

REMARKS OF SENATOR HUBERT H. HUMPHREY

LEADERSHIP SEMINAR

HUGH O'BRIAN YOUTH FOUNDATION

Washington, D. C.

April 4, 1976

It is a special pleasure to be here with my good friend Hugh O'Brian and to have a part in this fine program.

I have had the opportunity to work closely with a number of youth programs over the years, and I am always struck by the vigor and enthusiasm which you bring to your visit in Washington.

Your program is a particularly fine one, since it enables each of you to learn a great deal not only about the American political system, but to learn from each other about different parts of the United States and to develop an understanding of international issues from our visitors from other countries.

I have been asked to speak to you about the national character. Now that the Bicentennial is in full swing, each of you no doubt has heard a great deal about the revolutionary period -- when Americans faced great adversity in severing our colonial ties with Great Britain.

But there is a time in early American history that describes our national character in even more relevant terms than the revolutionary period.

Ten years after the Declaration of Independence, the unity that bound the states together during the War had all but vanished. There were bitter divisions among the States. Commerce was nearly at a standstill. Accusations and recriminations resounded in Congress, and the Articles of Confederation offered no system for resolving these bitter disputes.

The optimism and confidence that launched our experiment in self-government had all but vanished. A federal convention was called for May, 1787, to consider how the Articles could be made to work.

The political crisis that led to the Constitutional Convention of 1787 was a far greater test of the American character than the War of Independence. The Founding Fathers expressed a mixture of despair and self-confidence.

Yet despite their monumental differences of opinion and interest, their attitude never was one of defeatism or discouragement.

To the contrary, the Founders seized the moment to design a new system of government capable of bringing order and justice to the United States.

These men had been charged only with amending the Articles of Confederation. So in setting about to draft a Constitution they took a great risk. They were willing to risk the consequences because they knew it was necessary to save our fledgling democracy.

It was the Founders' willingness to risk, buttressed by their optimism, faith and confidence in the ultimate wisdom of their actions, that saved the Union -- scarcely a decade after the separation from Great Britain.

It has been these two characteristics -- a sense of adventure and a willingness to risk -- combined with self-confidence and optimism, that historically have been at the roots of the American character.

But one more ingredient was essential in the spring and summer of 1787 in Philadelphia: a willingness to compromise on the substance of the new Constitution -- compromise between the interests of the large and small states, the agricultural and manufacturing states -- to compromise on the framework of the Federal government and its relationship to the States.

To their surprise, the Framers found that compromise solutions could be hammered out.

I mention these events surrounding the writing of the Constitution because I believe they are at the heart of America's continuing experiment in self-government -- a willingness to risk, to pioneer -- a sense of optimism and self-confidence -- a capacity for compromise and accommodation.

Time and again, these three characteristics have brought us through national trials and difficulties far more imposing than anything that confronts us today.

They brought us through the secessionist movement in the early 1800's.

-- through the perilous period of frontier settlement and the establishment of new States;

-- and through a long, bloody, and divisive Civil War.

These elements of our national character brought us through world wars and domestic scandals;

-- they helped us to survive depressions and civil unrest;

-- they have helped us develop cures for dread diseases and put a man on the moon.

We have survived adversity and progressed as a free nation by taking great risks, by retaining our self-confidence and optimism, and by learning to compromise what seemed to be totally hostile and incompatible points of view.

As a result, the injustices were rooted out, our democracy was refined, and the security and happiness of our people were advanced.

But what of the American character today?

There are some who believe that the national attitude has changed. Our national mood is at times negative and apathetic. The polls tell us that the public is cynical and disenchanted with all of our institutions -- government, business, the church, and so on down the line.

But I believe there is another side of the American character that doesn't get reported.

It is an America that openly acknowledges failures and imperfections, but that also recognizes our country's continuing ability to learn from its mistakes.

It is an America that becomes more forward-looking in defeat -- that uses adversity as an instrument for progress.

These were the attitudes that sustained our Founding Fathers in 1787. And I believe they will continue to sustain our Nation as we move into the third century of independence.

But we must realize that surely as our national character is not perfect, so indeed is our government imperfect.

It was an Englishman -- Winston Churchill -- who summed it up, ". . . democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time."

A nation of 215 million people, and a government that serves those people, cannot be perfect. So we must strive for excellence, rather than perfection.

From our country's earliest moments, the willingness to risk, supported by a robust self-confidence and faith, tempered by a capacity to compromise, have been the decisive factors in sustaining the American experiment.

It is the realization of these qualities in your lives and among your generation that will decide the issues in the years to come.

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IT IS A SPECIAL PLEASURE TO BE HERE WITH MY GOOD FRIEND HUGH
O'BRIAN AND TO HAVE A PART IN THIS FINE PROGRAM.

I HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO WORK CLOSELY WITH A NUMBER OF
YOUTH PROGRAMS OVER THE YEARS, AND I AM ALWAYS STRUCK BY THE VIGOR
AND ENTHUSIASM WHICH YOU BRING TO YOUR VISIT IN WASHINGTON.

