



Department of Justice

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ADDRESS BY ATTORNEY GENERAL ROBERT F. KENNEDY
AT THE ANNUAL LUNCHEON OF THE ASSOCIATED PRESS
NEW YORK CITY, APRIL 23, 1962

Mr. McKelway, I very much appreciate your generous invitation to be here this afternoon.

There have been some comments about the Department of Justice awakening three newsmen in the middle of the night to ask some questions. I want to tell you the reaction of your reporter, Louis Panos, who covers the Department of Justice for The Associated Press.

The next evening Mr. Panos came into my office and said:

"I am just leaving for home and before I go to bed is there anything you'd really like to know?" Then he said:

"Don't call me, I'll call you."

I want to assure you that we do not make a practice of calling reporters at two or three o'clock in the morning. But to tell the truth, when I get called at two or three in the morning by a reporter for the Associated Press -- and it happens -- I am not too sure it wouldn't be a good idea.

I am grateful for your invitation to be here today because I have a high regard for newspapermen who accept their responsibility to probe tirelessly for the truth.

I do not believe that newspapermen are self-appointed judges of what's right or wrong, or what's good or bad. But I believe in and greatly admire those who are competent to seek the truth and inform the people. In my opinion, the newspapers are equal to the courts -- and sometimes ahead of the courts -- in our system -- in protecting the people's fundamental rights.

Since my recent trip around the world, I am even more aware of the tremendous role that a free press plays in a free society, and of the absolute necessity that newspapers make a concerted effort to get the truth to the people.

The Associated Press is distributed in more than 100 languages in 89 countries around the world. Those statistics tell clearly what heavy responsibilities and burdens you gentlemen bear.

But on my trip -- wherever I visited -- in Japan, Indonesia, Thailand, Germany and Holland -- I found a great deal of misinformation and misunderstanding about the United States and the American people.

This was especially true among the students with whom the communists -- though small in number -- have done a more effective job in spreading the communist line than we have in telling the truth about our economic and social progress and about our fundamental beliefs as free men.

In Indonesia, I met with a group of 25 student leaders and the leader, whom I later learned was a member of the Communist Party, asked me the following questions in rapid fire:

"Why does the United States not agree that colonialism is bad -- that colonialism is completely amoral? Why doesn't the United States insist, along with Indonesia, that the Dutch evacuate West New Guinea and turn the territory over to the Indonesians?"

I answered by asking these questions:

"You say you are against colonialism in West New Guinea. Are you really against colonialism? Are you against the colonialism that the Russians have imposed on Southeast Europe? Are you against Chinese colonialism in Tibet? Are you against Russian troops going into Hungary? Are you against Soviet domination of Poland, Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia, Bulgaria, and Rumania? How do you feel about this modern-day colonialism?"

The aggressive young man spoke up again. These examples did not show colonialism, he said -- all of the people of the countries I mentioned supported their governments. They supported communism. They had a strong bond of affection for the Russians.

"How then do you explain the wall across Berlin?" I asked. "If the governments of these countries, dominated by the communists, are supported by the people, as you say -- if they have free elections -- why then is it necessary to shoot down women and children who attempt to escape across the wall?"

"What is your explanation for the fact that for the first time in the history of mankind, a wall has been erected not to keep bandits or marauders out, but to keep an entire people in? Can you explain that?"

The young communist's answer was brazenly simple:

"We did not come here to discuss details. We came to talk about the United States' position on West New Guinea."

Not one voice there was raised to protest or question his statement. Looking at the faces of these young people I could not find even a flicker of opposition to the colonialism of the Soviet Union or Communist China. This new, modern-day form of colonialism was not to be discussed. This was quite clear.

The meeting broke up amicably. I went to my room to finish packing. Fifteen minutes later when I came out, four or five of the group were

waiting to see me. They were extremely cordial. They asked inquisitive, friendly questions about the United States and about the American people. Their attitude was completely different than it had been during the meeting.

They admitted quite frankly that they had not expressed their views at the meeting because these subjects just never were discussed by them or by any of their friends in public. Quite clearly they were completely intimidated by the communists and had been for some time.

But it was not just with the students that I encountered this misinformation. The head of a leading Japanese labor organization, with millions of members, told me that a few industrialists -- Wall Street, the Morgan Bank and the Rockefellers -- run the United States. I said, "not yet."

Also I asked him how he explained Arthur Goldberg, former counsel for the Steel Workers Union and the AFL-CIO, being Secretary of Labor. If his idea of America was correct, how could John F. Kennedy, with the backing of labor, become President. He had no answer. In fact, incredible as it may seem, these questions hardly seemed to have occurred to him.

