Department of Justice

Address of Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy

Testimonial Dinner
for
Attorney General John Reynolds

Milwaukee, Wisconsin
October 6, 1962

I take great pleasure in being here with you in Wisconsin this evening. Politics aside, it is good to be back in Wisconsin which has so many memories for all the Kennedys.

It is also pleasant for Attorneys General, with their common professional and fraternal interests, to stick together. Of course, I've been fairly busy for the last couple of weeks and I imagine the same is true for John Reynolds. So I'm happy we were able to find the time to say a word of encouragement to each other.

As many of you know, this isn't the first time that the Attorneys General of the United States and of Wisconsin have worked together. We have worked closely with John Reynolds on a number of very important matters of mutual interest. The most notable have been in the anti-trust field -- specifically in the paper and electrical industries. But we have also had extensive contacts in matters ranging from crime prevention to civil rights. In these times it is encouraging to work harmoniously with a state in pursuit of responsibilities as well as rights.

Of course, there also are very personal reasons why I'm happy to be back here. As I look out among you, I see a great many friends and familiar faces. I suppose this should not be surprising when you consider that during the three months of the campaign, I visited every town in the western part of the state with a population greater than three hundred and that a Kennedy has visited every town in the whole state with a population over seven hundred.

I remember Barraboo and Wild Rose, Tomahawk and Rice Lake. And I must say that my memories of Berlin in Green Lake County and Cuba City in Grant County have happier connotations than the problems now associated with other places with similar names.

When I was here before, I never knew first-hand that Wisconsin had green grass and lakes without ice on them. During the primary campaign, I never saw a part of Wisconsin that was not covered by snow. Flying in this afternoon, your land and your lakes in all their autumn beauty were breathtaking.

We are now in the midst of another political campaign. Elections remind us not only of the rights but the responsibilities of citizenship in a democracy. Yet we live in a time when the individual's opportunity to meet his responsibilities appears circumscribed by impersonal powers beyond his influence.

On the surface the individual in the American society is pressed on all sides by the mightiest materialistic forces in man's history. The power of atomic weapons seems to dwarf the heroism of any individual soldier, and "City Hall" looms too big to fight in a hundred walks of life.

But even today there is so much that a single person can do with faith and courage and we have had a number of outstanding examples just this week. A few days ago it was the personal heroism of Commander Walter Schirra which represented the striving of mankind for the freedom of space, while another American, James Meredith, brought to a head and lent his name to another chapter in the mightiest internal struggle of our time.

At the same time in Mississippi, there were five hundred United States Marshals, most of them from the southern states, who remained true to their orders and instructions and stood with great bravery to prevent interference with federal court orders.

A troop of armored cavalry -- men from Oxford, Mississippi -- were the first soldiers to come to the aid of the marshals. Some of these young men had graduated only last June from the University of Mississippi. As one of them said:

"We don't like being here but we don't like that mob shooting at you either."

Individual contributions at their finest have always required courage to risk injury or death, unpopularity and financial loss.

In 1770, the prosperous and respected John Adams was pilloried as a traitor and turncoat by his fellow Bostonians when he defended a British officer and eight soldiers for firing on a crowd of Boston civilians. Adams, despite some one hundred hostile depositions and catcalls in court, won acquittal for most of his clients, but he judged his political career to have been ended irrevocably by the episode. Even after he was elected President, he remembered the actions as one of the finest of his life.

In 1895, Clarence Darrow gave up a profitable career as attorney for a powerful railroad to defend Socialist Eugene Debs and other officers of the American Railway Union against charges of criminal conspiracy evolving out of the union strike against the railroad for which Darrow was counsel. For an attorney much sought after by large corporations to renounce all that to defend a poverty-stricken labor leader was unthinkable. But it took Darrow only one day to decide to defend Debs.

"I didn't want to take it," he said later . . . "but when I saw poor men giving up their jobs for a cause, I could find no sufficient excuse,

except my selfish interests, for refusing."

But it is not necessary to have achieved great prominence in a field to make a major contribution. Nor is it necessary to be involved in a great crisis or a great event like a war although the sons and daughters of Wisconsin have always provided more than their share of valor.

We need the participation of all our citizens, freely given and commensurate with their resources, consciences and talents. This is an awesome period but it also is a time of maximum need and thus, a time of great opportunity.

The response to the Peace Corps from all over the country demonstrates the readiness of American youth to meet their responsibilities and to make a contribution just as those National Guardsmen from Oxford came to the aid of the embattled marshals and stood against their fellow Mississippians.

It is to be expected that a state which provided 19 Congressional Medal of Honor winners during World War Two and the Korean War also make its contribution to the Peace Corps. And in fact, there are 22 young men and women from your state serving in the Peace Corps around the world.

One of them is Michael Shea of Eau Claire, whom many of you will remember as a quarterback for Marquette University. Now Mike Shea is in Ghana, teaching science and running an athletic program which made a significant contribution to Ghana's showing at the Empire Games in Australia. He's rated one of the top ten in the corps.

