

"Politics and Morality: Where Leaders Fail," New York, May 26, 1971

NOTE: The following text has been edited from the original notes used for this speech; some handwritten notations have been enclosed in brackets for clarity

[Handwritten notes at top:

On your own
Didn't know choice
Eleanor -- Adlai -- Helen
We luv yu Rich Nixon]

Charles Dickens begins his "Tale of Two Cities" with a paradoxical statement that "it was the best of times, it was the worst of times." Dickens wrote of the 1770's and the French Revolution, but his description might well be applied to our own time and to our collective experience in the 1960's. For in many ways, this last decade was both the best and the worst of times. It was a time when we put a man on the moon, an event as much a symbol of our astounding technological progress as it was a result of that progress. It was the best of times in other ways, too, for the 1960's saw the culmination of social reform efforts begun more than 30 years earlier.

But it was also a decade when mobs put the torch to some of America's sick and deteriorating cities; when three of our most promising leaders fell in senseless assassinations; when we became embroiled in a hopeless war that has done incalculable damage to us and to the people of a far off land.

As a result of the worst aspects of the times, it seems to me we are on the verge of losing a typical American quality -- **optimism**. One of America's unique strengths and most obvious national characteristics has always been optimism. We have believed -- and our history has tended to support this view -- that America would be bigger and better and more prosperous for each generation. A man could hope and dream that his children would surpass his own achievements. We believed that when crises arose, leaders, somehow, would appear to match the times.

Yet in recent years this faith in ourselves and our leaders has been eroded. In fact, one of the most alarming things to me is the discovery that youth, to a large degree, no longer believes in the nation's leaders. Our young have no heroes. In nearly every other time in our history, there were politicians, adventurers like Wilson, Lindbergh and Admiral Byrd, great men of medicine and law, who served as models for the next generation. Contrast this with the results of a survey of college campuses a few years

ago that revealed the majority of young men could think of no public man they admired and would want to emulate.

So we might stop and ask ourselves tonight **what has gone wrong** and how are we going to recapture our faith in our leaders and in ourselves. Have our leaders failed us or did we fail them? Or have we failed each other?

The questions go to the heart of the issues of ethics and morality in politics. Politics, after all, is concerned with relations among men, with our obligations to ourselves and to each other. And this, of course, is what Felix Adler was concerned with and why the first Ethical Culture Society was formed in this city 95 years ago. Adler knew that men must be concerned with each other and that, united, men could build a better world. His life tells us that man is more than an animal, that he is his **brother's keeper** and his **brother's brother**, that he has an obligation to his fellow man and to future generations, and that he rejects himself when he rejects these obligations. Adler's creed has been echoed through more than 30 years of this lecture series. It is a tradition in which I am both pleased and flattered to participate.

It may seem presumptuous for a Congressman to stand up here tonight and talk about politics and morality. [Here lies Atty (word indistinct). An honest m] There are a lot of people who think the two concepts are mutually exclusive. But I suppose most people, when they hear the two terms linked, are inclined to think in terms of monetary morality, of kickbacks and money passed under the table, of fat contracts negotiated under a kind of most favored brother-in-law agreement. The vast majority honest -- this is a traditional American attitude and there is enough evidence both in the history books and the daily newspapers to support it.

But there are other aspects of morality as it relates to politics and these are what I want to discuss tonight. In fact, one of our fundamental mistakes, I think, has been to confine our concern for morality in politics to narrow pecuniary terms. Too often we have been satisfied if our leaders just didn't steal from us, or at least didn't get caught at it. And too often we've gotten just what we demanded: conventionally honest men who were content to devote their public lives to the maintenance of their comfortable positions. There may have been times in our history when this was enough. But I want to suggest that this is not one of those times, and that the narrower definitions of political morality no longer are adequate.

