

Remarks in New York City on Receiving the Charles Evans Hughes Gold Medal of the National Conference of Christians and Jews

March 23, 1982

Mr. Chairman, reverend clergy, Mr. Mayor, the board members and officers of NCCJ, and distinguished guests here at the head table:

Henry, [Dr. Henry A. Kissinger, former Secretary of State] I thank you very much for such an eloquent presentation of this cherished award. It is a deep personal honor to be the fourth President and the thirtieth American to receive the Charles Evans Hughes Gold Medal of the National Conference of Christians and Jews.

I notice from the program so far that Presidents outnumber Secretaries of State by 2 to 1 on the honor roll. [Laughter] You received the medal in 1973, and Al Haig was similarly honored in 1980. And by the way, Al asked me to pass along a short message: He said that he wanted you to know that yours has been a big hat to fill. Now, I know what he meant by that, and I assure you, it's a compliment. [Laughter]

But I also want to thank you for coming all the way from California to pinch hit for Walter Cronkite here tonight. I know from personal experience what it's like to tear oneself away from retirement on the west coast. [Laughter] One of these days we must get together at the ranch. What's your preference -- flat saddle or Western? [Laughter]

The purpose of the Hughes Medal is to provide recognition for "Courageous Leadership in Governmental, Civic, and Human Affairs," as you've been told tonight. So, I can tell you that one can only accept it with a heartfelt sense of humility; and I do so in that spirit. One thing is certain: For more than half a century now, the Conference itself has lived up to that ideal, striving with courage, dedication, and humanity to promote the ideals of brotherhood and tolerance that our nation was founded upon.

Last month, we all joined together to commemorate this spirit in observing Brotherhood Week. But for Brotherhood Week to take on its fullest meaning, it must live the year-round in the heart of every citizen. This has always been the American ideal. And if it is one we've not always lived up to, the fact that generation after generation, century after century, Americans have sacrificed to bring the ideal closer to reality says something good about that national spirit.

Hatred, envy, and bigotry are as old as the human race itself, as too many tragic passages in the history of the world bear witness. What is new and daring and encouraging about the American experiment is that from the beginning, men and women strove mightily to undo these evils and to overcome the prejudice and injustice of the old world in the virgin soil of the new.

Roger Williams struggled for freedom of conscience in New England more than a century before the Declaration of Independence. He likened a free society to a ship in which Catholics and Protestants, Jews and Moslems all sailed together, subject to the same tides, winds, dangers, and responsibilities, but each free to worship God in his own way. For as the Bible teaches, "Have we not all one Father? Hath not one God created us?"

George Washington, our first President, in a letter to the Jewish congregation of Newport, committed our newborn nation to a road that "gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance."

The way has never been easy, and even our best efforts have left us far short of utopia. But generation by generation, year by year, we've come a long way down the road to a just society. It took a bloody, tragic civil war to end the abomination of slavery. Thousands had to lay down their lives before that great evil could be undone. But it was undone, and the descendants of slave owners and slaves alike today enjoy the same standing under law as free citizens of a free republic.

The battle against discrimination still goes on, and much remains to be done. But in a single generation, an entire nation recommitted itself to the cause of equal rights and used the full force of the law to ban once and for all racial bias in public education, in hiring, and in the voting booth.

Nowhere does history offer a parallel to this vast undertaking. With all its flaws, America remains a unique achievement for human dignity on a scale unequaled anywhere in the world.

I recall tonight another important chapter in the advance of brotherhood that took place during my lifetime. It began earlier in this century, in 1928. This conference was born out of it. Maybe I shouldn't admit it, but I was already a teenager at the time; that was the year of my high school graduation.

We've come so far since then. It's hard to remember the wave of hatred and bigotry that swept the country when, for the first time, a Catholic won the Presidential nomination of one of our great national parties. But I remember, and we all should remember the gallant fight that Al Smith waged against prejudice. Even in defeat, he struck a blow for tolerance and shamed the forces of bigotry. It took another 32 years before a Catholic would be nominated again, but in 1960 John Kennedy proved that the American people had overcome the last vestiges of anti-Catholicism. It took time -- too much time -- but at last the spirit of brotherhood prevailed.

Year by year, in spite of all the setbacks, America has been a place where an ever-growing variety of races and creeds has learned to live together. I remember being told a few years ago the story of a nationality day parade in one of our major cities. The mayor of the city happened to be Jewish, his parents had come from Eastern Europe where for centuries, Christian had persecuted Jew in a seemingly hopeless cycle of hatred and injustice. But on that day, in that American city, "His Honor" was leading the parade. And reaching the end of the march, he turned to one of the parade marshals and said, "Just think, in the old country your grandfather

might have been chasing my grandfather down the street with a gun." He says, "Here, we're leading the same parade together. Ain't America grand!"

