



Department of Justice

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ADDRESS
BY
ATTORNEY GENERAL ROBERT F. KENNEDY
AT THE
NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF CHRISTIANS AND JEWS DINNER
CLEVELAND, OHIO
DECEMBER 3, 1961

I am happy to be here tonight to join with you in honoring two distinguished citizens, Dr. Millis and Dr. Glennan, for their service to the cause of human relations. And, of course, I am deeply honored to accept this special citation from your organization which for more than 30 years has made such an outstanding contribution to the fight against prejudice and bigotry and in behalf of human liberty and civil rights.

During the campaign last year, President Kennedy said, "I believe in an America where religious intolerance will some day end -- where all men and all churches are treated as equal -- where every man has the same right to attend or not attend the church of his choice -- where there is no anti-Catholic vote, no bloc voting of any kind -- and where Catholics, Protestants and Jews at both lay and pastoral level will refrain from those attitudes of disdain and division which so often have marred their works in the past."

This kind of an America is a goal for all of us.

This has been the aim and the objective of the National Conference of Christians and Jews from the very beginning.

As we meet in Cleveland tonight, our minds are full of the headlines about Berlin, Viet Nam, test ban negotiations, fall out -- and outer space which was visited this week by an American chimpanzee.

While our scientists strive to lead the way to the moon, other Americans are helping new nations to decide their own destiny and keep their newly-won independence for the race won in outer space is meaningless if we fail in our efforts to extend the cause of freedom around the globe.

With so much of a commitment beyond our shores, we are tempted at times to forget that we still face great problems at home.

Members of this organization are perhaps more aware than most citizens that religious bigotry has existed and still exists in the United States. The National Conference of Christians and Jews was founded in 1928 by Americans who were concerned over the prejudice that had developed during the Presidential campaign that year. But what was not possible in 1928 was possible in 1960 and President Kennedy's election in one sense satisfied the purpose for which your organization came into being. But much more remains to be done.

Though the critical matters facing the nation are war, health, poverty and survival, there still are Americans who would vote against a candidate or for a candidate because of his religion. There still are neighborhoods and organizations and institutions in our society which exclude Americans because of the sound of their name or the color of their skin.

There are sections of the United States where citizens are denied the right to vote because of their race; Negroes still have not been accorded equal employment opportunities in many of our States; in some areas American Negroes as well as African diplomats and students are denied decent housing and service and facilities in public places.

These are matters that trouble all of us but while we are conscious of them and concerned about them, let us also consider some of the real progress that we have made.

In October 1960, at Wittenberg College, here in Ohio, President Kennedy declared that the Federal Government must set the example if employment opportunities are to be open equally to members of all races and creeds.

The President pointed out that no Negroes held important positions in the Federal Government; that no Negro headed a Federal Agency or held a policy-making post.

Then the President said:

"I believe we can do better."

Now, a year later, there still is much to be done. However, we have done better.

President Kennedy has named two Negroes to District Judgeships and appointed Thurgood Marshall to the United States Court of Appeals. When I came to the Department of Justice, there were only ten Negroes employed as lawyers; not a single Negro served as a United States Attorney -- or ever had in the history of the country. That has been changed. We in the Department of Justice are indebted to the City of Cleveland for giving to us such a competent and able lawyer as Merle McCurdy to serve as United States Attorney. Mr. McCurdy was appointed by the President because he was a lawyer of ability and integrity. That is the significant point.

In fact, all of these men were named to positions of trust in our Government -- not because of their race or the color of their skin -- but because they are men of outstanding qualifications and proven ability. However, they were not denied the opportunity to serve in these important positions because of their color. This is also important.

Earlier this week, a group of the Nation's leading industrial firms sent their executives to the White House to sign an agreement with the Federal Government to voluntarily concentrate their efforts on the task of providing more job opportunities for qualified Negroes. As the President said, such voluntary actions will benefit not only the companies involved but the country as well.

This September, white and Negro children went to school together in such cities as Atlanta, Dallas and Memphis and Little Rock and New Orleans. There was not a single community where local officials failed to meet their responsibilities. There was not a single incident of violence. Under difficult and trying personal circumstances, there was a recognition of responsibility; a willingness to uphold and live by the law.

Again on Friday of this past week, this same recognition of responsibility was demonstrated by the officials of Mississippi when a mob gathered to intimidate a group of Negro bus riders. It was an explosive situation. But ultimately law and order prevailed. Law enforcement officers met their obligations.

It is important that this whole problem be placed in proper perspective.

We are making progress in this country. The President and the Federal Government are working diligently toward that end. Further, the vast majority of American people are aware of the problem and anxious to do something about it.

Obviously, we are going to continue to face difficulties in this area for a long time to come. The problems will not disappear overnight. But this country will continue to move ahead in this field. We will not accept the status quo. We will continue to make progress. That is what is important.

We live in a free and open society; that is where our strength and greatness lies. We do not hide our faults behind a wall; we do not try to bury our mistakes; we do not conceal incidents, even though they are shameful. We have no secrets from ourselves or from others. If there is an outbreak of violence in some section of the United States, it is flashed around the world in less than an hour and quickly finds its way into the Communist propaganda mill.