We might begin by looking at what happened to us in the 1960's and where we stand today. We began the last decade with the highest of aspirations [Ask not -- Best generation] and the confidence we could attain them. We ended it in disillusionment and despair. In January, 1961, young John F. Kennedy watched a traditional American parade march proudly through the streets of the nation's capital. A few weeks ago,

thousands of young people who were in elementary school on that day threw garbage in those same streets. We have become so accustomed to social upheaval that I don't think anyone was really shocked by the sight of federal troops occupying the bridges leading to Washington, or of military helicopters disgorging soldiers on the Mall. To acknowledge that these are signs of the times is to come a long way from the idealism and hope of the early '60's.

Every society has had its dropouts, its hippies if you will, but ours has had to learn a new lesson. We have learned, to our bitter dismay, that the technological wonders upon which we depend for our comfort make us pitifully vulnerable at the same time. This is an age of power, but it is the kind of power that is nearly impotent in the face of fanatical minorities. Examples abound, from the hijacking of airliners to threats of urban guerrilla warfare. They all point to the same lesson: that the more complex and advanced a society is, the more vulnerable it is to the onslaughts of small groups of militant, determined men. [Heathrow -- Karachi] Here is a modern-day version of Dickens' paradox: the greater our power the less our security.

[Bigger is not better] What is frightening, is that the number of desperate, alienated people who are willing to exploit this vulnerability seems to be growing so rapidly. John Kennedy once said that sometimes it is better to rock the boat than to sail under false colors. But today we are confronted with large numbers of Americans who no longer are satisfied with rocking the boat. They want to sink it.

The danger in this phenomenon is that the American system, with all its strengths, is a fragile thing which depends on civility, faith, trust, and the acceptance of democratic procedures by the overwhelming majority of the people. Indeed, our system has survived only because of a fragile, unwritten social compact which until now has bound most of us together with common principles and aspirations. It is a compact of rational men in which the majority -- the "haves" of the times -- agree to listen to the grievances of the minority and to act within a reasonable length of time on legitimate complaints. In return, the dissenters agree that while they may shout and become unpleasant, they will refrain from violence and grant sufficient time for the system to work out the necessary changes. With the tragic exception of the War Between the States, our differences and divisions have never seriously threatened to destroy the social compact itself.

I do not want to suggest that we are on the verge of another Civil War, but I do want to emphasize that we live in an age of increasing instability and polarization. And confronted with these conditions, we ought to address certain basic questions to those who occupy or aspire to occupy positions of leadership in this country. Where have our leaders failed us? What do they owe us that they have not been giving? And what do citizens owe their society and their leaders?

I want to suggest tonight that our leaders have failed us in three or four major areas: most notably, in **challenge**, in **faithfulness**, and in **candor**. Moreover, I want to emphasize that those failures have been **fundamentally moral** because they involve obligations unfulfilled. The obligations are implicit, if not generally acknowledged, in the assumption of positions of leadership. [Oblig. leaders to lead]

First is the failure to challenge people and to arouse a sense of participation. We have accepted such challenges in the past and shared with each other the spirit of participation. But more often than not these challenges have been imposed on us from the outside -- World War II is a good example. In the absence of a Pearl Harbor or a Hitler, leaders have been loath to ask of us more than a minimum.

I believe the American people are capable of great accomplishments if they are determined, inspired and challenged enough. The catalog of Americas problems is by now an old and familiar one, and it is a list of shortcomings which ought to challenge and inspire us. Yet our national leaders do not give us the goals and the programs that might restore our spirit and give us purpose. I believe that sensible, attainable programs to rebuild our cities, clean up the rivers, end the pollution of the air and landscape and reduce racial divisions can be designed and carried forth. But such programs are not presented to us, perhaps because they would involve sucha radical change in our priorities and life styles. [Where is the (word indistinct). Blood, sweat and tears. (words indistinct)]

I believe those elected to positions of leadership have a moral obligation to exercise leadership. Timidity may at times be a virtue; if found in a leader in these times it may be a deadly sin. It is simply not enough to accept a position and then refuse to do little more than occupy it. In its starker terms, this is an abdication of responsibility.

