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BY

ATTORNEY GENERAL ROBERT F. KENNEDY

BEFORE THE

UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF MAYORS

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2 P.M.

Recently in my travels I've had a chance to glance at some of your calendars and day books. It is apparent that the Mayor's desk is at the cross roads of our domestic problems and there are very few turnoffs. It is here, as Harry Truman observed, "where the buck stops."

Among the many concerns that come to rest there, none is more bothersome and important than our growing and unwanted stockpile of idle youth. Ant the street corner warehouses are brimming.

Today's three-quarter million youths who are out of school and out of work increased 22 percent in one year. And just to keep us even in the job race, we need to have 10,000 new openings every day.

Our problems are compounded because we have so many youngsters who are unfit for work no matter how many jobs we find. I am sure none of you need to look very far to find a boy who cannot read your job application blank, who doesn't know how to dress when he comes for an interview.

These youngsters are standing in the complex economic market place with nothing to sell. They have been marked by the handicappers in a skill-oriented nation long before they ran their first race.

Last year, on June 11, 1963, President Kennedy gave this description of a Negro child's birthright:

"The Negro baby born in America today, regardless of the section of the nation in which he is born, has about one-half as much chance of completing high school as a white baby born in the same place on the same day. One-third as much chance of completing college, one-third as much chance of becoming a professional man, twice as much chance of becoming unemployed, about one-seventh as much chance of earning \$10,000 a year, a life expectancy which is seven years shorter, and the prospects of earning only half as much."

Today, May 25, 1964, that child is within 17 days of being one year old. Have the odds in our communities changed for that child?

As public officials isn't a major part of our task to change those odds - to change them for every child - whatever color - who isn't running even? When we talk about birthright we talk about the right of opportunity, the right of opportunity to succeed or fail on individual talents developed unfettered by man-made barriers.

And opportunity denied or opportunity delayed -- often one and the same -- is not a question of color. One-tenth of our population is Negro. But one-fifth of our fellow Americans are poor.

I could tell you what the odds makers would say of a white child born somewhere in a shack in the vast hills and valleys of despair we call Apalachia.

The child would have about one-half the chance of completing the fifth grade as other American youngsters.

He or she would receive about half the educational dollars that are spent on the average American youngster.

As a young adult the chances are twice as great that he or she would live in substandard housing and equally twice as great that he or she would eventually have to move from home for lack of work.

In one community I visited recently in one of the back hollows of West Virginia, there were 40 families, but only three - only three - had fathers who were working. Ninety-five percent of the children were not in school, partially because a school bus could not get up the rutted road and no effort had been made to arrange other transportation.

And those who were in school -- they sat in a school house without running water, and without indoor plumbing; a school where books are out of date and worn, where the supply cabinet has little more than a box of pencils and a few crayons; a school house where the brightly colored food posters distributed by the National Dairy Council, provide a contrast with the surplus commodities the youngsters had for dinner the night before.

The storehouse that is accumulating these statistics is as explosive a container of unrest as any ghetto fenced by prejudice.

Again, we need not single out Appalachia. I am sure that all of us here today can think of examples in our own communities. Our cities contain neighborhoods in which the odds makers would have no trouble ticking off the handicaps.

The dilemma I'm talking about is the dilemma of youth, whether they "hand around" at the side of a muddy road in West Virginia or on a street corner in Harlem. They can be found - differing only in number - in every city and hamlet in these United States.

Do they have rights without substance? Do they have opportunity that has been stalled - promise that has been delayed?

In the same fashion that some of us have public accommodation laws and fair employment practices legislation, all of us have public education statutes. But how meaningful and how uniform are these - not on the law books, but in practice? How uniform is the quality of classroom teaching, the quality of the teacher, and the quality of the books in one part of the city as opposed to another - in a suburb as opposed to a slum.

Recently on a visit to Harlem I was told that between the third and sixth grade in this troubled community's schools the average I.Q. of students drops ten points and that 94 percent are one-to-two years behind in their reading ability.

The law is not enough. The right defined by law is not enough whether it concerns education or civil rights. Within weeks we shall have a Civil Rights Bill. It will be the law of the land and it will call for compliance, which is merely a submission to the process of law.

And we all know how painful and how hard our struggle has been in the last decade for just compliance with the law. Again, we will have to ask ourselves is just compliance enough? Again, we must ask ourselves: How willing and how meaningful will we make that compliance?

This is not a question that must only be answered by the South. Recent events in Northern cities have demonstrated amply that significant compliance - compliance backed by intent, heart and mind - is a problem there as well. For compliance anywhere does not begin at the end of a nightstick; nor is it easily achieved.

The mere presence of machinery - for civil rights or idle youth and their impoverished parents - does not insure service. The fact that the structure exists has not insured its full use - and particularly its use to best advantage.