And while we recognize our own faults and acknowledge our responsibilities to continue to do better, let us also recognize how much better we have done than the system with which we presently are struggling for men's souls and hearts.

Just consider a little of what has happened in the lands under the Communist regime in the field of civil rights in the last few months.

Yes, we have our problems in Alabama, but to be blunt, we are not shooting old women and young children in the back as the Communists are doing in Berlin. As the newspapers and people of the world freely discuss the errors of a small minority in this country and hold the entire United States responsible, the Communist officials themselves build a wall in Berlin to keep truth and freedom out -- and tyranny in. Those who attempt to flee the workers' paradise receive a bullet -- not a passport .

Can anybody equate the disturbance in Alabama last spring with the death by starvation of hundreds and hundreds of thousands of Chinese peasants under a farm commune system which has failed?

Consider how many thousands of words have been printed around the world about Birmingham and Montgomery compared to what has been said about this systematic extinction of large numbers of Chinese by their fellow

countrymen. How much more has been written about Little Rock than Tibet or even Hungary!

This a free society. Our faults are discussed. Our mistakes make a rich grist for the Communist propaganda machine. This we accept. However, let us all remember also that their failures are seldom even mentioned, their mistakes never fully known and the terror of this system discussed only when it becomes politically expedient. Five years after Khrushchev dies -- who will be moving his body?

Last week President Kennedy granted an unprecedented interview to Mr. Adzhubei, the Editor of Izvestia, and that newspaper with a circulation of four million, printed the text of the exchange.

Tass, the Soviet News Agency which provides news to some 200 million other Russians, printed only excerpts of the interview and paraphrased other parts. The interview was distorted. They carefully omitted three of the President's major points. Tass excluded the President's statement that (1) our conflict in Berlin exists because the Soviet Union does not intend to permit reunification of Germany; (2) that Russia violated the Yalta and Potsdam agreements by never allowing the countries of Eastern Europe the right to free elections, and (3) that the Soviet Union broke the moratorium on nuclear tests and prepared for new tests in the atmosphere while still negotiating with us in Geneva on a test ban. And, as a matter of fact, the Russian people have not even been told, to this day that their Government has set off some 50 nuclear explosions in the atmosphere.

The interview was of great importance and most significant however. For the first time the United States was able to have its position known to at least a percentage of the Russian people. The door to the truth was

opened a little in Russia. However, the mere fact that an interview should receive such attention indicates the tightness of the curtain around the Communist orbit.

In this country, as I have said, there is a religious intolerance. This nation and our Government are aware of such bigotry and have condemned it and are fighting it. How different from the Soviet Union where the Government itself recently deposed a number of Jewish religious leaders from their positions in religious congregations. Other Jewish lay leaders are serving long jail terms for so-called anti-state activities. And only a few months ago the Communist Party Journal attacked Jehovah's Witnesses and the Seventh Day Adventists as "poisonous religious narcotics."

In 1955 Justice Douglas and I visited Soviet Central Asia. Historically this had been a deeply religious part of the world. In Bukhara in 1920 before the Communists took control, there were 300 Mosques and religious schools. Now there is only one. In fact, there are only a handful of Mosques to serve the whole of Soviet Central Asia. In Ashkhabad, the capital of Turkmenistan, which has a population of 225,000, and in Stalinabad, the capital of Tadzhikistan, which has a population of 325,000, there are no Mosques and no religious schools. The officials with whom we talked made it clear that the Government considered religion backward.

The Soviet Union charges the West with colonialism. The countries of the West have all made mistakes in this field. But examine the colonial record of the Soviet Union. I am not referring just to Hungary, Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, and the rest but consider the region of Kazakistan for instance. Not only has religion been destroyed, but between 1926 and 1939, one out of every three Kazaks died in the Soviet effort to communize their farms. This process was repeated in many places in Russia. What the

Chinese are doing today, the Russians did 20 and 30 years ago with equal harshness and terror.

Though we have much to accomplish in this country let us keep our heads high and meet our difficulties with courage. As a nation we need not apologize, we have much to be thankful for. We have much of which we can be proud.

The fact that free men persist in the search for the truth, is the essential difference between Communism and Democracy. The other road might at times appear to be easier -- to be less troublesome -- to be more immediately profitable. Our way is more difficult and in these days more perilous. The fact however, that we would rather live in an open society than hide our troubles and mistakes behind a wall or barbed wire, is evidence of the strength of our Government and our way of life.

Thus, the great challenge to all Americans -- indeed to all free men and women -- is to maintain loyalty to truth; to maintain loyalty to free institutions; to maintain loyalty to freedom as a basic human value and above all else to keep in our hearts and minds the tolerance and mutual trust that have been the genius of American life throughout our history.

One of our great poets, Archibald Mac Leish, said:

"The American journey has not ended. America is never accomplished. America is always still to build; for men, as long as they are truly men, will dream of man's fulfillment."

Upon you and I, and our fellow countrymen, falls the challenge of protecting, not only our country, but the free people of the world in this hour of maximum need -- of greatest danger.

With confidence born and nurtured by knowledge and truth, and with the courage of free men, we shall prevail.