I might also note that it is impossible to challenge and inspire the people of a nation at the same time you are attempting to divide them. To divide is easy, for it requires only that leaders appeal to our baser instincts and exploit whatever divisions already exist. We have seen a good deal of this in recent years, and there are some people in both parties prepared to gamble that this kind of politics will be rewarded in a period of tension and confusion. Perhaps it will -- although I doubt it -- but, whatever the outcome, such men do not deserve the description leaders. Rather, they merely occupy positions of power and willingly sacrifice the moral obligations of those positions in order to retain them.

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Of course I know that it might be argued that one of the major causes of disillusionment in modern America is too much talk, too many grand programs and

ringing rhetoric, followed by too little action. Well, that's true, too, for a **second** failure of our leaders has been the tendency

to **overpromise** and **underdeliver**. Since I entered Congress in 1961 we have enacted into law a remarkable number of progressive and noble measures, with great goals and promises for the future. Yet these acts of Congress have had relatively little impact in practice and in some cases, such as the Economic Opportunity Act, have been all but dismantled.

A mark of the 1960's was the rise in Congress of what I call "Titlemanship" -- the grand art of packaging noble new laws with noble new labels that promise all. We passed the 1968 "Safe Streets and Crime Control Act," but we refuse to fund it while crime rises every year. Meantime, we are assured that more wiretapping, "no knock" raids and preventive detention will stop street crime. We had "Model Cities" legislation, an "Open Housing" law, a "War on Poverty" and all the rest. In exasperation with this game we play, I once threatened to introduce a bill labeled the "Veterans, Farmers, Widows and Orphans National Defense, Anti-Communist Right-to-Work Act of 1966."

Public men have an obligation to deliver on their promises. When they don't, they can expect disillusionment and finally cynicism among the followers. You would think we would have learned this lesson, yet, I am afraid, there persist in public life some men who when they have coined a slogan believe they have solved a problem.

A sense of perspective ought also to remind us that the failure to deliver on one's promises is not confined to the political sphere. A record of promises not kept pervades much of our national life and has, I suspect, a great deal to do with the disaffection and disillusionment of the younger generation.

Linking the first two failures is perhaps the biggest failure of all -- the failure of our leaders to be-**candid**. There is something sad and dangerous in the fact that the most prominent, the most widely used new expression in the lexicon of the 1960's was "credibility gap," which, put more bluntly, is a widespread public belief that government lies to its own people.

If the news is bad the American people ought to be told. More importantly, if the task ahead is difficult and involves sacrifice, the American people deserve to know it. This is the indispensable link between the obligation to challenge our people and the obligation to deliver on our promises. Too often we have been satisfied to proclaim great goals without honestly outlining the sacrifices necessary to attain them. Those goals I mentioned earlier -- rebuilding our cities, cleaning the environment, reducing racial divisions -- they can be reached, but to do so will involve changes and sacrifices which both the leaders and the people shrink from. The fundamental failure is on the

part of leaders, for they are satisfied to allow the people to live with the illusion that **sacrifice** is not part of the goal. [Ask not]

We need, perhaps more than ever before, the spirit of Adlai Stevenson, who said in 1952: "Let's tell (the American people) the truth, that there are no gains without pains, that this is the eve of great decisions, not easy decisions like resistance when you're attacked [Pearl Harbor], but a long, patient, costly struggle which alone can assure triumph over the great enemies of men: war and poverty and tyranny -- and the assaults upon human dignity which are the most grievous consequences of each." Stevenson knew that in the long run everyone lost if we put the requirements of the next election ahead of the needs of the next generation.

There is another aspect of this failure of candor -- the failure of us politicians to tell the people the truth about our own business. There is a general assumption in this country that much in politics is dishonest, but I think few people truly realize the extent to which money has corrupted the political process. This is not the same thing as the monetary morality I spoke of earlier, for much of this corruption is conventionally honest according to the rules we now follow, which makes it all the more dangerous. The failure is with those of us who have mastered the existing system and learned to live with it.