L YOUR PROGRAM IS A PARTICULARLY FINE ONE, SINCE IT ENABLES
EACH OF YOU TO LEARN A GREAT DEAL NOT ONLY ABOUT THE AMERICAN
POLITICAL SYSTEM, BUT TO LEARN FROM EACH OTHER ABOUT DIFFERENT
PARTS OF THE UNITED STATES AND TO DEVELOP AN UNDERSTANDING OF
INTERNATIONAL ISSUES FROM OUR VISITORS FROM OTHER COUNTRIES.

L I HAVE BEEN ASKED TO SPEAK TO YOU ABOUT THE NATIONAL CHARACTER.
Lg NOW THAT THE BICENTENNIAL IS IN FULL SWING, EACH OF YOU NO DOUBT
HAS HEARD A GREAT DEAL ABOUT THE REVOLUTIONARY PERIOD --

Rec'd 9 Ind 53
Jeff-Madison 25
Hamilton 28

WHEN AMERICANS FACED GREAT ADVERSITY IN SEVERING OUR COLONIAL TIES
WITH GREAT BRITAIN.

h BUT THERE IS A TIME IN EARLY AMERICAN HISTORY THAT DESCRIBES
OUR NATIONAL CHARACTER IN EVEN MORE RELEVANT TERMS THAN THE
REVOLUTIONARY PERIOD.

h TEN YEARS AFTER THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE, THE UNITY THAT
BOUND THE STATES TOGETHER DURING THE WAR HAD ALL BUT VANISHED.

h THERE WERE BITTER DIVISIONS AMONG THE STATES, h COMMERCE WAS NEARLY
AT A STANDSTILL. h ACCUSATIONS AND RECRIMINATIONS RESOUNDED IN
CONGRESS, AND THE ARTICLES OF CONFEDERATION OFFERED NO SYSTEM FOR
RESOLVING THESE BITTER DISPUTES.

h THE OPTIMISM AND CONFIDENCE THAT LAUNCHED OUR EXPERIMENT IN
SELF-GOVERNMENT HAD ALL BUT VANISHED.

L A FEDERAL CONVENTION WAS CALLED FOR MAY, 1787, TO CONSIDER HOW
THE ARTICLES COULD BE MADE TO WORK.

L THE POLITICAL CRISIS THAT LED TO THE CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION
OF 1787 WAS A FAR GREATER TEST OF THE AMERICAN CHARACTER THAN THE
WAR OF INDEPENDENCE. THE FOUNDING FATHERS EXPRESSED A MIXTURE OF
DESPAIR AND SELF-CONFIDENCE.

L YET DESPITE THEIR MONUMENTAL DIFFERENCES OF OPINION AND
INTEREST, THEIR ATTITUDE NEVER WAS ONE OF DEFEATISM OR DISCOURAGEMENT.

L TO THE CONTRARY, THE FOUNDERS SEIZED THE MOMENT TO DESIGN
A NEW SYSTEM OF GOVERNMENT CAPABLE OF BRINGING ORDER AND JUSTICE
TO THE UNITED STATES.

L THESE MEN HAD BEEN CHARGED ONLY WITH AMENDING THE ARTICLES OF
CONFEDERATION.

SO IN SETTING ABOUT TO DRAFT A CONSTITUTION THEY TOOK A GREAT
RISK. THEY WERE WILLING TO RISK THE CONSEQUENCES BECAUSE THEY
KNEW IT WAS NECESSARY TO SAVE OUR FLEDGLING DEMOCRACY.

IT WAS THE FOUNDERS' WILLINGNESS TO RISK, BUTTRESSED BY THEIR
OPTIMISM, FAITH AND CONFIDENCE IN THE ULTIMATE WISDOM OF THEIR
ACTIONS, THAT SAVED THE ~~UNION~~ ^{Revolution} -- SCARCELY A DECADE AFTER THE
SEPARATION FROM GREAT BRITAIN.

IT HAS BEEN THESE ~~THE~~ CHARACTERISTICS -- A SENSE OF ADVENTURE
AND A WILLINGNESS TO RISK -- COMBINED WITH SELF-CONFIDENCE AND
OPTIMISM, THAT HISTORICALLY HAVE BEEN AT THE ROOTS OF THE AMERICAN
CHARACTER.

BUT ONE MORE INGREDIENT WAS ESSENTIAL IN THE SPRING AND
SUMMER OF 1787 IN PHILADELPHIA: A WILLINGNESS TO COMPROMISE
ON THE SUBSTANCE OF THE NEW CONSTITUTION --

Compromise

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h COMPROMISE BETWEEN THE INTERESTS OF THE LARGE AND SMALL STATES,
THE AGRICULTURAL AND MANUFACTURING STATES --TO COMPROMISE ON THE
FRAMEWORK OF THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO THE
STATES.

h TO THEIR SURPRISE, THE FRAMERS FOUND THAT COMPROMISE SOLUTIONS
COULD BE HAMMERED OUT.

h I MENTION THESE EVENTS SURROUNDING THE WRITING OF THE
CONSTITUTION BECAUSE I BELIEVE THEY ARE AT THE HEART OF AMERICA'S
CONTINUING EXPERIMENT IN SELF-GOVERNMENT -- A WILLINGNESS TO RISK,
TO PIONEER -- A SENSE OF OPTIMISM AND SELF-CONFIDENCE -- A
CAPACITY FOR COMPROMISE AND ACCOMMODATION.

h TIME AND AGAIN, THESE THREE CHARACTERISTICS HAVE BROUGHT US
THROUGH NATIONAL TRIALS AND DIFFICULTIES FAR MORE IMPOSING THAN
ANYTHING THAT CONFRONTS US TODAY.

