

SPEECH BY ATTORNEY GENERAL ROBERT MORGAN  
GOLDEN STAR AWARDS PRESENTATION  
STAR-NEWS NEWSPAPERS, INC.  
WILMINGTON, NORTH CAROLINA  
MAY 4, 1972

It is always a temptation for a politician, especially in an election year, to use an opportunity like this one to promote some special interest of his or to try to convince you that the things he is doing on your behalf are good and sound and responsible. I tried not to yield to that temptation tonight but instead to present to you for your consideration some thoughts I have been turning over in my own mind lately.

The United States has been known throughout the world as THE great land of opportunity, and for good reason. It was here that our forefathers began the great social and economic experiment that has been described time and time again as a system of "rugged individualism".

This is the same system to which President Hoover referred when he said,

"While I can make no claim for having introduced the term 'rugged individualism', I should be proud to have invented it. It has been used by American leaders for over a half-century in eulogy of those God-fearing men and women of honesty whose stamina and character and fearless assertion of rights led them to make their own way of life."

I think any one of us, like President Hoover, would be proud to have invented this phrase because we Americans have always admired those persons who could, by their own hard work and determination, raise themselves from ignorance and poverty to wisdom and wealth. Until a few generations ago, rags to riches stories like the career of Abraham Lincoln, that started in a log cabin and ended in the White House, were told to our children to instill in them the ambition to use their own resources to make the most of themselves. And we are here tonight because we want the young people who are being honored here to use their talents to achieve this same kind of success that we Americans have always admired since the founding of our nation.

Although most of us still feel that America is still THE great land of opportunity, we must admit that this is a changing land. Rags to riches stories are no longer popular in some quarters. Many of our citizens rightly complain that opportunity has never been theirs and others rightly complain that it is theirs no longer.

Too many forces seem to interfere with our daily lives. Too many people feel they cannot do the worthwhile things they want to do. Too many people feel that they cannot be the individuals they want to be.

Those of us who are older have felt this interference for some time. Now today's young people are beginning to feel it too, and I think that this is why they have tried so desperately during the past few years to change the course of our nation's priorities. This feeling is not peculiar to any one group of persons for it has been said by all kinds of people — conservatives and liberals — that our government interferes with our lives far too often.

It is seldom today that a person is reminded of his responsibilities in a free society yet also encouraged to strive to achieve whatever good things he aspires to. He is seldom told to first determine how best he can serve and then to set about finding a way to achieve it.

Instead, he is told continuously to mold himself to fit the present needs of society. And even then he is not always allowed to pursue some of these goals, for our society has established the practice of setting quotas. To illustrate, let us look at our educational institutions.

A perfect example is our medical schools. It should be that in this nation a young person with the desire to help his fellow man through the practice of the healing arts could aspire to become and, become, a doctor ministering to the people of his community. This is not true for most of our young men and women.

Nothing has been more disturbing to me in recent years than to see ambitious and talented young people, who want more than anything in the world to become doctors, told there is no place for them in our medical schools. Neither their desire to serve or the need for their services in communities throughout this State or nation has swayed those who set quotas and establish priorities in our institutions of higher learning.

The concept of individualism and pursuit of personal ambition has been effectively frustrated by a system of quotas. How do you explain this to our young people and in the same breath try to talk with them about "rugged individualism" and the pursuit of personal ambition. Certainly they are justified in suggesting a credibility gap.

We are told that we do not need over a few hundred new lawyers each year. The competition to get into one of the handful of veterinary schools in the country is unbelievable. Most of our young people, after years of preparation and hoping, are turned away. "The quota has been met," they are told.

We have too many college professors, we have too many teachers. We even have too many educated people, we are told by some. Too much education, it is said, is as bad as none. This is strange talk in a country like ours.

Consequently, many young people are being counseled to lower their aims, to redirect their ambitions and in many instances, to stifle them.

If our society needs factory workers, our schools are told to train their students to be factory workers. No one seems to want to ask what these students may someday want to be. We seem to be only concerned about keeping our established institutions going. And this tends to put institutions first and people last. What does this do to the concept of "rugged individualism"? Perhaps we should think about it.