And you know, it really is. We in America have been blessed with a sacred opportunity and a sacred quest. At times it may only seem like the imperfect reflection of a perfect dream, but to all whose ancestors came here as immigrants -- whether they were non-conformist Protestants fleeing persecution in the 17th century, Irish-Catholics fleeing famine and injustice in the 19th century, Jews fleeing pogroms at the turn of the century, or the Asian boat people and Soviet dissidents of today -- all came to seek a higher goal than just mere physical survival. There was, and is, an element of moral principle in our national fiber that makes a difference. Americans are brothers not because we share the same past and the same ancestry, but because we share the same ideals and the same hopes for the future.

In his history of the Plymouth Colony, William Bradford wrote that he and his fellow settlers "knew they were pilgrims. . . so they committed themselves to the will of God and resolved to proceed." Well that's been the way with each succeeding generation -- pilgrims all. And as long as we stand true to our ideals, it'll be the way with every American generation to come: that we commit ourselves to the will of God and resolve to proceed.

Last week, I addressed the Alabama State Legislature in Montgomery. Only two blocks from where I spoke, a courageous American named Martin Luther King organized a struggle for racial equality that led to historic changes in our society. He walked in the footsteps of other martyred Americans of other races and other ages. He, too, was an American pilgrim. The sacrifice that Martin Luther King made brings tears of sorrow, but the good he did brings tears of gratitude and a message of hope.

Martin Luther King warned, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere," and his message helped to guide us to a freer and more just society.

The struggle goes on. To be alive and to be human is to struggle for what is right and against what is not. Our nation today is engaged in a serious and, at times, even acrimonious debate over what policies will best serve the interests of America and a troubled world.

Here at home, there are wide differences over how best to tackle the twin problems of recession and inflation. The debate continues over how best to divide the responsibilities between the Federal Government and State governments, and between the public and private sectors, in our constitutional duty to promote the general welfare.

You know, back in the New Deal days, many critics of Franklin Roosevelt accused him of trying to destroy the free enterprise system. Well, F. D. R.'s answer was simple: He wasn't out to destroy our political and economic freedom; he was out to save it at a time of severe stress that had already caused democracy to crumble and fascism and totalitarianism to rear their ugly heads in so many other countries. In America, freedom was saved, and it gave us the strength to rescue a strife-torn Western world in the 1940's and 1950's.

Well, today I'm accused by some of trying to destroy government's commitment to compassion and to the needy. Does this bother me? Yes. Like F. D. R., may I say I'm not trying to destroy what is best in our system of humane, free government; I'm doing everything I can to save it, to slow down the destructive rate of growth in taxes and spending, to prune nonessential programs so that enough resources will be left to meet the requirements of the truly needy.

For 1983, we've proposed that 28 percent of all Federal spending go to the elderly, an average of \$7,854 -- or \$7,850, I should say -- per individual, in payments and services.

The Federal Government subsidizes approximately 95 million meals per day. That's 14 percent of all the meals served in the United States.

Almost 7 million post-secondary awards or loans will be available to students or their parents through Federal student assistance programs.

Through increased funding for Medicaid and Medicare, the Federal Government will provide medical care for some 47 million aged, disabled, and needy Americans -- about 20 percent of our total population and 99 percent of those over 65.

And approximately \$2.8 billion will be spent on training and employment programs providing skills for almost 1 million low-income, disadvantaged people -- 99 percent of whom will be below the age of 25 or recipients of Aid to Families with Dependent Children.

The list goes on and on, but I won't drown you with statistics. I simply want to point out that we do care and the facts prove it. Government does have a responsibility to do many of these things because our citizens -- you, the most generous people on Earth -- have so ordered.

But there's more to brotherhood than government-inspired and administered charity. In recent years, too many of us have tended to forget that government can't properly substitute for the helping hand of neighbor to neighbor. And in trying to do so, government has, to a great extent, brought on the economic distress that mires us down in recession.

Out of this economic distress, however, can come opportunity -- the opportunity to remember our heritage of brotherhood, our responsibility to care for each other not through impersonal government programs alone but through the giving of ourselves with love and compassion.

For this reason, I have asked William Verity, head of Armco, to head up a nationwide effort to recall to all of us our capacity for great and unselfish deeds. You in this organization are proof that that spirit still lives in America.

I saw it firsthand, further proof of that spirit, just last week in flood-stricken Fort Wayne, Indiana. There on a muddy dike, which was just barely inches above the flood crest, hundreds of young people -- some hardly in their teens -- all lined up, passing heavy sandbags to raise the level of the dike. They were volunteers from all over the area who had seen what was happening on television. Evening was coming on, and they had been at this since early morning, but they showed no sign of stopping.

I wasn't exactly properly dressed for the occasion, but I couldn't resist getting in line and joining them for the little time I was there. Now, a roster of their names would probably reveal a variety of ethnic backgrounds. As would be true of any group of Americans, they included different races and religions, I know -- but who asked? And the line was coeducational -- girls and boys. Looking at their fresh, wholesome and, yes, happy, enthusiastic faces, even though they'd been there since early morning, I was looking at the future of America and, believe me, the future looked mighty good.

This story has a happy ending. Before the crisis passed -- for once the weatherman wasn't completely correct -- there were 30,000 people of all ages, inspired by them, piling more than a million sandbags on those battered old dikes. And now the flood waters are receding, and the people are being able to go back and start the clean-up of their homes.