This man was not a communist. He said that he just felt the United States was imperialistic. He was very bright, attractive, articulate and convinced he was right. But his ideas about the United States were 50 or 100 years out of date.

The students who visited me in Indonesia after I spoke and the Japanese labor leader are typical of the majority of persons we encountered on our trip. They are not communists nor even pro-communist, and they have tremendous reservoirs of good will toward America and the American people. But they have serious questions about our country and our way of life.

They know we have made great material progress but they have difficulty understanding our federal system of government.

They do not understand that the American people have great concern about their fellow Americans and about their fellow human beings.

They do not know that the American people are dedicated to making progress toward our national goals as set forth in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, and that the American people are fiercely determined to remain free.

So, we have a great problem but we have a great opportunity, and, in my judgment, unless we are able in the next decade to convince the people of foreign countries -- and particularly the students -- that we are true to our ideals and that prosperity and decent health can be achieved in a system that preserves individual liberty, we will lose the cold war no matter how much money we spend on aid.

But I believe that if we get busy and enter this battle for the minds of tomorrow's leaders with all the skill, vigor and dedication at our command, we will win hands down. I believe this because we have so much going for us -- despite what success the articulate, highly disciplined communist cadres have had.

The President said in his State of the Union message that "our overriding obligation in the months ahead is to fulfill our own faith . . . for if we cannot fulfill our own ideals here, we cannot expect others to accept them. And when the youngest child alive today has grown to the cares of manhood, our position in the world will be determined first of all by what provisions we make today -- for his education, his health, and his opportunities for a good home and a good job and a good life."

The importance of the President's statement came home to me again and again on my trip.

Every place, every city, every community, every country that I visited -- whether it was a press conference, a talk with students or a meeting with labor leaders or businessmen -- I was questioned about problems here in the United States -- what progress we were making, what steps we were taking.

When Carlos P. Romulo who is a great friend of the United States and the American people, came to my office just before he left Washington recently, he said that we were destined to continue to lead the world. However he warned that the one thing that can stop us -- the one thing that will stand in our way is if we don't deal with the important civil rights problems. People are just not going to believe that we live by the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution if we don't treat our fellow human beings as human beings. He said we have a responsibility and obligation to do this.

And to put it another way in the language of your newsdesks, we must be sure we have a solid story first before we can worry about giving it effective display.

On my trip when I was asked about civil rights, what steps we are taking -- and it happened again and again -- I said quite frankly we had major problems but that we were making progress.

I told them about the progress we are making -- that dramatic strides have been made in guaranteeing that all our citizens are able to exercise their fundamental freedoms equally. I cited instances of this progress such as the fact that for the first time in the history of the United States Negroes hold positions of District Court judges; that two of our biggest cities -- Cleveland and San Francisco have United States Attorneys who are Negroes; that Negroes occupy other high places in the government and that they are not selected just because they are Negroes but because they had ability and integrity and they were not denied the opportunity for employment because they were Negroes.

I said that while we have made progress there was much more we could do and much more that we will do; that the problems and difficulties and even the violence they would read about and hear about meant that we were moving ahead -- that the American Government and the American people were dissatisfied with the status quo.

Sometimes I was asked about racketeers and hoodlums. Again I could cite the progress that has been made. In January 1961 the Department of Justice began a major effort against organized crime and racketeering. Federal law enforcement investigations are now being coordinated effectively and we are pooling information from the files of federal and local law enforcement agencies about more than 700 top racketeers. Five of eight bills which we submitted to Congress were enacted and had an immediate effect in lessening gambling profits which finance all other forms of organized crime.

I wish I could stand here today and tell you we have organized crime on the run; that in every city throughout the United States it has been brought to the point where it can be controlled by the local authorities. The important racketeers and hoodlums are well aware of the pressures that have been placed upon them and they are uneasy. However we have a long way to go and much to do, but we have made progress.

But the fact that we have these problems and difficulties in civil rights and law enforcement and other areas is what leads to misunderstandings and misconceptions about the United States by the small communist groups who then say for example:

"How can you believe the United States? How can you believe that they believe in equality if they won't treat minority people equally?"

What we must do is make it clear that we in this country are not going to accept the status quo; that we are not selfish people interested only in ourselves and our pocketbooks, that we are interested in our fellow citizens.

Capitalism has become a dirty word because it is synonymous with selfishness. Many people in foreign lands believe that Americans are interested only in material gain, that they are not interested in their neighbors, not interested in their communities and not interested in those that are less well off.

