

ON THE IMPORTANCE OF INFORMING THE PUBLIC

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Speech by  
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Solon, the economic reformer of Ancient Greece, once said that speech is the image of actions. It is through speech that we communicate our ideas or our thoughts, and actions to each other, as public officials, and to the people. (Insert: Solon - legislators - law-makers.)

With the advent of a more educated, a more enlightened public, we cannot afford to carry on the affairs of government in silence, for silence breeds distrust. We are more exposed to public opinion than ever before; our actions in government are closely observed and monitored by the news media serving a waiting and inquiring public. and rightly so. As one of our Presidents so aptly put it, "Public officers are the servants and the agents of the people." I believe that it is our responsibility to bring the people in closer touch with the government through press conferences, speeches, informative letters and open meetings. (Insert: During campaign I let people know)

Franklin Roosevelt in his fireside chats went to the people to discuss with them the problems of the Nation. He spoke in words that reawakened the spirit of America and brought unity to a troubled people. He went to the country not to "stump" but rather to converse with his fellowmen. They responded with strong support for his New Deal policies.

Today, lines of communications must be opened and kept open so that a better understanding might be fostered among our agencies and the public we serve. We must ensure that government does not become so vast in scale, so crowded and so remote that it becomes inaccessible and ineffective. We must not allow ourselves to become so secluded that we cannot keep our eyes and ears open and our responses flexible.

Open government invites enlightened politics. There is a need to create direct citizen participation through which citizens who retain their private status can participate in public business. Only through open government can the people and the government operate as a whole body, not each body suspicious of the other.

Thomas Jefferson voiced this belief when he stated, "No one more sincerely wishes the spread of information among mankind than I do, and none has greater confidence in its effect towards supporting free and good government."

We have been elected to share in the responsibility of serving the people. We have also taken upon ourselves a political responsibility. The politician or administrator is directly responsible to those who gave him his office, namely, the voters.

In order to function effectively as citizens and to support those they have elected, these same voters must be sufficiently and honestly informed. They must have access to truth. Without this access, the whole foundation of government is weakened. Neither should the public's access be restricted to information of a non-controversial nature. They should not be asked to accept "government on faith." Too often the government restricts information and says "have faith in us; we're doing what's best for you." And some of our leaders take the position that many issues are far too complicated for the people to understand. This is an extremely dangerous practice.

Our early leaders were as convinced as was Patrick Henry that the business of government must be publicized. They believed that the survival of the new Nation depended upon the people being kept informed and so do I.

Madison, the father of the Constitution wrote: "Knowledge will forever govern ignorance. And a people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power knowledge gives. A popular government without popular information or the means of acquiring it, is but a prologue to a farce, or a tragedy, or perhaps both." Clearly, the founders of our Nation considered informing the people to be a function of democracy.

Especially after the last turbulent decade, dissatisfaction with the government is growing among the people. If the present situation of crisis following crisis -- of violence in the streets and on the campus -- continues, the silent public which has, to some extent, lacked interest in government can erupt. We in public life can see more "citizen action" than we want if we don't take it upon ourselves to keep the public informed. Times are not placid and unrest is replacing apathy in more and more people.

To the average person, the government sometimes presents itself to be an uncontrollable body of mass laws, restrictions, and even persecutions. The government is often the scapegoat of all sorts of social and political mores, and, frequently, the people consider the government as a dictator in complete control of the destiny of the Nation. The concept that government is of the people, for the people and, especially, by the people too often seems to be lost.

With the extended growth in the credibility problem, former President Dwight D. Eisenhower acknowledged: "In the diplomatic field it was routine practice to deny responsibility for an embarrassing occurrence when there was even one percent chance of being believed, but when the world can entertain not the slightest doubt of the facts there is no point in trying to evade the issue." Eisenhower could not forget the discovery of the United States U-2 spy plane deep inside Russia. The Russians smugly kept silent about the capture and confession of pilot Francis Gary Powers until after the United States government had released a contrived story stating the plane was on a weather reconnaissance flight for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. "The big error we made was, of course, in the issuance of a

premature and erroneous cover story," Eisenhower reflected, "Allowing myself to be persuaded on this score is my principal regret--except for the U-2 failure itself--regarding the whole affair."

Credibility in governmental programs is the first essential, and it cannot be achieved by falsehood and hypocrisy which would and should be promptly exposed.

A measure of the impact of the credibility problem on the American people can be seen in the results of polls taken regularly by members of Congress. One Congressman asked, "Do you believe that the government gives the people reliable information on what is going on?" Of those responding, more than 86 percent answered, "No."

Access to information about the government is required for the democratic system to work successfully. In order to maintain a government run by an informed people, secrecy must be minimized and the flow of accurate facts maximized. A government whose leaders cannot be believed runs the risk of losing the privilege of representing the people, and the people risk losing the contest between democracy and despotism. In a democracy, it is essential that the people possess and exercise

the right to criticize the actions of the government.  
Criticism worries me only when I know I'm wrong.

In a 1960 report of the President's Commission on National Goals, the report concluded: "Improvement of the democratic process requires a constantly better informed public ... What America needs is not more voters, but more good voters, men and women who are informed, understanding and reasonable. To produce such men and women in ever larger numbers should be a major goal of all labors to preserve American democracy."

We are faced and have faced a crisis in credibility and an ever-widening gap in communication. Now we must come to the people. We cannot permit ourselves to remain aloof and out-of-touch. As Attorney General, I am trying to breach these gaps in credibility and communication and to initiate a bond of strength and mutual respect between the general public and the Office of the Attorney General, and to let the public know that I respect the intelligence of those who elected me.



NOTES - ADDITIONS

1. Be frank
2. Take time for background
3. Take time for little things - explain
4. Press - mindful of their deadlines.
5. Mindful of what management expects of reporters.
6. Know that they expect only fair treatment -  
no favoritism.
7. Public can support only if they know good and  
bad news.
8. Stand behind any story you give