



Department of Justice

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THE PRESIDENT JOHN F. KENNEDY LECTURE
BY
ATTORNEY GENERAL ROBERT F. KENNEDY
AT THE
FREE UNIVERSITY OF BERLIN
June 26, 1964

I greatly appreciate your kindness in asking me to return to the Free University to give this address in honor of President Kennedy. I know he would have been proud to be honored in this way and in this place.

Excellence of education was particularly close to his heart and to be associated with this memorial that reaches to the minds of men would have greatly pleased him. But even more than education, more than any other human quality, President Kennedy admired courage. As Cicero once said, "There is nothing more fair, more beautiful, more to be loved than high courage." He spoke often of his visit to Berlin. He admired its vitality and its dedication. But most of all, he admired its courage. And he knew that the Free University was the heartbeat and soul of that courage -- that commitment to what is best in man.

When the honorable purpose of The University of Berlin was cruelly distorted, the Professors and students came here, unwilling to be diverted in their search for the truth and refusing to surrender their freedom. East Berlin has the buildings. West Berlin has the University -- an institution dedicated to the education of free men and celebrated around the world as a monument to the courage of the free mind. It would have been, therefore, a source of deep satisfaction to President Kennedy to be remembered by this University, and for the same reasons I am honored to become one of your "graduates."

Nothing was closer to President Kennedy than the thoughts and feelings of the students of the world -- the future artists, scientists, managers, public servants, political leaders -- all those to whom the destiny of our civilization is confided. He was concerned not only because he was young himself, but also because he had a unique rapport with young people around the world. I think the young felt that he was going to battle to insure that the world would still be intact when it was turned over to them for their direction, and that it would, perhaps, be even a little better place than when he and his generation inherited it. That was his objective. He felt, in fact, that it was his responsibility.

It is a commonplace to say that the young will inherit the future. Of course they will: The laws of life and death make this inevitable. But this proposition ceases to be a commonplace when older people begin to act upon it. And never in history has it been more necessary to

recognize the just claims of youth than it is today.

But it is all very well to criticize the older generation and to demand a greater say in the future of the world. But at the same time, we -- you and I -- must recognize our particular responsibility to our communities and to our countries. That responsibility and how we can best discharge it in a world swept with change, must be the greatest concern of the young, the free, and the educated of the world. That is what I want to talk about with you this evening.

In quieter times when the pace of scientific and social change was slow, it might have been possible to forget about the young and for the young to be unconcerned about the future. But our world has changed more in the last hundred years than in the thousand years preceding. We live in the midst of an endless revolution -- social, technical, intellectual. It reconstructs every aspect of our environment and of our daily lives. The onward rush of science and technology is transforming the face of our earth.

President Kennedy once described the rush of this development by figuratively condensing the fifty thousand years of man's recorded history into half a century. Of these fifty years, he said, we would know very little about the first forty, except that man learned to use animal skins to cover himself. Then about ten years ago, in this analogy, man emerged from caves to construct other kinds of shelter. Only five years ago, man learned to write and use a cart with wheels. Christianity began less than two years ago. The printing press came this year, and then, less than two months ago, during this fifty-year span of human history, came the steam engine. Last month, electric lights, telephones, automobiles and airplanes became available. We developed penicillin, television and nuclear power only last week. And in a few figurative hours, man will reach the moon.

On this scale of time, modern freedom and democracy are less than three months old. And the explosions of change which shook the old world in 1776 and 1789 continue at a faster and faster pace to shake the political foundations of our contemporary world. Countries long fallen into oblivion now demand full membership in the 20th century. Countries never even heard of two decades ago now can affect the history of the world.

The developing nations remind us that Europe and America may not be the final and permanent center of human affairs. They have caused us to reexamine the Western role and Western responsibility. Even in our own America and Europe the winds of change blow more strongly than ever.

In my country there has developed in the last three years an accelerating movement for human rights -- a revolution which is steadily and surely bringing our Negro citizens to full equality in American society. In Western Europe, the movement toward unity is overcoming the national antagonisms fostered by centuries of rivalry and strife. In Eastern Europe the forces of diversity are weakening the rigid bonds of doctrine.

In Asia, the Communist empire is torn by conflict approaching the proportions of religious war. The Sino-Soviet split probably is the major fact of present international affairs.

Such developments illustrate the clouds that obscure the future. Who among us, a dozen years ago, would have foreseen the shape of the world today? And, a dozen years hence, equally surprising events will give a new cast to world affairs. "We know what we are," Shakespeare writes, "but know not what we may be." Thus, we live in a world of exceptional uncertainty and hazard. But we also live in a world which gives us a foundation for a future of exceptional excitement and possibility. That foundation is freedom.