Recently in the Capital -- in the City of Washington -- this lag of structure behind use was dramatically illustrated. We have many Government and private agencies dedicated to relieving some of our severe social problems.

More than a thousand families who live in what gently is called a "deteriorating neighborhood" were surveyed to learn how many had contact with our private and public social agencies. These were some of the findings:

Fewer than 5 percent of the families were involved with the boy scouts.

Fewer than 3 percent of the families were reached by the Boys Clubs.

Fewer than 3 percent had contact with the Salvation Army.

And one highly publicized settlement house reached three-tenths of one percent of the families.

The U. S. Employment Service reached about 11 percent; the PTA and other school groups, 9 percent, and only about 14 percent had any contact at all with churches.

Now the church, the Employment Service and the settlement house all were there. But again, this was not enough to reach the troubled youths and their parents in this neighborhood.

Today we have the new war on poverty and a host of expanded Government services - all intent on bridging the gap between structure and use. While these will be debated and hammered into Legislation on the Federal level, they will be organized and carried out by and in the communities.

To organize our communities we need not bodies, but brains. We need not simply able bodies, but the best brains.

The hardest task is to appoint and incorporate in our work a group of men and women with the power and willingness to look at our community difficulties, dissect them, criticize areas of shortcoming - and make meaningful suggestions.

Sometimes, too, it is hard to accept that sort of recommendation. For sometimes it carries with it announced or implied criticism of programs that have failed us in the past. Change means that someone's professional feathers will be ruffled, that a glass-topped desk might be moved to another office or abandoned, that pet programs might die.

Progress is the nice word we like to use. But change is its motivator. And change has its enemies.

The willingness to confront that change will determine how much we shall really do for our youth and how truly meaningful our efforts will be.

The test will be not how elaborate we make our proposals for new programs and new funds, but how well these programs affect the inadequacies of old, how willing we are to change the old.

Each of us as office holders has a very precious piece of that irreplaceable commodity that ticks away at our backs -- the commodity called time. We hold it and expend it for constituencies. Are we prepared to expend it by seizing the initiative now? Are we prepared to invest however many months or years remain in our respective offices to forge meaningful compliance?

I wish I could stand here this afternoon and tell you that we who are part of the Federal Government can provide the answers, that we have provided very many answers.

Many of you have suggested in easy to understand language that we haven't, that we, too, must look at the old, that we, too, must achieve the meaningful working relationships among our own agencies that we desire others to achieve. And Much of the criticism has been right.

I'm sure that in this room there is no shortage of examples.

As a matter of fact your very able chairman could tell of the day when Federal officials were sitting in his office discussing with him how to organize both city and federal resources in a concerted attack on

community problems. A newspaper reporter interrupted the meeting to inform the mayor that the city had just received a federal grant -- a grant unknown to the mayor and, for that matter, unknown to the federal officials sitting in that room.

We plead guilty as charged. I must ask you, though, to provide an organized community approach that will help us to line up our own forces. But however, well we put our own house in order, the bulk of the burden still will fall on you.

The right to eat in a restaurant may be given Americans beneath the marble dome of Congress, but the food will be served up in your town. A large part of a school drop-out program may be financed out of a federal office building, but the youngster will be chosen and helped by you.

Wherever drop-out programs have worked, or job training has been successful, or educational approaches have been revised -- in all of these places we have found full political commitment. We have seen the political and business leadership of the community combine to back up the social worker, the youth leader, the teacher who all have cried out about these problems for so long.

And they have worked.

We have proved again and again that important changes can be made in the deprived areas, that compliance to our social obligations can be meaningful.

Teachers have been trained to serve in the slums. And they have served well. Residents of impoverished areas can be called upon to help each other. And they have helped greatly. College youth can be recruited to teach their less affluent neighbors. And they have taught enthusiastically.

We have shown that I.Q.'s in the slums can rise rather than fall, that training programs provide jobs for the idle, and that new educational approaches provide hope for the previously hopeless.

In the last few weeks, I was in Prince Edward County in Virginia to accept 9,964 pennies donated by children for the John F. Kennedy Library. For four years there were no schools at all in Prince Edward County. Youngsters who were ten and twelve years old formerly couldn't read the cover of a first grade book. They read now. They do arithmetic now. They have meaningful education now.

Our task is to spread these achievements from the isolated to the general, from the test cases to all cases. The question facing us is: Can we combine all of these isolated successes within a single community?

Can we combine the established city leadership with the new leaders of the impoverished in an organized attack that will benefit both?

I firmly believe that your talents and your willpower dictate a unanimous answer of yes.

If we do this together, then that child born last year, that Negro child, that Appalachian child -- and all children like them, will disappoint the oddsmakers and the handicappers. And together we shall collect the winnings for having cheated failure and having glorified opportunity.