

ON THE INDIVIDUAL BASIS OF GOVERNMENT

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America has been a wonderfully resilient nation. We have seen war, economic depression, and in recent years a Constitutional crisis, in which a series of Presidents illegally used the police powers of government to attack political opposition. We have come through these difficulties. The American people, acting through their leaders, and working through their local institutions, have prevailed again and again, when other nations would have sunk into dictatorship and repression.

Now we have another crisis, a very quiet crisis, which we must resolve. To do that, we need to re-emphasize an element of the American success story which has been of bedrock importance. I mean the sense that we, as individuals, are the source of government, and that we ourselves are the source of change. I am asking you to make sure the way you think about government is in keeping with the way the revolutionaries who founded our nation envisioned a self-governing people. Do not act as if the center

of government were in Washington, and that responsibility radiates from there. Imagine, instead, that the center of governmental responsibility lies with you yourself, and radiates from you outward.

One of the most creative aspects of our form of government is that we divide the responsibility for our needs between ourselves, working at the state and local level, and the national government in Washington. It is the maintaining of this division which lies at the heart of our present problem. We have been deputizing people in the Washington bureaucracy to do things we need to do for ourselves, and I maintain they cannot do it as well as we can. For the American government to continue to work as well as it can, we need for every American to answer the question, "Who's in charge here?" And it is of the utmost importance for each of us to answer, "I am."

Some of you graduating today will want to enter federal

service. That's fine. We need good people in Washington, and I encourage you. But I am convinced nothing could do more for our nation than for the greatest number of young people to return to their community, or settle in a new one, and take personal responsibility for it. Think of the image I used a moment ago. You are the center of responsibility for how we are governed. You therefore keep the important activities of government as close to you as possible, so you can have an effect. You work to do things at the community level before you delegate authority to the state, and you delegate to Raleigh before you delegate to Washington. The secret of American democracy has always been that it works from the grass roots level up, not down from the top.

I am saying, in effect, "Don't forget your origins." We have come a long way as a nation, just as you have come a long way to be graduating here today. But ask yourself whether we got this far because of what Washington did, or because of what local

people did. The high schools you came from exist because the people of your communities took it upon themselves to develop the local school system and to run it. Lees-MacRae does not exist because of anything Washington did. It exists because local people decided to build a college in a mountain vale so that their young people could study and prosper. In case after case, the institutions America has thrived upon have been created, not because of any sweeping national policy forged in Washington, but because somebody in his own hometown decided he was responsible for its well-being.

Changes in American life, and our long period of affluence, have encouraged us to forget the satisfactions of doing things for ourselves, and has inclined us to look to Washington when we ought to be looking to our own abilities. For many years, young people moved away from the small towns and rural communities in which their families may have lived for generations. They have gone to the big cities to earn a living, and they have retired to

yet another place. This causes us to forget the continuity of things. We loose touch with our origins at the very moment we are taking up the responsibilities of adulthood.

There is simply something very different about starting a job and perhaps a family in a big-city suburb, and doing it in the small town you grew up in. It is in the years immediately after college that most of you will take on the responsibilities of an adult member of your community -- if you realize what those responsibilities are. If you know of your origins, if you have a sense of where your community has been, you are in a better position to know where it should go.

Let me give you an example. For nearly as long as you can recall, your life has been directed and controlled by the schools. Now, that relationship will be reversed. You will begin to vote, to pay taxes, to send children to school. And it will be up to you to shape and influence the life of the schools.

You will have to exercise your responsibility to participate in government. You may be a voter, only. You may run for the board of education. But you are the source of any improvement or neglect your schools will have.

