

"Can America Do Too Much for You?"

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Freedom or Totalitarianism?

"Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country" is the often quoted phrase uttered by President Kennedy in his inaugural address.

Are we permitting America to do too much for us? What are the facts?

Thoughtful answers to these questions are given in the commencement address by Ward L. Quaal, Executive Vice President and General Manager, WGN, Inc., before the 1962 graduating class of Mundelein College, which conferred upon him the degree of doctor of laws, *honoris causa*.

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In my 27 years in the radio industry and in television since its first year of infancy as a commercial medium, I have had the good fortune to address the general public on various segments of the broadcast industry on the many facets of radio and television.

Today, however, I should like to confine my remarks to a phrase which President Kennedy uttered in his inaugural address and has since been often quoted:

"Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country."

Commencement address before the graduation class of Mundelein College, Chicago, Illinois, June 5, 1962.

It is a challenging thought for young people today since the phrase itself is subject to a multiplicity of interpretations which may flow from your political or religious convictions, from your business or professional ambitions or from the very basic spirit which, like a beacon, will light the corridors along which you will walk throughout your life.

I would not presume to impose my own judgment upon that of the President of the United States as to his meaning in thus phrasing this admonition to the American people.

For that matter, he himself has avoided specific and exact proscriptions with respect to the meaning of this phrase, although I am sure he has been asked many times about it.

So far as I am concerned, the interpretation must be an individual one for each of us, somewhat in the fashion that certain works of poetry and philosophy imprint different images on different minds.

If we are to think constructively of what we can do as individuals for our country, we must first arrive at a meaning of those words alone: our country.

In the first place, our country is a republic in its political form, a fact frequently forgotten or obscured. Each year, the broadcasting industry undertakes, in cooperation with the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the conduct of a nationwide contest among high school students. It is called the "Voice of Democracy" contest. The purpose of this competition is to encourage young people to speak positively and forcefully in behalf of the democratic way of life.

Each year when this contest is announced, a very dedicated American in our Chicago

area purchases newspaper space to stress that the voice of our country is a voice of a "republic" more surely than it is a voice of a democracy.

I could not agree with him more enthusiastically but, setting aside the semantics, we know what we are or what we are supposed to be: we are a free people whose voice controls the state.

Years ago, when James Russell Lowell was the American minister in Great Britain, he was asked:

"How long will the American Republic endure?"

"As long," he answered crisply, "as the ideas of the men who made it continue to be dominant."

James Russell Lowell was speaking, of course, of the ideas of the founding fathers as expressed in the Constitution of the United States, as documented in such publications as *The Federalist Papers* and as implicit in the causes and objectives of our own great Revolution.

I would presume this much, with reference to President Kennedy's interpretation of his own advice, that he is well aware of and sensitive to these fundamentals in American life as set forth nearly two centuries ago. For just recently, when he had a party at the White House for the nation's leading scientists and artists, all Nobel Prize winners, you may have noted, he commented that never had so much brain power sat down to dinner in the White House since Thomas Jefferson dined there alone.

Certainly, no man in the history of the United States, possibly excepting Benjamin

Franklin, personified more surely the rewards of personal initiative than did Thomas Jefferson—writer, inventor, architect, educator and political leader. The study of his life and that of other great personalities, whose contributions to our nation's development have been unquestioned, brings one to an interesting postulate: *what one can do for his country relates to what he does for himself.*

Lest you conclude hastily that I am establishing a premise that selfishness is more to be desired than selflessness, let me with equal haste emphasize that I am talking about individual *responsibility.*

The philosophy of individual responsibility, recorded in civilization since the time of the stone carvers, was believed in and practiced by Jesus, by the world's great philosophers (such as Socrates and Plato) and by political leaders since tribal times. Where individual *irresponsibility* identifies leadership, as we well know within our own generation, chaos is pursued by collapse.

We see around us evidence of such irresponsibility extending from the gang leaders of juvenile packs to the awesome unreality that finds one-half of the world fenced in by barbed wire.

In summary, where an individual in a position of power seeks to enlarge that power through force, he is indeed expressing individual initiative but he is foregoing individual responsibility.

A man is distinguished more importantly from all of the other creatures of the earth by his ability to reason and, consequently, to aspire. In the animal world, the fang and the

claw are the marks of superiority and leadership. To the extent that we as individuals resort to weapons and force, just so far do we negate the true meaning and the sure promise of individual responsibility.

