

A RESPONSIBLE OPPOSITION IN A DEMOCRACY
by Senator Hubert H. Humphrey

A Lecture Delivered at Town Hall
New York, New York
March 23, 1953 - 10:30 A.M.

I am glad to be speaking this morning about the role of the opposition. Recently I have had some occasion to ponder this problem....It is a new role, but a challenging one. You know, of course, why it is a new role. Let me say something of the challenge of the role.

The opposition has at once a great advantage and a great responsibility. Its advantage lies in this - that, to a large extent, the opposition can define the issues before the country. It is up to the opposition to discover and to focus attention on the most significant issues - to see that American politics debates first things first.

Obviously, this advantage carries with it a great responsibility. We will be responsible for the substance of American political discussion -- whether that discussion shall be concerned with significant issues or side issues; whether that discussion will be informative, or merely propagandistic. Intelligence is in large measure a matter of asking the right questions - raising the right issues. An intelligent political system does the same thing - it centers politics on things of significance. A system that achieves this is likely to improve its substance and its powers of survival. The opposition takes much of the responsibility for this.

Not only the substance of politics, but also the tone of politics and of government fall within the responsibility of the opposition. The opposition can set the whole tone of government -- if it is captious, carping, pettifogging, then government will be frustrated and ineffective. It is doubtful if the opposition can gain from forcing this kind of government. Often, the opposition will obviously be to blame, and in the long run it subverts free institutions. It is better politics and better public relations to attend to major issues, and not to create false crises.

Let me make clear at the outset that I shall be speaking as a partisan... as a political practitioner. I think this is as it should be, for the role of the opposition today is one that will have to be worked out by those who belong to it. And it will have to be worked out within the active and fluid political situation - it cannot be worked out on an abstract basis. This is so because there are very few traditions or institutions in the United States which lay down either a law or a code of conduct for the opposing party.

The Democratic Party had 20 years in which to think out the problem of how to govern. It may well be that it lost the last election because it had ceased to concern itself actively with that problem -- it seemed to have lost something of the will to govern.

But the more difficult problem is that of how to conduct an opposition. I don't think the late opposition ever gave much attention to this problem, and certainly they never thought it through. You may say that they must have given it some attention, since they were successful at the polls in November. But remember -- it took them 20 years!

It may well be that the irresponsibility of the late opposition has made them - some of them, at least - unfit to govern today. I am not speaking here of individuals, for there are many noble and responsible men and women in the administration today. I am speaking here of the party itself - of the party as an institution, and of the state of mind which still continues to flare up in several quarters of that party.

Sometimes, in Washington today, it is a little hard to tell just which party is government and which is opposition. I need only mention the Voice of America, The Yalta Resolution, the appointment of an ambassador to Moscow, the extension of the Reorganization Act.

It is taking some time for both parties to make the transition (between government and opposition, and vice versa). I notice this daily in my work in Congress. And I think it is largely explained by the fact that the party recently in opposition - or some members of it - never really thought about what their function should be. The problems of opposing are naturally closely related to the problems of governing. The most urgent common denominator of both is responsibility.

Responsibility can in part be enforced by institutions. But only in part - for there is a state of mind or an attitude involved as well. We have to start with that if we are to make our political institutions work. The electoral process is the institutional framework of American political responsibility. But I believe it takes an initial attitude of responsibility to work the electoral

process. Part of this responsibility is an allegiance to the electoral process itself, and to all the other civil liberties and institutional forms which go with that process in our country. Another part is a constant intellectual awareness of political realities -- the wants of the American people, and the interest of America as a nation among other nations.

So much for the past and its influence on the present. Now -- what of the Democratic Party and the liberal opposition? It now falls to us to work out a method of responsibility in opposition.

Our decisive defeat in the Presidential election might make this difficult. But we also begin our task with some advantages. We are not too far from control in the Congress, and we may achieve control in 1954. Our Presidential candidate won innumerable friends and admirers even in defeat - he is admired by many who voted Republican simply because they felt it time for a change. Finally, we are a party who over the past 20 years has created much of the policy and the political framework within which the Republicans are now governing.

