

AMERICA AND HER COMMUNITIES
ANNUAL BEE TREE PICNIC
SWANNANOA, NORTH CAROLINA
SEPTEMBER 4, 1977

Two hundred years ago, the representatives of American colonists made a declaration, the intent of which was revolutionary in its every word. A little over a decade later, after a desparate war, many of those same representatives gathered to write another document, which was equally revolutionary--the United States Constitution.

And what was the revolutionary message of both those documents, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution? It was this: "We the people of this land, in cities and towns, on farms and in frontier cabins, take upon ourselves complete and total responsibility for our own government, our own well-being.

Upon our own initiative, we will succeed or fail."

There were to be no ifs, ands, or buts about it. From that time forward, no one was going to step in to save us, no one was to be blamed for failure or mediocrity but ourselves.

America has been a very resilient nation, exceptional in the history of the world. We have seen war, and depression, and Constitutional crisis, and we have come through. We have come through because for the most of our history, that sense of personal responsibility for ourselves has made us able to meet any challenge.

I have been taking this message to high school and college graduating classes this year. I think there is no more important message to repeat than the message contained in the Declaration

and in the Constitution.

I tell those graduates, "Make sure you think about yourself and your government the way those revolutionaries 200 years ago imagined it. Do not think that the center of power lies in Washington, D. C. Imagine, instead, that the center of governmental power and responsibility lies with you yourself. The responsibility to govern is yours, given you as a gift by people who fought and died for it."

What does this mean, in practical affairs? It means that we keep government authority as close to ourselves as we can. We do all we can in our local communities, before we delegate to Raleigh. We do all we can in Raleigh before we delegate to Washington. There is little, more dangerous to our future as a

people, than to come to believe that the ability to solve problems exists nowhere anywhere but in Washington. To be sure, there is a great role for the national government. **Every** time I see the United States Capitol building, standing proudly on its hill, the very metaphor of the American people, I feel a fullness in my heart.

But I fear we shall learn once again, just as the American colonists learned two centuries ago, that a distant government cannot do many things as well as we can at home, either as efficiently, or as fairly. I don't want us to have to learn that hard lesson all over again. The lesson is that for America to work, local people must take their own community, and take total responsibility for it.

Certainly it is a thrill to be here today and feel the spirit of unity and brotherhood among the people of this valley, gathered to celebrate this annual event.

Standing here today, I am reminded of my affection for my hometown of Lillington and I am struck by the "grass-roots Patriotism" so prevalent in small communities. President Eisenhower also recognized the virtue and the integrity of the small town citizen, for he said:

"I think for any American who had the great and priceless privilege of being raised in a small town, there remains always with him (fond) memories of those days.

And the older he grows, the more he senses what he owed to the simple honesty, the neighborliness, the integrity that he saw all around him, in those days, and took for granted,

and that he learns to appreciate only as he grows older
and dwells more in other places of the earth."

The simple honesty and friendship--the spirit of
brotherhood and cooperation and community spirit that Eisenhower
remembered from a small town are the foundations of our country.

You know, sometimes our young people go off on the road
"looking for America," trying to understand their society and
to find their place in it. The wiser ones find it, by returning
home. And in their homecoming, they find themselves, suddenly,
at the very center of America.

Here is **the** center. It lies in Bee Tree churchyard, and
in a thousand other places like it. It lies in small towns
and in country communities by the score. In every person's heart

there is a memory of such a place as this, or he is a sad case, indeed.

And every time a homecoming picnic is held, like this one, the shuttle is thrown again, and the threads of peoples' lives are interlocked, and the fabric of this nation is woven up.

We can never let this spirit die in America. We have to look at our communities from a historical perspective, and understand the responsibility we have for our own welfare.

In every community, we inherit what our parents and grandparents built. We hold stewardship for it in our lifetimes. Then it is our duty to pass the community on to our children better than we found it. And it is our duty as well, the responsibility to go forward is given into their hands.

They learn that, I think, by going to the Bee Tree picnic,

more than they'll get it from lectures.

This is the very image of America. You are making your community work the way America is supposed to. Under the governmental system envisioned two hundred years ago, the responsibility for the well-being of the country is centered solidly on the individual. From there, it radiates to the community. From there, less forcefully, it goes to the state, and then to the national government. American works from the grass roots up. Never, in the history of the world, has the spirit and success of a people been successfully imposed, from the top down.

That is the essential difference between the American experience, and the experience of the rest of the world. In a moment of genius, men centuries ago realized a nation built

upon anything but the heart of the individual, living at the heart of his community, was built upon sand.

And what was the result? A miracle, of what others can only dream.

Somewhere in this world, right now, there is a man scratching out a meager living, in a country with no tradition of economic freedom, and no resources to make that kind of freedom possible.

And when that man stands up from his plow, and wipes away the sweat, and allows himself to dream for just a moment of a place in which he could prosper by his effort--it is America of which he dreams.

And somewhere in this world at this moment--perhaps in one of the nations of Eastern Europe--there is a man who stops

what he is doing, suddenly sick of the repressiveness of his government.

And when he dreams of the one place on earth where he could say what he wants, and go where he wants, without fear of a secret police--it is America of which he dreams.

And still, in too many corners of the earth, there are human beings who feel the lash of government by terror. Such people dream, I am sure. They dream of an unbelievable country in which the arm of authority does not always hold a club above the people's heads. And when they dream so, they, too, dream of America. Ours is that unbelievable nation.

If the world could wake up from its unending nightmare, it is America to which it would wake. Remembering that is the key

to knowing what we stand for.

America is no more than individuals who try, and communities which work and prosper. To the extent that we fail to make this a fact, America is the less. To the extent that we make it so, America is the greater.