The subject of campaign money -- who gives it, who gets it and the preposterous bundle of laws that "control" it -- is approaching a national outrage. These laws and practices, in the judgment of one who has to live with them, are shot full of hypocrisy, threatening to corrupt many good men in public life, giving unnecessary influence and power to special interest groups and lobbies and posing a serious threat to the integrity of American political institutions. Consider, for instance, the threat to the integrity of the political process implicit in these facts: We are just now beginning the process of picking a President for 1973-77. Based on past experience, in the next year or so the candidates will spend close to \$75 million just to get the nominations. Then the nominees and their supporters will throw in another \$75 million in the finals. [Where come from -- Noble men who ask no favor, widows (word indistinct)]

In politics -- like war -- one of the hardest things to do is to change voluntarily the rules of the game. The great barrier to campaign reform has always been this: present laws are a jungle of hypocrisy, unfairness and confusion, but it is **our** jungle. Incumbents as a rule have hacked their way through the foilage with some success. We know, in general, how to evade the traps, where the gold is to be found and how it must be spent. So we have a real advantage over our tenderfoot opponents who have never tried this path before.

Yet we owe the country something better than the non-law which supposedly regulates campaign spending. The present system is nothing less than a loaded gun pointed at the head of our political process. Those of us already established in politics must lead the way; will have to change to a degree the comfortable ways in which we have always done things, and some of those adjustments won't be easy. But those who had the wit to master the old system can master a new, honest system the country has long demanded and always deserved. [One of key tests of 92nd Congress -- result is in doubt.]

Our leaders have failed us again when they have failed to think anew, to challenge old dogmas. James Reston remarked in 1965: "The history of mankind is strewn with habits and creeds and dogmas that were essential in one age and disastrous in another." [Tree-Reform if you would cause]

One of the ironies of today is the performance of President Nixon. To Democrats, he has always projected an image of sharp partisanship, cunning opportunism, little adherence to principle. Yet a case can be made that Mr. Nixon's finest hours as President have been precisely those times when he was flexible and pragmatic. For example: The Family Assistance Plan sponsored by a man who has made more speeches against welfare cheats than anyone this side of Ronald Reagan. Or a new China policy from a man whose political success was based in large part on an inflexible anti-Communism. Or the acceptance of modern economics and deficit spending from a man who extolled the balanced budget as being next only to the flag and motherhood. [Full (word indistinct) budget]

The other side of the irony is that, in my view, the President's worst performances have come when he has stubbornly clung to old dogmas -- for instance, a Vietnam policy firmly grounded in outdated principles, or a defense spending policy which seems to be rooted in the thinking of John Foster Dulles.

It seems to me, finally, that our leaders owe us a timely departure. More of our public men ought to keep in mind the quotation from Ecclesiastes: "A time to weep, a time to laugh, a time to mourn, and a time to dance. A time to keep silent and a time to speak." And they ought to add their own postscript: A time to run and a time to step aside. Pass on the torch to a new generation.

Some of our leaders have known when, gracefully, to leave. Senators Saltonstall of Massachusetts and Williams of Delaware are two examples that come to mind immediately. But perhaps the best example is Lyndon Johnson. Here was a man who relished power as few have; a master of the political process. Yet he saw in March 1968 that he had, rightly or wrongly, become a symbol of division. No matter what one thinks of the Johnson Presidency, his renunciation of another term must be

viewed as an act of courage, motivated by the knowledge that it was a time to leave. I do not accept the cynical view that Johnson gave up the Presidency because he knew he could not be reelected, for that was by no means certain.

The average age of the American people is twenty-eight. The burdens of society and the burdens of change are borne largely by the younger generation. Whether we solve our problems or fail will be decided in large part by the young. Yet the Congress is run by men in their 60's and 70's and 80's. Perhaps this is what comes of a career devoted sometimes primarily to its own perpetuation.