In creating those policies we answered the expressed needs of millions of Americans at home, and the requirements of our integrity as a nation in our dealings abroad. We are accustomed to meeting these needs. We do not feel that we have lost touch with the people - and we are thus free of the feeling which gives rise to so much irresponsibility - the feeling that leads to ever more desperate expedients in the search to reestablish favor with the voters. And, we are, of course, in sympathy with the legacy of broad policies which we have left to the country. We understand those policies, having taken the lead in working them out.

We are prepared, now that we are in opposition, to defend those policies where we think them wise and still justified; to urge their extension where we hoped to finish the job. We are also prepared to use our time wisely in order to study the new and emerging needs and requirements of our economy, our political institutions, and our international position.

Not all Democrats are agreed on the substantive issues of our opposition. Let me point out here that our party system differs from the British in an important respect. In Britain, most issues are fought out between the two major parties - there is almost no public debate within either of the parties. There are exceptions, of course - like the Bevanite opposition in the Labor Party, and the debate on economic policy within the Conservative Party. But these are exceptions, and are condemned by many as violating the rules of party conduct.

In the United States we debate issues within parties as well as between parties. One task of our opposition will be to work out positions to which both 'liberals' and 'conservatives' in our party can subscribe. Much of this working out will be done publicly; but I am sure it will be done with good feeling and respect on both sides. And remember - there are many issues, particularly in foreign policy, on which our party is already united.

The Democratic Party will conduct a selective opposition. We will not oppose simply for the sake of opposing. Both President Truman and Adlai Stevenson have urged that we so conduct ourselves. We agree. Let me consider some of the main issues.

Much has been said about bi-partisan foreign policy. I do not believe this means there should be no opposition. There is, I think, some broad definition of the national interest which sets the bounds of debate. But our party has remained within those bounds over the past two decades, and the President is today committed to a foreign policy which shows no actual signs of sharp departure from Democratic foreign policy. Many of the changes he has talked about are changes to which our policy logically led and for which the time is now ripe. We had foreseen those changes, and will support many of them now.

But bi-partisan foreign policy does not mean that there shall be no debate. There is no reason why the party system should not operate in foreign policy - since debate between parties is essential to our system of responsible government and to the improvement of policy. Naturally, security considerations are important in foreign policy today. But I believe the broad lines of foreign policy should be shaped in public - all issues not involved in security considerations should be subject to debate. Security is generally involved at the more narrow factual level - the broad trend of the facts, and the issues they present ought to be public. For there is a grave danger in allowing important policy to be made under cover.

As a member of the Foreign Relations Committee of the Senate I have urged, and will continue to urge, that all meetings on legislative matters - those where security is not involved - be open to the press and public. Though this is a requirement of the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1946, it has not prevailed in

the Foreign Relations Committee this year. In advocating this change I believe I am consistent with the President's pledge to 'bring foreign policy back to the people'. I am also trying to see to it that the people get the facts direct and undistorted - not as 'interpreted' by members of the committee who talk somewhat selectively with the press. I think responsibility of the government is as deeply involved in this issue as responsibility of the opposition, and I think it the responsibility of the opposition to press for more open policy-making.

Two other issues may serve to illustrate the opposition stand on foreign policy. One is the recent Resolution on wartime agreements. On this issue the opposition supported the administration, and was ready to vote for the Resolution which the administration submitted. I voted for it in committee. We could not, however, vote for an amended Resolution which made itself meaningless and ineffective, which exceeded the request of the administration, and which was clearly directed at partisan domestic purposes rather than at Soviet foreign policy. The lesson here is that the Administration will have to do something about its Republican opposition.

There are some wags in Washington today who observe that if President Eisenhower is to have bi-partisan support he will have to persuade the Republicans in the Congress to support him.

The other issue is the nomination of an Ambassador to Moscow. We Democrats supported the Administration's man. We recognized his proven ability as a career official, his knowledge of the Soviet Union, and the urgent necessity to have an Ambassador in Moscow at this time of transition in Russia. We also feel that an ambassador is seriously crippled in his work for our nation by damaging, and I think, irresponsible opposition to his appointment where that opposition serves no national end, but merely local electoral ends. The case of Mr. Bohlen seems to be an instance of the bad habits a reckless opposition finds difficult to unlearn when it has the responsibility for government. The present opposition is anxious to avoid this.

