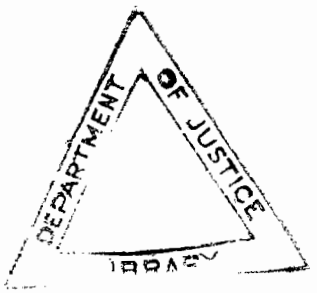
Department of Justice



Remarks

by

Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy

to the

120th Anniversary Dinner

of

B'nai B'rith

Conrad Hilton Hotel

Chicago

October 13, 1963

I am delighted to be with you tonight to share in your 120th Birthday Celebration.

This is no ordinary birthday. In addition to being the biblical age of Moses--and therefore an age of special significance--it represents the longest record of continuous service attained by any comparable organization founded in the United States.

But even if it were not so historic an occasion, I would be glad to come here to join in honoring Phil Klutnick.

In his devotion to public service, to the United States, and to causes of human rights, Phil Klutznick has earned our admiration and our gratitude.

He was, of course, president of B'nai B'rith--for he exemplifies the qualities that have made this organization great--and I am glad to say we did not permit him to retire from public service when he left the presidency of this organization.

One of the earliest acts of President Kennedy was to appoint him Ambassador to the United Nations. No sooner did he leave that post than he was asked to head the campaign to build a living memorial to Eleanor Roosevelt.

When this is completed, I know there will be many other tasks for him, because men like him are hard to find.

One hundred and twenty years ago, twelve men who had immigrated to this country came together in New York to dedicate themselves to the assistance of those in need. They saw as their mission the promotion of "the highest interests of humanity."

It has been said that there is no power so great as that of an idea whose time has come. Their ideas and purposes have been nobly fulfilled. I believe they would be proud of the size, the scope and the strength of B'nai B'rith today--and perhaps even more important--of the way their ideas have been developed in "the highest interests of humanity."

It is that concept--the rich legacy of belief in human rights, human dignity and human freedom which we have all inherited but which we sometimes fail to put into practice--that we commemorate and honor tonight.

We believe that freedom has but one message though it speaks in many tongues.

We believe that the denial of religious liberty is an ugly blot on the human conscience wherever and whenever it occurs--whether it restricts the rights of protestants in Communist China, Jews in the Soviet Union, or Catholics in Cuba.

We know that the pangs and pains of hunger and disease distress, without distinction, the child of poverty in Asia and the child of poverty here at home.

All Americans, of every color and creed, are the heirs of those beliefs with the right to share equally in their rewards as well as a responsibility to maintain them for those who will inherit them from us.

The books are still open on this generation's contribution to that legacy. Within our nation, north and south, equal opportunity for all is still for many citizens no more than an empty phrase.

But although this is a cause for concern, it is not a cause for disillusionment or discouragement. Democracy is never a final achievement. It is by nature an ever-changing challenge, a call to untiring effort, to renewed dedication, to new goals to meet the needs of each new generation.

We know full well the faults of our democracy--the handicaps of freedom --the inconvenience of dissent. But I know of no American who would not rather be a servant in the imperfect house of freedom, than be a master of all the empires of tyranny.

What do we mean by freedom? A generation ago, Franklin Roosevelt spoke of a world founded upon four freedoms: Freedom of Speech, Freedom of Worship, Freedom from Want, and Freedom from Fear.

Today, even before these four freedoms are secure, we would add two new freedoms to the galaxy by which our course is charted--freedom to learn and freedom of opportunity.

No doubt we could name other types of freedom that should be added. But in truth, there are not four freedoms, or six freedoms, or any higher number. There is only one.

Freedom is indivisible--and so is its defense. Each gives meaning to the others. The indivisibility of freedom is clear to all.

So long as one American child is denied the full freedom to learn--so long as one American family cannot be free from want--so long as one American citizen does not enjoy the right to speak or read or worship or vote as his conscience directs--then so long will the rights of all Americans be uncertain and unfilled.

There can be no freedom from want without freedom of opportunity; there can be no freedom of opportunity without freedom to learn; there can be no freedom from fear unless each of the other freedoms is attained.

Protecting the rights of minorities is not an act of generosity. For these basic rights cannot be separated in such a way as to apply in whole or in part to less than all of us.