↳ THEY BROUGHT US THROUGH THE SECESSIONIST MOVEMENT IN THE
EARLY 1800's.

↳ -- THROUGH THE PERILOUS PERIOD OF FRONTIER SETTLEMENT AND THE
ESTABLISHMENT OF NEW STATES;

↳ -- AND THROUGH A LONG, BLOODY, AND DIVISIVE CIVIL WAR.

THESE ELEMENTS OF OUR NATIONAL CHARACTER BROUGHT US THROUGH
WORLD WARS AND DOMESTIC SCANDALS;

↳ -- THEY HELPED US TO SURVIVE DEPRESSIONS AND CIVIL UNREST;

↳ -- THEY HAVE HELPED US DEVELOP CURES FOR DREAD DISEASES AND
PUT A MAN ON THE MOON. *They have helped us a nation*
of man people to learn to live together

↳ WE HAVE SURVIVED ADVERSITY AND PROGRESSED AS A FREE NATION BY
TAKING GREAT RISKS, BY RETAINING OUR SELF-CONFIDENCE AND OPTIMISM,
AND BY LEARNING TO COMPROMISE WHAT SEEMED TO BE TOTALLY HOSTILE
AND INCOMPATIBLE POINTS OF VIEW.

AS A RESULT, THE INJUSTICES WERE ROOTED OUT, OUR DEMOCRACY WAS

REFINED, AND THE SECURITY AND HAPPINESS OF OUR PEOPLE WERE ADVANCED.

(A) BUT WHAT OF THE AMERICAN CHARACTER TODAY?

THERE ARE SOME WHO BELIEVE THAT THE NATIONAL ATTITUDE HAS

CHANGED. OUR NATIONAL MOOD IS AT TIMES NEGATIVE AND APATHETIC.

THE POLLS TELL US THAT THE PUBLIC IS CYNICAL AND DISENCHANTED

WITH ALL OF OUR INSTITUTIONS -- GOVERNMENT, BUSINESS, THE CHURCH,

AND SO ON DOWN THE LINE.

BUT I BELIEVE THERE IS ANOTHER SIDE OF THE AMERICAN CHARACTER THAT DOESN'T GET REPORTED.

IT IS AN AMERICA THAT OPENLY ACKNOWLEDGES FAILURES AND IMPERFECTIONS, BUT THAT ALSO RECOGNIZES OUR COUNTRY'S CONTINUING ABILITY TO LEARN FROM ITS MISTAKES.

The test of our ~~state~~ Democracy
is in ~~the~~ our ability to
and willingness to respect
the dignity - the worth -
of each individual.

- Human Rights -

- Equal opportunity -

- Equal Protection of the Laws.

↳ IT IS AN AMERICA THAT BECOMES MORE FORWARD-LOOKING IN
DEFEAT -- THAT USES ADVERSITY AS AN INSTRUMENT FOR PROGRESS

Challenge!

↳ THESE WERE THE ATTITUDES THAT SUSTAINED OUR FOUNDING FATHERS
IN 1787. ↳ AND I BELIEVE THEY WILL CONTINUE TO SUSTAIN OUR NATION
AS WE MOVE INTO THE THIRD CENTURY OF INDEPENDENCE.

← ↳ BUT WE MUST REALIZE THAT SURELY AS OUR NATIONAL CHARACTER IS
NOT PERFECT, SO INDEED IS OUR GOVERNMENT IMPERFECT.

↳ IT WAS AN ENGLISHMAN -- WINSTON CHURCHILL -- WHO SUMMED
IT UP, "... DEMOCRACY IS THE WORST FORM OF GOVERNMENT EXCEPT
ALL THOSE OTHER FORMS THAT HAVE BEEN TRIED FROM TIME TO TIME."

↳ A NATION OF 215 MILLION PEOPLE, AND A GOVERNMENT THAT SERVES
THOSE PEOPLE, CANNOT BE PERFECT. ↳ SO WE MUST STRIVE FOR EXCELLENCE,
RATHER THAN PERFECTION.

"To form a more perfect Union."

2 FROM OUR COUNTRY'S EARLIEST MOMENTS, THE WILLINGNESS TO RISK,
SUPPORTED BY A ROBUST SELF-CONFIDENCE AND FAITH, TEMPERED BY A
+ *to be tolerant*
CAPACITY TO COMPROMISE ¹ HAVE BEEN THE DECISIVE FACTORS IN
SUSTAINING THE AMERICAN EXPERIMENT.

h IT IS THE REALIZATION OF THESE QUALITIES IN YOUR LIVES AND
AMONG YOUR GENERATION THAT WILL DECIDE THE ISSUES IN THE YEARS
TO COME.

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