



Department of Justice

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REMARKS OF

ATTORNEY GENERAL ROBERT F. KENNEDY

to the

JUNIOR RED CROSS AWARDS CEREMONY

DEPARTMENTAL AUDITORIUM
WASHINGTON, D. C.

September 23, 1963

It is a pleasure to take part in this recognition ceremony, and to join in offering congratulations and thanks to you young people for the work you have done this summer.

By devoting your summer to something other than your own entertainment or your own gain, you have given a great deal. And apart from the satisfaction that comes from giving, you have this satisfaction too: that the poor, the sick, the handicapped and the helpless of this community would be less well off today if it weren't for your help.

All of you are to be commended for a fine job.

But youth is a time for learning; and so perhaps the most significant way to measure your experience this summer is in terms of what you have learned from it.

Those of you who worked in hospitals have learned something of the terrible affliction of disease, and of how tireless and complicated our battle against it must be.

Those who worked with underprivileged children have learned how great their need is for enlightened care and guidance if they are to emerge as happy and useful citizens.

And there have been other valuable lessons for those working in homes for the aged or in institutions for the mentally retarded.

One thing I hope all of you have learned -- in the way that only first-hand experience can teach -- is that social problems don't solve themselves.

They cannot be solved by Government edict, either, or by mere appropriations of money.

Their solution depends above all on the dedicated work of individual men and women -- people trained in the physical and social sciences, as well as volunteers like yourselves.

You have been exposed to some of the social problems that exist here in Washington. What about the rest of the country?

We think of ourselves as a rich nation, and we are. Most of our people have the highest standard of living ever known in the world.

But in our affluence, we have forgotten too quickly that some members of our society continue to live in conditions as squalid as those of the most backward country and are oppressed by poverty, hunger and disease.

Unemployment in many industrial areas remains a matter of great concern, particularly as it effects undereducated, racial minorities.

Moreover, the market for unskilled workers is rapidly shrinking with the advance of automation.

And the forces of deprivation are by no means confined to city slums. Millions live with pride but without resources in the mountains and valleys that run from Alabama and Kentucky to West Virginia and Pennsylvania.

Elsewhere throughout the country, nearly half a million migratory farm workers live on earnings that average less than three dollars a day. For ninety-two thousand of these workers, total income for the whole year of 1960 averaged \$388.

In our vast new state of Alaska, conditions among the rural natives are often intolerable. Only thirteen percent of these people have structurally sound housing. In one district, with a population of 3,000, none of the homes has a flush toilet and only seven have hot and cold piped water.

Health is so poor that the Alaskan native has a life expectancy of only 30 years, compared with 62 years for the overall American population.

Many American Indians, too, live in squalor and oppression. Their unemployment rate is six or seven times the national average, and their rate of infant mortality is twice that of any other racial group in the country.

Nor are poverty and physical disease the only major evils in our land. One out of every eight Americans is either mentally ill or mentally retarded, and we have barely begun to help these afflicted people.

Mental retardation alone is ten times more frequent than diabetes, 25 times more common than muscular dystrophy, and 600 times more common than polio. Yet facilities for the care of retardates are still sadly inadequate.

It has been estimated that every sixth citizen of the United States is in some kind of immediate need of medical, social, or economic help.

And conditions are immeasurably more critical beyond our shores, especially in under-developed areas of the world -- areas whose people have come to rely more and more on American support to save them from starvation and despair.

The Red Cross, as always, is doing all it can to meet and solve these problems. But far too many other Americans, as always, are indifferent to the sufferings of their neighbors.

If you have learned something about the spirit of public welfare this summer, of the obligation of the strong to help the weak, you have learned a great deal.

And I think there is still another aspect to what your work for the Red Cross has taught you -- perhaps the most important lesson of all.

You have learned how it feels and what it means to participate in the life of your community -- to take an active, responsible role, rather than merely a passive one, in the workings of your society.

That is one of the most vital lessons any American can learn, and it can't be learned too young.

No Democracy can be stronger or more enlightened than the will of its citizens to direct its affairs; the whole idea of Democracy, after all, is that of self-government, of rule by consent of the people -- and only when the people are passive and indifferent can there be any danger of atrophy in the Government itself.

We live today in a time of infinite possibilities. We are on the threshold of a new era in which the hopes and dreams of all mankind will be involved with the future of the United States.

Already the broad outlines of that future are clear. We can see the beginnings of America as the champion of world peace -- as a nation strongly armed and determined that its strength will assure against the catastrophe of a nuclear war.

We can see the beginnings of America as the champion of human dignity, a nation determined to cast out the evils of racial and religious prejudice that have held too many of its own citizens in bondage for too long.

We can see too that America has begun to move toward the realization of these ideals more rapidly and in more ways than ever before in history.

But this is only the beginning.

It is your generation -- those of you who are in your teens today -- that will live to make the dreams come true, You will inherit the leadership; you will inherit the responsibility; you will inherit the rewards.

Oliver Wendell Holmes once said: "It is required of a man that he should share the passions and actions of his time, at the peril of being judged not to have lived."

I believe the thought behind those words has more meaning for your generation than for any other in our history.

And if you are typical of that generation -- if you here tonight are truly representative of the youth of this nation in this time -- then I believe America will have nothing to be afraid of.

Thank you.