



# Department of Justice

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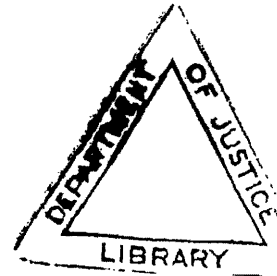
ATTORNEY GENERAL ROBERT F. KENNEDY

BEFORE THE

COLONEL FRANCIS VIGO POST

OF THE

AMERICAN LEGION



WALDORF-ASTORIA HOTEL

NEW YORK, NEW YORK

OCTOBER 5, 1963

Mr. Toastmaster, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen:

If I tried to express my gratitude to all of you here tonight, I'm sure I would run on for more words than Congressman Rooney used in his introduction.

And so, I'll settle for saying thank you. This is an evening that Mrs. Kennedy and I will never forget, and we are delighted to be here.

The one small disquieting note in my pleasure is the awesome presence of our toastmaster. He's the Chairman of the Congressional Committee that holds the pursestrings on the Department of Justice; and I can assure you that facing John James Rooney at an appropriation hearing is like looking down the barrel of a rifle.

Colonel Francis Vigo, your Patron, died in 1835. He was an American Revolution and frontier hero, and his family had to work to get the money due to him from Congress.

They finally got it--forty years later, in 1875. We can't actually prove that John Rooney was the Chairman then, but he must have been around.

At any rate, I doubt if Colonel Vigo himself could have asked for a better tribute to his memory than the establishment, in his name, of an organization like yours.

Everything I have read and heard about the activities of this Post is impressive -- your unstinting aid to charities, and your clear devotion to community service.

But to me the most inspiring of your ventures is that of financing scholarships for law students. In providing these funds, you are doing more than helping to launch the careers of promising and deserving young men.

You are making a direct contribution to the cause of American education--and there is no cause that works closer to the heart of all the major domestic problems we face in America today.

We tend too often to think of our educational system as a fixed and immutable structure -- when, in fact, it is a living, dynamic force that constantly moves and grows and changes with the times.

Like all living things, it must be nourished, or it will starve. It is capable of great strength and vitality, but it can also be made weak -- and its relative health reflects the health of the Nation.

"I view education," said Abraham Lincoln, "as the most important subject which we, as a people, can be engaged in."

And the prophetic British writer H. G. Wells put the case even more strongly, speaking not only for America but for all the world:

"Human history," he wrote, "becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe."

When we examine the state of American education today, there is much to be grateful for.

We have a high literacy rate, compared with most other countries, and we have a tradition that allows the benefits of advanced learning to be shared by students from all walks of life rather than being restricted to the province of an aristocratic few.

In the fields of science and technology, especially, we are making rapid strides in keeping with the demands of the nuclear age.

Some of our universities rank among the finest in the world, and we can take pride in the caliber of our most distinguished scholars and thinkers--men who work at the outer frontiers of human knowledge.

All these factors are encouraging; but they don't begin to tell the whole story. And to look for the whole story is to turn up a great deal of disturbing evidence on the negative side.

From kindergarten through college, our educational system today is riddled with inadequacies -- with failures and deficiencies that must concern us all.

More than ten and a half million children are now studying in schools so overcrowded that there are thirty or more pupils in each classroom.

Roughly one-seventh of the classrooms in the nation -- some two-hundred thirty-five thousand of them -- were built before 1920. And fifty-one thousand of these are made of combustible materials.

Present estimates show that within the next ten years we will need no less than thirty percent more teachers than we are presently producing.

In the meantime, our teachers are not only badly overworked -- they are badly underpaid, and many are underqualified for their jobs.

The national average of all teachers' salaries is less than six thousand dollars a year -- compared with eleven and a half thousand dollars for chief accountants, and more than twelve thousand dollars for attorneys.

One out of every five teachers has either not been certified by the state as qualified to teach, or has not completed four years of college.

Sixty percent of all high-school English teachers did not take that subject as their college major.

Then there is the increasing problem of school dropouts. Across the Nation, one out of every three students in the fifth grade will quit school before receiving his high-school diploma.

When no kind of remedial schooling is provided for these children -- and none is available in many communities -- they frequently find themselves not only unemployed but unemployable.

And their idleness and frustration helps to explain much of the national problem of juvenile delinquency.

At the university level, too, the need for education greatly exceeds the supply. Thirty percent of all high-school seniors in the 80th to 90th academic percentile -- students who are clearly college material -- are unable to go to college at the present time.

It has been estimated that we will need 2.3 billion dollars a year to keep pace with the enrollment growth in colleges -- and we are now spending only a little more than half of that amount.

Still another area of failure in our educational system is in the field of vocational training.

In many industrial communities, little or no effort is being made to establish training and re-training programs for the many thousands -- adults of all ages, as well as youngsters -- who can't find work because they lack any marketable skill.

According to one recent estimate, the advance of automation is causing a loss of some 40,000 jobs a week throughout the country -- both directly, in terms of workers being replaced by machines, and indirectly through the elimination of the need for new employees.

In the next two and a half years, we will have to find no less than ten thousand new jobs every day if we hope to avoid a depression -- and what jobs there are will tend more and more to call for people who are educated.

Clearly, a great deal of work must be done, a great deal of public and private support must be given, a great many improvements must be made before our educational system can be sufficient to the economic realities of our time.

And no one can speak of economic realities today without getting into a discussion of civil rights.

It is the American Negro, living at the bottom of the social scale, who suffers most from poor education and unemployment. And it is the Negro who has the most to gain from whatever improvements we are able to make.

Twenty-two percent of all non-white citizens in the United States have received less than five years of schooling, as compared with only six percent of the whites.

In one state, where the total population of non-white adults is 383 thousand, less than 154 thousand have had more than a sixth-grade education.

Is it any wonder the unemployment figures for Negroes are virtually double those for white workers throughout the country?

If the current Civil Rights Bill is passed, it will go a long way toward removing racial injustice in the South.

But it will scarcely touch the injustice that oppresses Negroes in all parts of the Nation today -- the injustice of poverty.

Only full and fair employment will solve that problem -- and education is the key. It is, in fact, the key to interracial harmony in more ways than one.

So far, I have spoken only of education in terms of quantity, and tried to point out that our need for more of it is desperate.

But what about the quality of our education? Is it the best we can expect?

Great numbers of Americans are being graduated from institutions of learning every year -- but can we claim they have been truly educated? Can we really claim their minds have been enlightened and freed from the bondage of ignorance?

It is a difficult claim to support when we see how many of them remain hobbled by the ignorant, self-defeating passions of racial prejudice.

Our failures in education must surely have been grave, for many generations, or the brutality of prejudice could never have grown so widespread in our land.

Dr. James B. Conant has defined the purpose of education in America as being "to cultivate in the largest possible number of our future citizens, an appreciation of both the responsibilities and the benefits which come to them because they are Americans, and are free."

And by that definition -- in the light of the present racial crisis -- it seems painfully clear that we still have much to learn.

I would like to conclude with another quotation, and I would like to commend it particularly to the three young men among you who now hold scholarships -- who are actively engaged in our system of education and will soon be engaged in our system of law.

It was written by the British Lord Acton, in 1881:

"The law of liberty tends to abolish the reign of race over race, of faith over faith, and of class over class. (This) is not the realization of a political ideal: It is the discharge of a moral obligation."

I believe that only insofar as we Americans are able to discharge that moral obligation -- only insofar as we are strong enough and wise enough to do so -- only to that extent can we call ourselves an educated people.

And only to that extent can we be assured that a legacy of freedom will be left to our children.

Thank you.