Freedom lives today because freedom permits us change, because like man and like change, it is flexible, because it can continually evoke the best talent, the best minds, and the most imaginative concepts to the immense challenges that face us around -- and above -- the globe. By our commitment to freedom we are not only committed to the present or to the future. We are committed to what is best in man.

The Communists seek to conquer the future in the name of another set of commitments. But they make commitments to a fixed doctrine of the past. They make commitments to dogmatism, not to freedom; to dictatorship, not to democracy; to arbitrary powers not to just laws. They seek rigid solutions to changing problems. They seek to force old answers on new questions. The wall that scars your city is a supreme demonstration of the truth that in a changing world, fixed answers are no answers at all. On the contrary, they are a response of frustration to the tides of change which no man can predict or repel.

Besides the Communists, there are those in our midst who make commitments to simple slogans and easy answers. They think that a bomb can make our difficulties disappear; they believe that threats demonstrate courage; they imagine that violent talk can bring peace. But these men seek to get something for nothing. They expect the unbought ease of life. They try to force simple answers on hard problems.

In fact, the future does not belong either to those who place their trust in dogmatic certainties, or to those who believe in fairy tales. The future belongs to those who have confidence in it, to free men dedicated to the importance of the individual and to the proposition that the state exists for the individual, not the individual for the state. It is our commitment to freedom which gives us the mechanism with which to meet and shape the future. Our obligation today is to give this commitment new meaning in our whirling world. In the long run, the only weapon freedom needs is truth. In the short run, it must have other allies.

The first ally is courage and I hardly need underline this point in free Berlin. You have made the point for the world and for history with your unshakeable loyalty to the free spirit.

The second ally is strength and again, Berlin is an example for the world. We all know that it is not freedom which is under siege here. It is not freedom which has been afraid of being infected. Freedom has been walled out, not in.

My own country has repeatedly pledged its support to the defense of free Berlin. We are proud to share in that defense, not only through those Americans who serve in the allied garrison in this city, but also through those who stand guard elsewhere in Germany and the men behind them in the United States. They are here not only in your interest but in our own and in the interests of a peaceful world. For we who live across the seas have learned twice in this century that aggression in Europe is aggression against the United States. The presence of American troops in Europe is a visible guarantee that, as President Kennedy said last year at Frankfurt, we will risk our cities to defend yours. And this American Army will stay in Germany so long as it has a role to play in the defense of freedom.

A third ally of freedom, hardly less important than courage and strength is our capacity for imagination and innovation. Without it, freedom does not remain a flexible philosophy for the future, but merely a pious label for our rigidities of the present or the past. The recent history of your city, country and of Western Europe demonstrates the need for this capacity.

The present economic and social renaissance of Europe does not stem from the abrasive national rivalries of the past. It is the result of the development of imaginative common institutions. The Marshall Plan, the Schumann Plan, the North Atlantic Organization, the Common Market have established a new framework, within which progress could be made, prosperity created, and freedom enlarged. But however successful these institutions have been, their true measure is their capacity for continued growth and change. The Atlantic Nations must constantly renew the vitality of the institutions which brought success yesterday. In politics as in biology, to endure we must evolve. "He who moves not forward," wrote Goethe, "goes backward."

This capacity for imaginative response to change can do more than preserve or improve our own societies. Atlantic partnership can promote unity and freedom for all Europe. It can set up a kind of gravitational pull on the countries to the east, permitting them, by slow stages of internal transformation, eventually to achieve their true destiny.

President Kennedy came to this continent last year primarily to keep the door open for Atlantic partnership and European unity. Last month, at the dedication of a memorial to General Marshall, the father of the Marshall Plan, President Johnson declared, "We will continue to build bridges across the gulf which has divided us from Eastern Europe" to speed the time when all of Europe may be joined in a shared society of freedom. All this has a special meaning for Germany. For it is in an integrated Europe that Germany will find its appropriate role of dignity

and equality and it is in an integrated Europe that Germany will most surely recover its own unity -- a goal to which my country is deeply and unalterably pledged.

I believe the youth of Europe share in the creative and imaginative spirit that underlies these efforts. There is widespread support among young Europeans for European unity as the best way of assuring peace and progress. And I am sure they are right in their confidence that European integration runs with the grain of history. Of course, there will be delays and disappointments; history is rarely a painless process. But, if we are not diverted or discouraged, it is in a truly united Germany and united Europe that your children will grow to manhood.