Many of you through your newspapers and your civic efforts have assisted your fellow citizens in many ways and you are well aware how much effort Americans expend on improving their churches, their cities and schools and aiding those less fortunate. This is what is truly the United States. This is what is truly the real character of the American people.

This is the story that deserves banner play overseas. This is the story that we must tell and I think we have many other assets as well.

In the first place we are not afraid to admit that everything is not perfect within our borders -- that this is a strength of America and not a weakness. One of our greatest assets in this struggle is that we have the truth on our side.

We can stand to hear conflicting ideas and voices of dissent, not only among our citizens, but among our Allies and the non-aligned nations.

We encourage free inquiry and free experiment.

We believe that the state exists to serve the people.

All this distinguishes us from our adversaries and it was my experience that there are not only reservoirs of good will toward America in the countries I visited but that we -- not the communists -- share the common aspirations of people to be free and to be masters of their own destinies.

So, I believe there is a great deal we can do now to help these young people know the facts about us and our way of life. It will not involve large sums of money to do the job but it will require understanding and effort and hard work.

First, we can send groups of men and women to all nations to lecture not just about the United States and our form of government, or even democracy generally -- but to talk also about history and philosophy and literature, and even more practical matters.

These individuals should make tours of as many universities as possible and should confer with labor leaders, farm and cooperative leaders, newspaper editors, businessmen and government officials, as well as students. The people who would be sent should know the history of the United States, the philosophy of their government and be articulate in their understanding of the American people. In recent weeks, two men who have heard me discuss this problem have volunteered to speak at universities on trips they are making to the Far East. One is a young, leading businessman and the other is a top labor official. I know they both will make a favorable impression and they will help.

But I would like to see many more people go -- Senators, Cabinet members, Congressman, Governors, university professors, playwrights and poets travel for this purpose. I would like to see Walter Lippmann tour the Far East for a month, speaking on a number of subjects and answer the questions of students and intellectuals.

Secondly, our government information agencies and services can talk more about the fundamentals in the United States. They explain the social progress being made in this country; what great contributions charitable organizations are making in medicine, sociology, education and all walks of life -- both organizations like the Ford, Carnegie and

Rockefeller Foundations. I propose that our information agencies speak quite frankly and openly about the problems and difficulties we have in our country while at the same time strengthening the efforts being made by the government and the American people to deal with these problems and move ahead.

Third, we should encourage other free countries of the world to set up their own peace corps with the understanding that our organization will cooperate closely with them.

There is much for instance that young Japanese could do in South-east Asia. I am convinced they would be willing to do it.

Many young Germans, Frenchmen and Dutch are as anxious as young Americans to help their fellowmen and others less fortunate economically.

Among all of the students with whom I have talked, I found an idealism and a thirst to make the world a better place in which to live. This is a tremendous potential and it must be harnessed and utilized.

Your organization, going to 89 countries, can do so much in bringing the truth -- good or bad -- but the truth -- to all the people. And you individually as publishers of the greatest free press in the world can do so much in your own communities.

Raymond Clapper said:

"Never overestimate the facts that the public has, but never underestimate the ability of the people to draw their own conclusions from the facts."

Hard, digging reporting -- the type that made it possible for the McClellan Committee to unveil the full danger of organized crime in America -- is absolutely essential. Thirty percent of the leads which the McClellan Committee received came from newspapers. This information did not always come from the large newspapers. It came from newspapers who recognized their responsibility to their local areas and made it their business to know what was going on in their communities.

There are so many internal problems which the press can help solve, which in the last analysis relate to honest, efficient administration of government -- whether it is in a city, county, state or federal agency.

It is virtually impossible for even the most alert administration to be fully aware of all the corruption or laxity that can creep into our government. But, an alert press can make a major difference not only in eliminating wasteful or corrupt practices, but in insuring that justice prevails.

Our greatest strength in international affairs is our integrity in handling our own affairs at home. And if you are diligent and do

your job and if we do ours in cleansing our cities, counties, states and federal government of waste, mismanagement, corruption and intolerance we will triumph. For even with the problems and difficulties which we have now, we stand out in a category of the highest integrity measured by other nations today. Continuation and improvement of that record can be our greatest assurance in the long sweep of history.

So we need your assistance. But most of all we need your vigilance.

We are willing to make the sacrifices that are needed and we have always had the toughness, courage and perseverance to see the job through. We have the will to win. Therefore, I know we will win.