Let me mention one or two domestic issues. The Democrats have long supported the principle of Reorganization Plan No. 1 - that the Federal Security Agency should be a Cabinet post. We were for it under a Democratic administration and we're for it now. There is no opposition on grounds of personalities now. But let me tell you something of the committee hearing on this plan.

I am a member of the Government Operations Committee. Reorganization Plan No. 1 called for a special assistant for health to the Director of the Federal Security Agency. Yet there was no provision for assistant in the fields of education or social security. I asked the administration spokesman what were to be the duties of the special assistant for health. The spokesman said he could not tell me that; it has not been discussed yet.

Later in the day representatives of the AMA testified before our committee and I again asked some questions about the special assistant for health. During my questioning it developed that a complete plan for the special assistant's duties and functions had been submitted to the AMA by the administration.

Surely, Congress in considering a basic reorganization of the administration is as well entitled to information as the AMA.

The administration too has a responsibility. If Congress is to do its job responsibly and well the administration must be frank in supplying information. And if the administration is to do its job responsibly and well -- in the public interest -- it should put the Congress before pressure groups; and should, in fact, have a little less truck with pressure groups.

The public interest isn't always easy to define. The liberal opposition believes, however, that the public interest is well served by our traditional public lands policy . . . a policy in which both parties have had a hand. We think that policy is in jeopardy now, and we will oppose any attempt to do away with it. We are opposed to the "Tidelands", or quitclaim bills. We think the education of all Americans is of the first importance, we think the Supreme Court was right, we think that considerations of national security, of international law, and of our time-honored public lands and conservation policy are on our side.

There are other straws in the wind besides the "Tidelands" legislation. Bills are before Congress to cede to some states the public lands in those states. One Senator has recently favored selling off the federal dams. There are indications that previous plans for a federal dam in Hell's Hole Canyon will now be scrapped, at the cost of an integrated power policy for the Northwest. This seems to be the beginning of a consistent administration policy. The liberal opposition will stand on its record, and will consistently oppose this policy.

Most of the issues I have discussed have not themselves been major policies -- though they have reflected major policies and issues. There is not yet much administration legislation before Congress, and the opposition must wait for the larger measures -- most important, for the budget -- before it will really see what it's up against and what it's to do. In the meantime we can certainly be charitable -- realizing that it will take a new administration some time to find its feet.

One thing I can promise you the new opposition will not do. We will not run down the very institutions of our national government. This was a frequent practice in the last years of Republican opposition, when the opposition went beyond policies, beyond personalities, and often attacked some of the actual institutions of federal government -- institutions created to meet real needs -- needs which local governments had failed to meet.

Looking back at these attacks, we can see that it is certainly a bad thing for any party to be too long out of power. It certainly leads to recklessness -- it is demoralizing to opposition and government alike. I am not afraid of this in the case of the Democratic Party, however -- it seems likely that our period of opposition will be a short one, and that we shall return to power in 1956.

I want to discuss one more field where I think the opposition should be active today -- the field of local government. Liberals should return to the field where they had their first successes and found their first strength. They can find new strength there.

One frequent complaint about our Congress is that it gets bogged down with petty and local issues -- that it fails to find time for the really pressing issues. It tends to waste its energies and atrophy its educational function. It is important that Congress put more emphasis on truly national issues -- it is vital to the success of legislative bodies that they achieve this emphasis. The great nineteenth-century British parliamentarians understood this well. The writings of John Bright, William E. Gladstone, of Disraeli and Lord Salisbury continually stress that parliamentary debate should be concerned with the most significant questions. And the British have left Parliament free for these questions by delegating many issues to local governments.

Our loose American party system is probably largely responsible for Congress' excessive devotion to purely local issues. But we ought to be able to learn from the British, and to make a beginning at lodging local functions with local governments. Congress would benefit from this -- so would local government, and so would liberal politics.

Liberals have traditionally been concerned with the danger of a big federal government to a free people. Lately, the Republicans have had the most to say about it. I think there is a difference between the liberal concern and the Republican concern; a very positive difference. Liberals want to stimulate local government; Republicans simply want to de-energize the federal government. Liberals have backed the growth in power of the federal government because local governments have failed to answer promptly, efficiently and sympathetically to the needs of people. But liberals believe that local governments can be cleaned up and made ready to take over many of the present functions of the federal government.