Perhaps we should think about it in the light of what Thomas Wolfe, the great American author who lived here in North Carolina, stated so well as his idea of the "promise of America". Wolfe said it this way:

"To every man his chance, to every man, regardless of his birth, his shining golden opportunity - to every man the right to live, to work, to be himself, and to become whatever thing his manhood and his vision can combine to make him - this, seeker, is the promise of America."

This is what I am concerned about tonight as we gather to honor these young scholars. I am concerned about those great American ideals of ambition, hard work and individual freedom of choice which, in the past, have made the "promise of America" more than just a promise - which have made it, in fact, a promise fulfilled for those willing to strive and achieve.

These ideals once made America a beacon to the world. I hope we have not now lost faith in them, for can we have a truly great society if we, as individuals, are not called upon to strive for greatness? I believe not.

Many of you have most likely wondered apprehensively about the actions of many of today's young people. It is easy to think of their behavior in terms of rebellion. Perhaps much of it is.

But to prompt some thought tonight, I want to suggest another view. Maybe our young people are trying to tell us that we, and not they, have abandoned our heritage? Maybe they are trying to tell us that we have taught them the importance of individuality only to turn around and take from them the opportunity to make their place in and their mark on the world in which they must live.

It was once said that "Freedom is not safety but opportunity". But are we not now too often telling our young people to substitute safety for opportunity?

How many of us have encouraged our college-bound sons and daughters to study those subjects that will help them become what they want to be? How many of us, instead, are guilty of having told them to be practical, have told them to study something that will automatically get them jobs when they graduate? It seems that we who have always professed a belief in the value of the individual would now rather urge security upon our children than urge them to pursue legitimate ambitions which offer to them in their day "the promise of America" also.

You know the world we live in can be an interesting place, a place full of challenge, excitement, and fulfillment. It does not have to be a place of boredom, despair, resignation, and failure. But it will be a good world only if we return to that great system of rugged individualism that we Americans alone in the world have pioneered.

In that system, our government, our social, and our economic institutions were built to make it possible for each and every one of us to pursue our natural, worthwhile inclinations to be what we ourselves want to be. And if our government,

our social, and our economic institutions try to tell us how to live our lives and direct our ambitions, we are sure to be discontented. As President Lyndon B. Johnson once said, our most important task is to replace despair with opportunity, not only for our poor and our underprivileged, but for each and every one of us, for freedom, opportunity, and individuality are three sides of the same idea. And this idea made America great.

Men join together in society in order to share the fruits of each others talents. Each of us is talented in our own special way, as are you who are honored here tonight. And we all want - at sometime in our lives - to give to society that one unique thing that only we can contribute. Unless we rebuild our society so that it can take advantage of these unique contributions that only individuals who are left to develop their own resources can make, we, our children, and all of mankind will have lost what can never be replaced. For every life that is wasted, every talent not used, is a loss to the richness of our way of life.

You have all heard, from time to time, the expression "creeping socialism". What I bring to your attention today is a kind of creeping collectivism - those hidden changes in our society that, by destroying the opportunity of each and every one of us to be what we want to be, are destroying our individuality and ultimately our freedom.



So what is the greatest challenge facing these young scholars or any American today as he looks toward the future? It may well be the challenge to resist the unreasonable pressures of social planners on the one hand, and well-meaning friends and relatives on the other, to mold themselves at any cost to fit the needs of established institutions.

The world is ours to live in, and we should all have the right to find our own place in it, for America is a land that was founded on a belief in the freedom of every individual to choose his own way of life. If we should now give up this belief for some brand of collectivism because it is said that collectivism is more efficient or more economical, then we will have destroyed the essence of the American way of life — the promise of America.

Individualism is the doctrine that you can and should be what you want to be so long as it does not interfere with the rights and freedoms of others. This is the cornerstone of a truly free society, for no person is free who must live his life to suit the whims or wishes of others.

We must remember that individualism is not something that we can afford to starve, nor is it something that we can afford to sacrifice. Instead, it is something we must protect, something we must nourish, and something we must cultivate, for if we do not, we will have lost the battle to preserve our way of life without ever having fought it.