The spirit of brotherhood which you exemplify doesn't stop at our own borders. In the field of foreign policy, right now there are differences of opinion about how best to restore America's power and status in the world, and how best to meet the threat of totalitarian aggression. And there's disagreement over how best to deal with volatile, challenging problems in Latin America and the Middle East.

But while we may disagree over tactics in all these areas, we stand united as Americans in our underlying commitment to basic principles -- economic stability and growth at home, peace, freedom, and a better life for peoples everywhere. Those of us who've been selected by the American people to serve in government have the bottom-line responsibility to put these principles into practice -- to foster an economic recovery program at home and a national security policy that will give America the strength we need to survive in a dangerous world and to stand by our friends on the frontlines of freedom.

In the Middle East, in particular, a strong, credible America remains the best guarantor of Israel's integrity and survival as a free nation. A strong, credible America is also an indispensable incentive for a peaceful resolution of differences between Israel and her neighbors. America has never flinched from its commitment to the State of Israel -- a commitment which remains unshakable.

But for our commitment to be taken seriously, American strength and American integrity must also be taken seriously -- by friends and potential foes alike. Restoring both our strength and our credibility is a major objective of this administration. It deserves the support of all those who share concern not only for our own country's security, but also for the security of our friends and allies.

I am keenly aware of the costs of our defense program and will in the weeks and months and years ahead seek true savings and efficiencies. But we must refute the misguided belief that our defense program can be arbitrarily reduced and still guarantee our national security.

The Soviet Union has built up a military machine unequaled in all man's history, and that arms buildup gives every indication of continuing. When I took office, the Soviet quest for military

supremacy, combined with our own unwillingness to maintain American defenses, had produced a very dangerous momentum in their favor.

We cannot allow that momentous -- or ominous, I should say, momentum to continue if we want to survive. The hopes of all Americans for a better life, for more opportunity, for better futures for our children, can only be realized if we're safe and free.

Though not small, the cost of our program represents an historically reasonable share of our resources, must be devoted to this, and is far less than a potential disaster a weakened America could face at the hands of a ruthless, powerful foe.

The question before us is whether we have the will to make the relatively small sacrifices to preserve our freedom today and our children's freedom tomorrow and for generations to come.

And so I say, just as those outside this hall who spoke with such passionate conviction earlier this evening {The President was referring to demonstrators outside the hotel.] that, yes, there will at times be disagreement over the path that we should take. But can't such a dialog be carried on with decency and understanding, without a tone of hatred? Our ability to carry on a dialog, a debate, has always been the pillar of our strength in this land. And even as we disagree, we can remain as one in seeking a common destiny -- a society that is just and humane and free.

Every American, every citizen from every walk of life -- rich or poor, black, brown or white, Jew, Christian or Moslem, northerner or southerner -- has a full right and obligation to participate in shaping these policies and the programs designed to implement them. Our national dialog should reflect the rich diversity of our free, pluralist society, and that diversity should be one of our greatest prides.

Our democratic process is strengthened by the free flow and free competition of ideas. In the words of Thomas Jefferson, ``We are not afraid to follow truth wherever it may lead, nor to tolerate any error so long as reason is left free to combat it."''

In the final analysis, under the Constitution, the President and the Congress must determine national policy and the national interest. But every citizen and every citizens' group is guaranteed the right to speak out, and must be encouraged to do so without fear of reprisal or defamation. No group should be bullied into silence by racial or ethnic slurs, or the fear of them. The language of hate -- the obscenity of anti-semitism and racism -- must have no part in our national dialog.

In the office I hold, and as a recipient of this award, I pledge to you that I will continue to do everything in my power to enhance and protect the freedoms we cherish as a pluralist society. The rights of all our citizens are sacred -- in the eyes of God and under the Constitution of the United States. It's the Federal Government's responsibility to protect those rights for each and every citizen wherever that citizen may be, at the point of bayonet if necessary.

In one of the most poignant entries in her diary -- and in a far more tragic context than anything we face today -- Anne Frank wrote on July 15th, 1944, ``In spite of everything, I still believe that

people are really good at heart." To those who see only the problems and shortcomings of American society, I say: In spite of everything, our land and people are not only good but strong of heart.

America has already succeeded where so many other historic attempts at freedom have failed. Already, we've made this cherished land the last best hope of mankind. It's up to us, in our generation, to carry on the hallowed task. It is up to us, however we may disagree on policies, to work together for progress and humanity so that our grandchildren, when they look back on us, can truly say that we not only preserved the flame of freedom, but cast its warmth and light further than those who came before us.

Again, I thank you from the bottom of my heart for the great honor that you've done me. I shall do my utmost to be deserving of it. I thank you. God bless you.

Note: The President spoke at 9:36 p.m. in the Grand Ballroom of the New York Hilton Hotel. Prior to the dinner and presentation ceremony, the President and Mrs. Reagan attended a reception for head table guests in the Trianon Room at the hotel. Following his remarks, the President returned to Washington, D.C.