Education is the fourth ally freedom requires if it is to endure and flourish. It was no accident or coincidence that the Free University of Berlin was founded so early in the life of West Berlin. This University is integral to your freedom, just as education and free inquiry are integral and essential to freedom wherever it exists. As Thomas Jefferson, one of the moving forces of American independence, observed 150 years ago, "if a nation expects to be ignorant and free, it expects what never was and never will be." I am not talking about mere knowledge, for knowledge as such is meaningless. The vital function of education is to learn how to learn, to learn how to respond to new advances. And this is perhaps even more true in the social and political world than it is in the scientific.

What this institution, and its sister universities throughout the free world, can contribute is a stream of men and women who understand that freedom requires the ability to deal with problems rationally and flexibly. This cannot flow from the frozen dictates of doctrine. Rather, it must come from the attitudes of curiosity about changing reality which a university fosters.

"The destiny of any nation, at any given time," wrote Goethe, "depends on the opinions of its young men, under 25." In this changing world, his words are increasingly true. Today, youth is not only destiny and the future. To an accelerating extent youth is the present. In every Latin American country, a majority of the population is under 25. In India, 6 out of 10 are under 25. In dozens of the young nations, the classroom is only a few short years away from the presidential palace.

The older leaders of established states cannot hope to speak effectively to the young, impatient, rebellious men of the developing states. It is up to the coming generation in the West to clasp hands across the world and show its contemporaries in the new nations that we share a common cause and a common goal. That is why President Kennedy's Peace Corps has had such success in establishing bonds of cooperation and hope, and why your own Peace Corps, is such a welcome development. They demonstrate among our young people a recognition of the responsibilities of freedom.

It is the advance of civilization, after all, which is the ultimate purpose of education. The Greeks described education as the excellence which makes a person long to be a perfect citizen -- knowing both how to rule and how to be ruled. And the Greeks gave us an extraordinary example of the meaning of those words. As empires go, Athens was a tiny city with a small population. But its political thought, its drama, its poetry, and its art have lived on for centuries. Unlike so many lost cultures, the glory of Greece is relevant not only to archaeologists and scholars, but to the continued enrichment of civilization today.

The underlying reason was the importance given to the individual and to his responsibility for individual and social freedom. Such responsibility was not a matter of choice in Athens; it was a matter of duty. One could no more be a passive citizen than one could be a free slave. "Our ordinary citizens," said Pericles in his funeral oration, "though occupied with the pursuits of industry, are still fair judges of public matters . . . unlike any other nation, we regard him who takes no part in these duties not as unambitious but as useless."

That emphasis ennobles our strivings today. We cannot tolerate passive citizenship and passive commitment to freedom today any more than could the fathers of the first democracy. And the responsibility to participate in your government and community is even greater for you. You came here not merely to become intellectual tradesmen; you are not educated by this University merely to make a prosperous living in an upper class. You are among the best educated, most creative and most rational citizens of this continent. You thus have a greater obligation to return the fruits of your education, your creativity, and your reason to the future of society.

Jacqueline Kennedy said not long ago that, "John Kennedy believed so strongly that one's aim should not just be the most comfortable life possible -- but that we should all do something to right the wrongs we see -- and not just complain about them . . . He believed that one man can make a difference -- and that every man should try." This is the demand of scholarship as well as freedom -- commitment. And the commitment of the educated man who would be free cannot be reserved for times of stress. It cannot be selective commitment -- unless we choose to allow our freedom to become selective.

This, then, is the final and most important ally freedom must have if freedom is to exist, if it is to endure, and if it is to flourish. No amount of courage alone can make freedom live. No army, however watchful or powerful, alone can defend freedom. But if, on the other hand, the defense of freedom is supported by the active will and the educated dedication of all those who would remain free, then however perilous the path, however great the obstacles, we can go forward in confidence.

That was the kind of future President Kennedy sought. "Our problems are man made," he said, "therefore, they can be solved by men. And man can be as big as he wants. No problem of human destiny is beyond human

beings. Man's reason and spirit have often solved the seemingly insolvable -- and we believe they can do it again." President Kennedy spoke on behalf of men's reason and spirit; he also acted for them. As free men, let us do no less.

Because this University embodies so many of the things President Kennedy cherished, I would like, in closing to say a personal word about the significance of his death. There were many who felt then that a light had been snuffed out; that the torchbearer for a whole generation was gone; that an era was over before its time; that with him there died idealism and hope and what was clean and best in all of us. To many, it seemed then, that the world might lapse again into the empty poses and vain quarrels that disfigured our yesterdays, and made of our past a litany of anguish.

But in traveling through my own country, through the Far East several months ago and now in Germany, I have come to understand that the hope President Kennedy kindled is not dead but alive. It is not a memory, but a living force. The torch still burns, and because it does, there remains for all of us, the chance to light up the tomorrows, and to brighten the future. For me, that is the challenge that makes life worthwhile; and I hope it will be the same for all of you.