In Curaco, Chile, Sharon Pulchin of Green Bay is teaching at a girls' rural boarding school. She teaches sewing, hygiene, nutrition, child care and does dental hygiene work. She also fixes plumbing.

Even today, then, the contribution of the individual can be immensely significant. And at each successive stage in history the obstacles to progress and individual effectiveness have loomed larger than in preceding days.

Where, then, does one now meet this need and find the opportunity?

There are some conventional, but accurate answers to this question. The intelligent exercise of the vote is one answer. Each election reaffirms how important that is.

I doubt, for example, if anyone was not impressed when the citizens of Hawaii voted in their first election as a state. Ninety-three point six percent of the registered voters went to the polls there in July, 1959, and in the ensuing election of 1960 that percentage was approximately repeated again. When you recall that the President finally carried Hawaii by one hundred fifteen votes, you have an impressive reminder that the voice and vote of the individual citizen does indeed count for something.

But we all have a greater individual challenge and a greater opportunity to meet our responsibilities as American citizens than simply by voting. And

I submit that people like all of you here tonight -- attorneys, political leaders and government officials have a special responsibility and thus, the greatest opportunity.

The determination and initiative of a few Tennessee mayors brought the issue of rural dominance of our state legislatures to a head in a specific lawsuit, Baker v. Carr. The Supreme Court's decision, as you all know, has had the broadest and most serious application throughout the country, affecting the legislature not only in Tennessee but in virtually every state of the Union, giving new vigor and meaning to the principle of equal representation.

In 1960, a group of ministers in Newport, Kentucky vowed that within a year either the widespread gambling, prostitution and corruption which flourished in their city would be driven out or else they would be. Under their leadership, local citizens formed a Committee of 500. Despite great opposition, the reform group elected a new sheriff, George Ratterman, a former Cleveland football star.

Revitalized local law enforcement, coupled with state assistance and the power of our new federal anti-racketeering laws, have cleaned up Newport. The layoff bookies are gone. The significance is not only that law and order have been restored in Newport, but one of the great centers for organized gambling in the country has been put out of business hampering the activities of racketeers in many areas of the United States.

These are only two examples. But they are examples which should have particular meaning and merit in this great state, which is noted perhaps above all for the vigor and individuality of its leaders.

Back at the turn of the century, Frederick Jackson Turner, the great historian from the University of Wisconsin, was writing of the passing of the frontier and its effect on American political morality.

The rugged individuals of previous decades had by this time built a structure of power and privilege that appeared formidable indeed to the average citizen. It was the era of the massive trusts and a time when a magazine such as the old "Cosmopolitan" could run (as they did in 1907) a serious article entitled "The Treason of the Senate", which charged that 75 of the then 90 senators were really representing not the people but the railroads, the meat-packers, the sugar, oil and steel interests.

One of the prime factors in cleansing this situaion was a fresh breeze from the prairie called "the Wisconsin idea", driven by Robert La Follette, the leader of an historic political rebellion.

The specifics of "The Wisconsin Idea" are familiar to all of us and as enacted here they often served as models for similar legislation in other states: a strong corrupt practices act holding down political campaign funds, a railroad commission which protected the people rather than serving the railroad, pure food acts, public health measures, lower transportation fares, compulsory education of the young, workmen's compensation legislation,

child labor laws and industrial commissions to protect the public interest in a time when American industry was entering into an unprecedented (and largely unregulated) boom period.

That institution known as the direct primary -- which many of us here have particular reason to be grateful for -- was first adopted in Wisconsin in 1903 after a long fight by Bob La Follette. Since then, all but five of our states have followed Wisconsin's lead in one form or another. The force of the La Follette-led Progressive movement also supplied the impetus behind the eventual adoption in 1910 of the Constitutional Amendment providing for the popular election of United States Senators.

In 1962 we may take such reforms as the popular election of senators and direct primaries for granted. That's a tribute to the firmness with which they have become embedded in our political structure. But in my judgment, we can never take for granted that the voice of the people always will be heard in the councils of government simply because there are laws on the statute books.

We need people of both political parties who will serve their school district, their town, their city, their state or their country with responsibility, courage and integrity.

John Reynolds has provided steady, responsible leadership to this state in the question of reapportionment and in many other matters. He has made a great contribution and in my opinion exemplifies the type of leadership and participation that is so badly needed today.

A great American educator asked a century ago at the time of the Kansas-Missouri struggle:

"Would you have counted him a friend of ancient Greece who quietly discussed the theory of patriotism on that hot summer day through those hopeless and immortal hours Leonidas and the 300 stood at Thermopelae for liberty? Would you count anyone a friend of freedom who stands aside today?"

In simplest terms, none of us can sit on the sidelines. This is a strong country and if all of us will make our best effort to meet our responsibilities as citizens now and in the decisive years immediately ahead, this nation will remain dedicated to liberty and progress and our children and their children will live their lives in peace and freedom.