The obligations and failures of leaders I have spoken of are only half the equation, for citizens -- followers -- owe their country and their fellow man some things that they too have failed to give. It seems to me that what people often look for in their leaders are men who will not exercise leadership -- men who will give us oversimplified answers, who will justify existing ways, who will castigate our enemies, vindicate selfishness and make us comfortable with our prejudices. Some people, in the words of Sidney Harris, seek leadership which will "reconcile the irreconcilable, moralize the immoral, rationalize the irrational and promise us a society where we can continue to be as narrow and envious and shortsighted as we like without suffering the consequences."

We cannot escape individual responsibility, for we owe our fellow men something we haven't been giving them these days -- ourselves. We owe ourselves some things too, the first of which is an honest assessment of where we are heading.

More of us need to admit that we only cheat ourselves and our children when we allow -- or even demand -- that our leaders engage in the politics of illusion. The good, decent things we desire for ourselves and future generations simply are not attainable without considerable sacrifice and hard work. To pretend that this is not true, to year after year support those who tell us it is not true, or do not even mention it, is to soothe ourselves with the drug of fantasy.

This is a fact that is only now becoming painfully clear to most of us. For the blunt truth is that we have been able to live in the style we are so accustomed to only by robbing ourselves through neglect and by using up our reserves of several vital commodities. Now the bills are coming due and we are going to have to pay them. [Cannibalize. Fine - Moore (word indistinct) them not I/we]

New York City -- or almost any big city in this country -- is a good example of survival through neglect. Somehow the place hangs together and functions, however badly, day to day. But the cost has been frightful in terms of the quality of life. The

fact that most of us, until now, have been able to escape personal experience with that cost makes it no less frightful.

No place could call itself a city -- a center of civilization -- if it did not provide for the education of its young people and the care of its sick and elderly. Our cities do these things, but most do them very badly. The price of doing them adequately is high indeed, and so far we have not been willing to pay it. Those of us who are members of the affluent society seek our own solutions -- perhaps in a suburb or through private institutions -- while living comfortably with the illusion that our cities really perform their functions. We will pay enough to avert the utter chaos and collapse of our urban centers, for we need them for our work and entertainment, but we will pay no more. The poor, huddled within the cities, pay the price of our neglect. The ultimate cost of a system or institution that survives through neglect may be more than we are able to afford with even the best of intentions.

The environmental crisis is a clear case of past bills coming due. The fouled air and filthy waters of this nation are graphic evidence of both our neglect of the environment and our willingness to live high off **nature's reserves** rather than pay the price of our affluence. We have worshipped so long at the shrine of growth and "progress" that we have been blind to the results of our demands for more automobiles, more gadgets, more power, more comfort. We have been blessed with so much in natural resources that we have been able to get away with it. But now, just as the Great Lakes threaten to die one by one, the illusion that we can have this kind of "progress" free of charge also is dying.

This is what the debate over national priorities is all about, but I am not convinced that we have really come to terms with the implications of that debate. A few weeks ago *The Washington Post* reported that the administration is considering recommending a tax cut in order to revive the economy. I have no argument with the economic theory that holds tax cuts are an effective tool for this purpose, and certainly the extent of unemployment demands bold economic leadership.

What was interesting was that on the same page the *Post* reported the results of an extensive study of national needs and economic resources by The Brookings Institution. The study concluded that, if we really want to do those things we say, higher taxes will be necessary. No magic "peace dividend" from an end to the war, no flood of tax receipts from an ever expanding gross national product, will pay our bills -- past, present or future. It is we who must pay them, and that means higher taxes for a time and changes in our life style. [MIDI and wide ties. GNP down -- real terms -- better or worse off.]

In all the talk about national priorities, I hear very little about this prospect. The thrust now is to cut costs in one area and divert the savings to more pressing programs. This is a noble effort which has my full support. But I think we are still fooling ourselves if we think this will be enough.

Paying higher taxes would represent a genuine sacrifice on the part of the American people, but it is one of those sacrifices with singularly little appeal. It is not, after all, glamorous or romantic, like marching off to war or braving the wrath of your neighbors to picket for racial equality. In fact, it's downright dull and anonymous, which makes the sacrifice all the more irritating.