Abraham Lincoln understood this when he wrote: "This is a world of compensation; and he who would be no slave must consent to have no slave. Those who deny freedom to others deserve it not for themselves, and, under a just God, cannot long retain it."

If the President's proposal for Civil Rights Legislation, now before Congress, is passed, it will go a long way toward removing inequities and injustices which are felt keenly by Negroes and to a lesser degree by other minority groups.

The legal remedies concern every American's right to vote, to go to school, to acquire a job and to be served in a public place without discrimination--rights which the members of this audience do not take for granted.

But the legislation embodies even more than legal remedies. And I believe this can be its most significant contribution. For this legislation has become an article of faith, testing whether white Americans can put aside sectional and political differences to meet racial problems which can no longer be ignored.

It has become an article of faith, testing how much meaning there is in 1963 to George Washington's pledge to the Jewish Synagogue in Newport, Rhode Island, when he said: "The American Government gives bigotry no sanction."

It is a test in the fullest sense of the term--a test which will determine in the eyes of the non-white population here in the United States and indeed abroad whether the white population, which controls the economy and the political life of this country, believe in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, or just mouth the words of these two documents.

We are in the midst of a national crisis which requires that we put aside partisan considerations and work for passage of the strongest possible bill. If the legislation is not enacted, not only will we not have legal tools to hasten the end of discriminatory practices which have been allowed to go on too long, but Negroes will suffer a loss of faith in the ability of their government to redress their grievances. The whole nation will be the loser. And we who are white particulary so, because we failed the pledge of our forefathers, we failed our country.

The legislation, of course, is not the whole answer. It will not solve the basic problems of poverty, prejudice, ignorance, disease and human misery.

The law which governs us must be written in the statute books. But there are areas in which our guide is more moral than legal--more a part of the basic fabric of humanity than a rigid code--more a part of our beliefs than specific rules of conduct.

We cannot depend upon statutes alone to guarantee our freedom. It takes the personal efforts of people like you, and organizations like B'nai B'rith, to assure its reality.

Personal efforts, in fact, are the mainspring of all public advances in a democracy--nothing comes to us of its own accord.

For example, we may tend to think of America as an educated country in the same automatic way that we think of it as a free country--yet education, no less than freedom itself, can never be taken for granted.

And the closer we look into the state of American education today, the more clearly we can see that it demands the active concern of all responsible citizens.

More than ten and a half million children are now studying in overcrowded classrooms.

One-seventh of the classrooms in the nation--some 235 thousand of them--were built before 1920. And fifty-one thousand of those are made of combustible materials.

We can boast that six out of ten high school graduates go on to some form of higher education or training--but to concentrate on that pleasant fact is to overlook others that are far less encouraging.

Thirty percent of all high-school seniors with grades showing that they are clearly college material--are unable to go to college either for lack of funds or for lack of space in the colleges that ought to accommodate them.

Even more disturbing is the fact that no less than one-third of all our young people do not graduate from high school at all. These are the millions of school "drop-outs," whose plight has come to form a nationwide problem of critical proportions.

When no adequate remedial schooling is provided for these children--and none is available in many communities--they often find themselves not only unemployed but virtually unemployable, for they lack any marketable skill in a society where the need for unskilled labor is rapidly shrinking under the advance of automation.

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

B'nai B'rith has shown itself alert to this problem with the establishment of its vocational service, which offers job counselling and career guidance to boys and girls in nineteen major cities.

This clearly is the kind of work that must be done, on a massive scale, and it can only be done through the concerted efforts of private and public organizations within each community.

It was Thornton Wilder who said:

"Every good and excellent thing stands moment by moment on the razor-edge of danger and must be fought for."

I would add that it must be fought for by every generation. It is up to us to decide where this generation will stand and how it will prepare its sons and daughters for the future.

I feel confident that you, as individuals and as an organization, will not be content to see things left as they are.

I believe that the traditions of B'nai B'rith--your noble concept of men working together to "promote the highest interests of humanity"--will prove to be as sound and as effectual in the next one hundred and twenty years as they have in the past. I know that you and your organization will give the leadership and that effort will continue to lift the hearts and enlighten the minds of all Americans. For all this I thank you.