At the turn of the century, liberals were the leaders of reform in the cities and localities. Today liberals like Chester Bowles, Mennen Williams, Joseph Clark, Adlai Stevenson have shown what can be done in state and local government. We should go on with this work; and, in revitalizing local governments, we will be serving our old concern with the danger of excessive federal power.

What are the main jobs in local government? I think there are three. First, we must make sure that local governments are really representative, that they properly reflect the will of the people. This means fighting for redistricting and legislative reapportionment in many cities and states. Many of our states have failed to reapportion or redistrict for years. Many municipalities have been put at a grossly unfair disadvantage because thinly populated rural areas have controlled state governments. Frankly, the liberal forces are usually in the cities -- and if liberals want to have the voice in government which they deserve, then they should get into the fight for reapportionment.

Second -- local government has to be made more efficient. One chief way to do this is through the consolidation of many overlapping and wasteful governmental areas. If local governments are to take on new tasks and assume new responsibilities, then we should see that they do so as cheaply and expeditiously as possible. Attempts to achieve consolidation of city and county areas, for instance, generally meet with tough political opposition from those in suburban and rural areas. And

consolidation will not always answer all problems. But if local governments are efficiently to perform new functions they will have to get rid of much duplication. Liberals ought to be involved in these questions. They should be working for consolidation where, on balance, they find it best suited to the new needs of the community. And they should be giving more time to the study of local governmental issues -- as well as to the study of relations between local governments and the federal government.

The problem of intergovernmental relations is one that I have been concerned with ever since I have been in the Senate. During the 81st Congress I was chairman of a subcommittee which developed a bill calling for a federal commission on intergovernmental relations along the lines of the Hoover Commission recommendations. I have again reintroduced that bill during the current session. I am pleased that President Eisenhower has given indications of favoring such a study. This is an essential first step toward developing a realistic understanding of the local government's role in our federal system.

Third -- local government won't work by itself; people have to get in and work it. Here is something the liberal opposition can be constantly busy with -- liberals don't have to wait for federal election years. In local government, as in federal government, party is the heart of government, and government is no better than the party that runs it.

If we want to build up a strong national party system, this is one way to do it. Localism thrives in national politics not because people are too interested in local issues, but because they are not interested enough. The problems of local government are the same almost everywhere. When liberals involve themselves more actively in local politics they will soon find a common interest with liberals elsewhere. And they will replace those local politicians who have benefited by local apathy -- and who have been the main force behind localism in American politics.

Liberal politics ought to start at the grass roots and spread out from there. Liberal politics should be grounded in a concern for people and their immediate problems -- for a concern for healthy human relations is at the heart of liberal doctrine. I think the way to a consistent national liberal opposition, and a national liberal party, lies through local government.

Participation in politics of any kind gives meaning and realism to the debating of all public issues. For instance, many people question whether there is any such things as the 'public interest' -- it is said that there are only the separate and competing interests of groups. Participation in politics teaches that there is some definite public interest, though it is not, of course, a constant thing. Those who participate in politics assist in the working out of the public interest.

If liberals want to elect responsible men to office then they would do well to elect to federal offices men who have been schooled in the responsibilities of local government. And, as we give new tasks to local government, we will attract better men into local government. With such men, plus the many men in Democratic Party ranks who have had federal administrative experience, the Democratic Party can avoid irresponsibility.

These, I believe are the tasks of the opposition. I believe my party has something positive to gain from performing the role of opposition responsibly and conscientiously, and from giving some real thought to the conduct of its opposition. If it does so, it can make a new contribution to the traditions of American politics. A tradition of responsibility in opposition is badly needed. It can also quickly work itself out of a position of opposition. It can advance its thinking on many important issues, and it can do this not by intra-party warfare, but solid discussion between Democrats throughout the country -- not only those in Congress. When next we take on the job of governing we shall be far better off for having behaved thoughtfully and responsibly in opposition.



Minnesota Historical Society

Copyright in this digital version belongs to the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, link to, or email content, however, for individual use.

To request permission for commercial or educational use, please contact the Minnesota Historical Society.



www.mnhs.org