal opportunity for all its citizens is just around the corner and we have no time to lose. Let's plant our trees this evening.