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What do older Americans have that young people don't?

They have something very important in this Bicentennial year -- a long memory. That's something very special, and

I want to point out why I think it is so important right now.

From a statistical point of view, we are a nation of young people. Do you realize that most Americans alive today cannot remember the last time this country decisively won a war?

A sizeable part of our people cannot remember the Korean War, much less World War II. Almost all of the historical events of this century -- the Depression, Lindberg's flight and the coming of the jet age, both world wars, and the whole technological explosion of the 20th century -- all these are not part of the

personal experience of the majority of people.

But older people can remember these great events.

They realize how completely the world has been transformed since their childhood. A person approaching eighty probably can tell you the first time he ever saw a car or an airplane. A sizeable percentage of the population -- almost a third -- cannot even remember a time in which there was no television.

The point I am making is this: older people are bound to have a different point of view. They have every right, as I see it, to be more conservative, and they have every reason to be optimistic about America's long range chances.

Old people are accused of being politically conservative

because they are just getting behind the times. I don't think that's so. Statistics show clearly that senior citizens are inclined to be conservative, but I think the reason must be that they have lived through a lot, and have seen history repeat itself. Therefore, they understand that there is little point in rash political action.

We are a very self-critical nation. We focus on our faults and our problems. We seem always to be on the verge of some great disaster. There was an article in a newsmagazine recently which asked these questions -- Is democracy dying? Are we all washed up as a country? Are we going to run out of gas? Will our economic system survive?

Now how many times have the people here today heard that

before?

As far as I am concerned, this Bicentennial is just the kind of medicine we need. It will make it clear to all the pessimists that, yes, we will survive, against all odds. We now have a habit of it which is 200 years old.

It seems to me that people who can remember all that history the kids don't know, should take every opportunity to point this out. To have lived through the Great Depression taught us a lesson. It was a hard way to learn a lesson, but it should have taught us this country can make a comeback from the verge of absolute disaster.

World War II was another hard lesson -- but it should show us that a terrible fight against a great evil can be won, and

won decisively.

But there is something else which goes with this business of focusing on our problems and our faults. Because of the relatively short memory our young population has, our problems get magnified. And there are always those who cry that unless the government does something about some dire problem, and fast, all will be lost.

Now, anybody with a long memory will realize all will not be lost, and in all probability, a great deal will be gained by not being so rash.

The failure of one ill-conceived, poorly administered "emergency" program after another ought to have convinced us

the government does not need to intervene everytime something gets out of kilter in this country.

The past is very instructive on this point.

You know, there was a time early in the history of the United States when North Carolina was legally a foreign country. Nine states had ratified the Constitution, but not North Carolina. We did not have representation in Congress, and did not vote for George Washington the first time around.

Why?

The reason was that North Carolinians felt it would be rash to rush into the Constitution until it was amended to include a bill of rights which would protect individuals against the power of a strong central government.

In the Constitutional Convention down at Hillsborough in 1788, the Tar Heel representatives refused to ratify the Constitution until those rights were written into law.

There was nothing in the Constitution, as it was first written, about the right to trial by jury.

There was nothing about the right of free speech, or the right of religious freedom, or the right to hold property without fear of government siezure.

The Federalists at the convention argued that it was not necessary to have these things written into the Constitution because the people could trust their elected representatives in the federal capital to protect their rights. After all,

the people elected them.

But Willie Jones of Halifax rose to say that in an emotional issue, those representatives were bound to get carried away by the heat of the moment, and pass laws which would go counter to the very freedoms the colonists had just fought to win.

He was right. The very issue the convention was considering was just that kind of example. There were those who said time was of the essence, and the Constitution had to be ratified right then.

It is to North Carolina's eternal credit that it was conservative enough to slow down and insist on amendments to

the Constitution which later became the Bill of Rights. There were enough people in the state who remembered what the Revolutionary war had been fought for.

We have just seen another example. In the heat of an attempt to save the New River, up in Ashe and Alleghany Counties, one of these very rights was about to be trampled.

As you know, the state of North Carolina and the Department of the Interior were involved in a plan to prevent construction of a power dam on the river by having it declared a part of the National Wild and Scenic River system. The state was to secure the land along the river, preventing development.

But the state planned to do this by using flood plain zoning to restrict the property owner's rights to use their

land, instead of buying the land outright or buying a scenic easement. Thus the land owners would not be paid for the loss of some of their property rights, and thus their constitutional rights would be infringed.

Flood plain zoning was meant to protect life and property. It was not meant to create public parks without paying for them. Yet in all the debate in Congress over the bill to make the New River part of the Scenic River system not one word was said about the rights of the folks owning land along that river. In the rush and haste over a well-intentioned project, what Willie Jones warned of almost 200 years ago happened again: the people's representatives got carried away by an emotional issue.

When I insisted that this rush to legislate be slowed down long enough to make sure these few people up and down the river were not ignored, I was accused by the editorial writers of "stalling," and of being an obstructionist.

But if I had not done it, those people would never have been thought of. When the government acts too fast to what is pictured as some dire emergency, our principles of law tend to get forgotten.

I think there is some reason for concern that we are a nation of young people. The young are vigorous, hopeful and anxious for action. But they lack the perspective of experience, and I fear that until the average age of the average American gets to be right much older, we are going to

continue to have the problem of governmental overreaction to problems which are blown out of historical proportion.

But I believe we should also adopt the hopefulness of the young. As I pointed out earlier, those who can remember enough of American history should be optimists, not pessimists. America is not about to give up the ghost. We have a lot to be proud of, and a lot to make us confident of our future as a nation.

America may be presently enjoying the benefits and suffering the ill effects, of being in the hands of a young majority.

But as for the bad effects of this, I am reminded of a story from World War II.

A teenaged boy had gotten carried away by the spirit of the times and had gotten into the Navy by lying about his age.

Some miserable months later, he was shipped out, and not long after that, the skipper found him sick and in tears, leaning over the rail. The skipper asked him what the matter was, and the seasick young sailor decided to confess his lie.

"Sir," he said, I'm only seventeen!"

The skipper put his hand on the boy's shoulder and said, "Don't worry, son, you'll get over it."

We are going to get over some of the problems which look so insolvable to us now. Right now, we think we are going to run out of fuel, and have to give up our standard of living. We wonder if we will ever have an economy in which the need of the young for an expanding, boom economy does not go directly counter to the need of the old for a stable economy

which does not wipe out their savings by inflation. We wonder if we will ever again have a government of laws and men the people can revere, as Americans have always revered their democratic institutions.

I say we will. The history you remember says we will.

As a nation, we have demonstrated such genius for self government that we are the wonder of the earth. Nation after nation has tried democracy and freedom, and has been unable to keep either one. Nation after nation has been thwarted by lacking the innovativeness to lick seemingly insoluble problems of technology. We as a people have done both, and I do not think that genius has been extinguished.

In the year of the Tricentennial, a hundred years from

now, I believe people will hardly even remember the problems we think are about to do us in. Our pessimism will appear silly to them.

If you will think back over all you have seen, I think you will agree with me that our troubles are great, but that America is the one nation on earth which can crack a problem without cracking up. We may have come close to it, but we have never cracked before, and I sincerely believe we will not do it this time, either.