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THE PROBLEM OF YOUTH

Radio Address

of

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ATTORNEY GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES

to

The American Youth Congress

at

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Governor Lafoon and Members of the American Youth Congress:

In the stirring and difficult times in which we live one of the greatest problems that confronts Governments in all parts of the civilized world is the problem of youth. I do not refer to the general adjustments which each individual of adolescent or post-adolescent age must make for these differ in no essential respect from the adjustments that each of us must make as he enters the different phases that come with the changing years. The problem of youth, in the sense that it concerns Government, is one that arises from the particular social, economic and political conditions existing in the modern world - a world that is even now just feeling the full impact of the Great War, and which is filled with apprehension lest peace again be shattered in the not remote future.

Let us, therefore, consider the background of this problem and attempt, without too much stress on the difficulties, to examine some of the encouraging possibilities that lie ahead.

The future of the United States depends, now as in the past, upon the natural resources with which we have to work. Ordinarily when we use this term we think of physical resources of the type of water power, lumber, oil, or minerals, without considering that these things mean nothing without an alert, intelligent people to do something with them. There are vast areas of the world filled with great natural wealth which have never known modern civilization.

The most vital and the most valuable of our assets must necessarily be the coming generation. If it is able to measure up to the responsibilities of the age, there is a very real possibility for an advance form of

civilization such as we have never known before. The challenge of the times is for the development of the capacities of youth into dynamic qualities commensurate with present emergencies. The energy of the youth of today may be likened to the undeveloped energies of such a resource as water power. Uncontrolled, a great river may be highly destructive; it breaks over its banks washing out top soil, destroying crops, and menacing human life. The same body of water, under control, may be highly useful to society through the production of heat, light and power; making the lives of the people happier and moving the wheels of industry. In the same way the great potential powers of childhood, if properly developed and efficiently directed, may be equally beneficial. This does not mean that it is possible to channel the activities of youth as one might dam a river and send the flow of the stream through a power plant; but it does mean that children should be helped to discover their own interests and their own capacities, in order that the two combined may contribute to the development of our common life.

Experts on criminology inform us that the average age of criminals is being lowered constantly and now rests at about 19 years. What this means is the lack of proper adjustment to the conditions under which young people are living and the diversion of their activities into harmful rather than useful pursuits. It is not a fair criticism of present-day youth to assume that it is solely responsible for such untoward conditions. Generally speaking, the young people of today are doing their best to adjust themselves. If that adjustment is an unfortunate one it is our responsibility as well as theirs.

For years we have proceeded on the theory that when a certain content of information has been jammed into the young, they will be able to make their own effective transition from school or college into the responsibilities of adult life. Unfortunately this is not true. In a simpler civilization, when all that was involved was going from the classroom, where multiplication tables were learned, to the small shop, factory or office where the multiplication tables were applied, the transition was far less difficult. Under modern conditions it is impossible for any child, upon the basis of his own experience, even to conceive of the tremendous ramifications of adult life. Efforts to overcome this difficulty by extending vocational training are often resisted for a number of reasons, including the tremendous cost of maintaining the structure of mass education on the old information content basis, and the lack of a properly trained personnel for instruction in the new fields.

Vocational training, to most people, means training in the crafts of manual labor, such as shop work or woodworking. There is no reason why vocational guidance and training cannot be applied to all forms of professional and industrial activities, as well as to the handicrafts. Perhaps, if this were done, we could direct our educational processes into more purposeful channels. In this work of readjustment the voice of youth should be heard.

One of the most practical definitions of material success ever given was a statement made by David Starr Jordan, then President of Stanford University, to the effect that success consists of doing what one most wants to do and doing it well enough so that someone else is willing to pay for it.

It is obvious that if every normal person could be engaged in doing what he most wants to do, there would be no serious social problems, criminal or otherwise.

The formulation of a constructive, forward-looking program for liberating, encouraging and directing the energies of youth should evoke our best thought. With such a program there would be developed in the next generation a leadership capable of solving its own economic, social and political problems, including those of crime and maladjustment.

Youth and maturity must go on together, the former with dominating attributes of courage, imagination and confidence, the latter with experience, balance and understanding. Together, under the rich blessings that Providence has bestowed upon our beloved land, we shall meet the stirring challenge of our times.

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