Thus, it may be the case that what we can do for our country in one sense relates very directly to what we can do for ourselves. If, for example, our secret impulse is to satisfy a great need within us to be eminent in the field of science, the satisfaction of that impulse may lead to the greatest contribution we can make to our fellow man.

It is this interpretation of the President's admonition that would appear to me to be more consistent with the basic principles of the republic in which we live — as those basic principles are spelled out in the document that begins with the words "We the people" — and as the Rights defined in the preamble to the Constitution relate in their ultimate substance to the dignity of the individual person.

This does not mean that man is an island unto himself.

There could have been no more dramatic demonstration of the reliance of the individual upon his fellowman than the adventure of February 20, 1962, when Astronaut John Glenn successfully entered the "keyhole in the sky." Colonel Glenn indeed was demonstrating individual initiative and responsibility in a most intense way, but as he himself has pointed out so frequently since, there were literally thousands of earth-bound persons, from missile mechanics to scientists, who made his flight possible. It was as if each of these thousands held a guidance string that

terminated in the confined capsule that was the *Friendship 7*.

All of us, of course, made our contribution to that orbit thrice around the earth, a feat which has since been duplicated by Lt. Comdr. Malcolm Scott Carpenter. We may have done so only as taxpayers which, in itself, was not an inconsiderable accomplishment since it cost a million dollars more to launch the *Friendship 7* than the total expenditures for all government services in the year 1800.

Yet, I am sure that millions of Americans who lived through the agony and the joy of that first flight with Colonel Glenn in some way associated themselves personally, as individuals, with him. This was a true expression of the individual identifying himself positively with the society of which he was a part.

We were, in those moments, even as was Walter Mitty, Colonel John Glenn in flight—coursing over the oceans, over the great continents, penetrating the universe and, finally, returning.

The exploration of the universe, so recently a figment of science literature, has begun in earnest and those of you here stand upon the threshold of that great adventure. Whatever may be the outcome, the search for facts that personifies these spatial activities is justified against the experience of history.

Most of the tragedies befalling mankind have resulted from ignorance. In the 14th century, such a plague visited the earth—the Black Death, it was called—that possibly half of the population of the earth was destroyed. Crews manning ships at sea perished. Wild animals took up abode in tenantless homes.

A distinguished man of medicine of that tragic time explained the phenomenon by saying:

“The great conjunction of the three superior planets, Saturn, Jupiter and Mars, in the sign of Aquarius, produced the Black Death.”

It was not this, as we now know, it was the conjunction of vermin and microbes, carried by fleas and rats. The cause of this great scourge was discovered through painstaking examination over generations of time by thousands engaged in research.

The cures have been found, with no less demanding study, by such as the Pasteurs and the Listers and the Curies. Dedicated individuals, working along into the dark hours, expending their life energies, did this in medicine.

For material reward? I think not. For recognition? Surely for recognition, but mostly because they were devoted to a purpose that was more important in their minds than any other to which they could dedicate themselves.

In those darker days, when the practice of medicine was looked upon as a chicanery or occult science, people died because of ignorance. There are now those among us who question the wisdom of encircling satellites, missile launchings and projected trips to the moon.

We have come a long way, in this sense, from the day of this state's most treasured citizen, Abraham Lincoln, of whom Carl Sandburg said:

“In wilderness loneliness, he companioned with trees—silence claimed him as her own. In the making of him, the element of silence was immense.”

And Mr. Sandburg later wrote:

“Many, if not all, frontier women of the old days were dreamers. Their lives were hard, their emotions mostly sealed up, but all around them was the mystery of the primeval forest; they treasured it in silence . . .”

And now again, men and women face another great silence, with all of the implications of a new wilderness made up of galaxies, the silence of the universe.

This is the silent forest now to be penetrated. This is the ignorance now to be dispelled. This is the knowledge now to be sought. And upon its finding may rest the future of all of mankind as we know it.

In this overwhelming search, however . . . in this search for means of international communications and amity, developed through electronic systems that even now are in the laboratories—in this search, the right and the responsibility of the individual, and his concomitant freedom, should not be submerged.

Twenty-five centuries ago, Sparta—the totalitarian state of that time—was waging war against Athens, which stood for a freer way of life.