Nor is it very exciting to contemplate the prospect of one less car, with less horsepower, or of ridding ourselves of subservience to more and more power-hungry gadgets. Yet, like higher taxes, these are some of the things we may have to face if we mean what we say.

It is the task of leadership to end our illusions and to begin to talk about these prospects. And it is our task to accept these hard truths and to reward -- not punish -- those leaders willing to speak them. On both these accounts, I am afraid our record to date is not encouraging.

In 1969, the Congress attempted to tighten up some of the more scandalous loopholes that riddle our tax laws. The result of that effort was the Tax Reform Act of 1969, which included a number of worthwhile provisions closing tax loopholes and increasing federal revenues. But much of the additional revenue the government might have received from these reforms was lost because of other provisions designed to sweeten the law enough to gain passage. We have all happily benefitted from those additional benefits -- for instance, the increase in personal tax exemptions -- but that has not helped to reorder our priorities. Charles L. Schultze, who directed the new Brookings study of needs and priorities, remarked about the 1969 act:

"...There is much brave talk about 'new priorities.' But with large tax cuts enacted, there simply will not be the revenues available to pay for these new priorities. When the chips were down on tax cuts, those [Liberals] who **talked** about priorities for pollution control and education and an end to hunger **voted** for a different set of priorities -- for beer and cosmetics and whitewall tires..."

Nor is it very encouraging to contemplate recent events on Capitol Hill, which demonstrate once again that the strongest asset of the defenders of the status quo is their persistence. A few weeks ago my colleagues in the House, by a four-vote margin, resurrected the SST from what we thought was its final resting place. Despite the Senate's rejection of the project, the vote in the House ought to be a vivid lesson to

anyone who thinks significant political and economic victories can be won easily or cheaply. The whole fiasco reminded me of the words of a real estate speculator who had just suffered a temporary setback in a rezoning case. "Money can always wait," he said.

I have spoken tonight about politics and morality and illusion, and I want to close by suggesting that there is much to be learned from our experience in the 1960's. Reflecting on those turbulent years brings to mind Professor C. Vann Woodward's collection of essays, *The Burden of Southern History*.

It is Woodward's contention that the unbroken string of successes which marks American history has produced in us two myths: the myth of American **invincibility** and the myth of American **innocence**. Only the South escaped enrapture in these myths, Woodward argued, for the South had experienced war on its own soil and known the bitter taste of defeat, occupation, humiliation, poverty and the legacy of slavery. Such an historical experience is not conducive to visions of either invincibility or innocence.

The addition of the last ten years to American history has done much to shatter those two myths and extend the geography of Woodward's burden. Surely the myth of invincibility died somewhere in the jungles of Vietnam. And surely the discovery of blatant racism outside the South, or the awakening of more Americans to the real story of the white man's relationship to the Indians, has all but ended our illusion of innocence. The question as we enter the '70's is how will we react to the loss of these cherished myths.

One recourse is to retreat into despair and angry frustration. I mentioned at the outset that we are losing our traditional optimism. This is, perhaps, the price we pay for the sudden realization that we are not, after all, either invincible or totally innocent. The real tragedy will occur if this loss of unbridled optimism is followed by despair and anger, in a kind of universal dropping out by a whole society.

It will be the moral challenge of political leadership in the years ahead to prevent this from happening. As I have tried to indicate tonight, that task will not be an easy one, for either our leaders or ourselves. We can make the task both possible and rewarding if we will accept the costs and demand true leadership from our public men and institutions. we can begin by recognizing, as Adler recognized, that in the final analysis we are responsible ourselves. Mark Twain gave leaders of all generations some sound counsel: "Do what is right. You'll please some people and astonish the rest." And Edward Everett Hale uttered a philosophy which all Americans of the 1970's ought to adopt:

"I am only one ... but I am one... I cannot do everything but I can do something...what I can do I ought to do ... and what I ought to do by the grace of God I will do."