If you know your own origins, you will realize what a triumph of effort the schools really are. Our present educational system has not existed forever. It did not come into being spontaneously. People built it, and not too long ago. Many of you, I am sure, are the first college graduates in your family. I can tell you that my own parents had very little chance at education. My mother could neither read nor write. Her generation, your grandparents' generation could not take schooling for granted. They valued it, they needed it, and they got busy and provided themselves with school facilities. We are not far, in time, from the one-room schoolhouse in the pines. We are not far from the day in which the majority of North Carolinians were illiterate. The school system you just came

through is a modern invention, created largely by local initiative, with state aid and standards.

When you enter your own communities, you will have the opportunity to build upon this kind of inheritance. People create institutions and pass them on. The next generation has stewardship for them, and will leave them better or worse. That responsibility is ours for our lifetimes, and this fact is the rock on which our nation stands.

I challenge you to answer the needs of your day in the forum closest to you. I feel we are trying to attack problems at the federal level which belong closer to home. We are a nation which has never given up trying for perfection. This is one of the keys to our survival. But at the same time, we tend to be impatient, and to try to get a "quick fix" through Washington. Right now, the people perceive a need, and are responding to it. According to the most recent Harris Poll, the people are strong

in their desire for better consumer protection.

According to Harris, the public is concerned about price increases, unsafe products, false advertising, poor service, and unenforcable warranties. People do not feel they receive common justice in the marketplace. The question is, what should be done? I am afraid the common response is to set up another federal agency, the proposed Consumer Protection Agency. It may be there is room for a federal role in this area. But I am very skeptical of a new agency.

Now, I won't take a back seat to anybody when it comes to consumer protection. As Attorney General of North Carolina, I established a Consumer Protection Division within my office. We argued on behalf of consumers before the State Utilities Commission, the North Carolina Milk Commission, and the Federal Power Commission. We participated in suits against major drug companies for price fixing. And I believe these actions saved

consumers millions of dollars. In fact, my office was named the outstanding Attorney General's office in the United States, in large measure because of this.

I am trying to make the point that I am familiar with consumer action, and that I believe strongly in protecting consumers and small businesses from illegal practices. The first time around, when I got to Washington, I voted for the Consumer Protection Agency. But now I am not so sure. The more I have seen of the operation of the federal bureaucracy, the more I am concerned that a federal Consumer Protection Agency could turn out to be another federal boondoggle.

Washington is just too far from the individual consumer to offer him substantive help. I am disturbed at the way the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission has developed. It is the EEOC which is proposed as a model for the Consumer Protection Agency, and there is general agreement in Washington, among people of all

shades of political opinion, that the EEOC is a mess. The appeals of thousands of people for intervention by the agency lie un-attended-to, and the aim of protecting people against discrimination simply has not been met. I have to ask if another federal agency, just as far away, and based on the same principles, could ever be of much help to the individual consumer looking for justice in the marketplace.

I don't mean to suggest that we need no government in Washington, or that anything done at that level of government is necessarily evil. It is just that many of the things we are now looking to Washington to do do not belong there. They belong with us, either at the local or state level, where they can be done more carefull, at less cost, and -- most importantly -- with the least loss of the power we are supposed to keep with ourselves.

If we want consumer protection, it behooves us to look to

the authority nearest to us, not the farthest from us. The principle remains the same with everything else. We say, in our Constitution, that we are the government, we are the authority, and we hold the ultimate responsibility for success or failure. The working out of our problems, the direction of our national life, the very spirit we have as a people, all rise up from the people. Never, in the history of the world, have these matters been imposed from the top down, with any success. That is the realization people had 200 years ago, and I ask you to remember it now.

I ask you to return to your communities, or to make your homes in new places, with the complete understanding that the responsibility for your community rests with you. Every man and woman has a silent call to service, and on his answering it we all depend. Soon, the care of all our institutions will be delivered into your hands. I urge you to govern well, to serve willingly. Join the voluntary service clubs in your town, find

the area on which you want to go to work, and put your shoulder to the wheel. America is no more than individuals who contribute, communities that work, institutions that live and change as need be. To the degree that this is not so, America is the less. To the degree you make it so, America is the greater.