The Athenian statesman Pericles, in a funeral oration over the first victims of the war, said:

“The freedom which we enjoy in our government extends to our ordinary way of life. There, far from exercising a jealous surveillance over each other, we do not feel called upon to be angry with our neighbor for doing what he likes . . .

“If we turn to our military policy, there also we differ from our antagonists. We throw open our city to the world, and never by alien acts exclude foreigners from any opportunity of learning or observing, although the eyes of

any enemy may occasionally profit from our liberality. We trust less in system and policy than in the native spirit of our citizens.”

How apt are the words of Pericles today in the relationship between the United States and the Soviet states.

Yet, as Edith Hamilton wrote: “When the Athenians wanted not to give to the State, but the State to give to them, when the freedom they wished most for was freedom from responsibility, then Athens ceased to be free and was never free again.”

The lessons of history are inexorable. And though we cannot guide our lives in all fashions according to the plans written on ancient parchments, the words of responsible leaders through the ages on this subject of individual freedom bear unique similarity.

What can you do for your country? For one thing, you can see to it that your country does not do too much for you; for, if it does, in the sense that the State not only admonishes through law but administers through alms, then the undergirding of liberty will collapse and our destiny will be that of the Athenians.

In a statement on May 10 of this year, former President Eisenhower addressed himself succinctly to this very area, when he stated:

“It has long been my judgment that the real threat to liberty in this Republic will come not from any sudden, calculated assault; rather, the threat to our liberties will be primarily found in a steady erosion of self-reliant citizenship, and in excessive power concentration, resulting from the lodging of more and more decisions in an ever-growing Federal bureaucracy.”

Each step taken by the Government, any Government, to supplant your right to choose

is a step closer to leaving you with only one right, if such it can be called: the right *not* to choose.

This may be a comfortable state of affairs, but it is a dangerous one. In totalitarian nations, the state chooses for you—what you shall be able to buy, how much you shall have to buy it with, what your career shall be, where you shall pursue it, the nature of your housing, the dicta of education for your children, the manner in which you shall worship, what you may read and hear, and the gods to whom you will pay homage.

These are some of the “wonderful” things your country can do for you, if you are unwilling to assume the responsibility of doing them for yourself.

One hundred and ten years ago, the 19th century philosopher and teacher, Amiel, wrote in his *Journal*:

“The test of every religious, political, or educational system, is the man which it forms. If a system injures the intelligence, it is bad. If it injures the character, it is vicious. If it injures the conscience, it is criminal.”

By this measure, you can calibrate the worth of the American system in its purest form, as designed by its original architects, against the enslavement to which freemen stand opposed.

This is the challenge to you as you enter the arena of triumph and turmoil, which mark the era in which we live.

There is no question about your capacity to meet that challenge. You have been well prepared. You have been blessed by freedom, and you may now bless her name by living with

honor and pride and with the independence which has been foresworn as your birthright.

In the splendid future which faces you, whatever vocational pursuits you may follow and as the mothers of children who will fulfill other destinies in their turn, may you find great happiness and joy and a full life.

And may you give to your country that measure of truth and allegiance and dignity which you will surely demand of yourselves. No citizen can give less. No nation can ask more.

I hope that whatever may be the path you choose in life that you will never ignore the importance of continuing, in some form or another, your education. I hope this will include continued interest in your great school of Mundelein, but that in addition to that interest as an alumna, you will encourage your family to stress the value of a constant search for knowledge.

Over the years, my family and I have visited on many occasions the quaint and lovely home of Louisa May Alcott in historical Concord, Massachusetts. On each of these visits, where one likes to drink of the past and recall the greatness of those who made this country great, I enjoy reading the inscription on the unique mantle of Louisa's home. It contains a quotation of her father's dear friend, William Ellery Channing, a famed Philadelphia educator, and it reads as follows:

"The hills are reared, the seas are scooped in vain if learning's altar vanish from the plain."

I do hope that in the years to come, you will also bear in mind the importance of superior performance in that which you do, no matter what may be the area of activity in-

volved. In his beloved *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau, who died more than 100 years ago, made a statement which I treasure, and I hope it is one that you will recall throughout your lifetime.

“I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by conscious endeavor. It is something to be able to paint a particular picture, or to carve a statue and so to make a few objects beautiful, but it is far more *glorious* to carve and paint the very atmosphere and the medium through which we *look*, which morally we can do. To effect the *quality* of the day, that is the highest of arts.”

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