

STATEMENT OF THE  
HON. HUBERT H. HUMPHREY OF MINNESOTA ON  
"THE WELFARE STATE"

Town Meeting of the Air, November 1, 1949.

Mr. Denny, and my colleague and friend, Senator Brewster. The question before us has been well stated - "Are we depending too much on government - our government - for our general welfare?" My answer is a categorical "No".

For the purposes of brevity and to fit this debate within the context of a very critical election such as you have here in New York, this question boils down to the issue of the so-called welfare state. I'm using the term "welfare" deliberately for the very word itself has recently acquired, here in New York and elsewhere, a political definition that far overshadows its accurate definition.

On the tightening battlefield between the Tory, or conservative, concept of government and the liberal, we hear a great deal these days about the welfare state. The Republican leadership in Congress and in New York have seized upon this phrase to express their opposition to all progressive social legislation. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say their fear of all progressive social legislation.

Those who besmirch this honorable and constitutional term - welfare - are resorting, in my mind, to a standard communist practice or tactic of taking an ordinary, decent, wholesome word within the democratic vocabulary, and distorting its meaning.

The Communists have attempted, for example, to adulterate the word "democracy". And I charge that the Republican high command is attempting to adulterate the word "welfare". To deride and to mock this word "welfare" is to betray the very fundamental tenets of our Constitution.

Now do you imagine that if we were back in 1789 that Jefferson and Madison would be persuaded to omit the word "welfare" from the Constitution?

Do you imagine that anyone could make them believe that the "general welfare" was not related to individual freedom and liberty?

Do you believe that this affirmative responsibility of government, to promote the general welfare, had something to do with the loss of individual freedom, as the opponents of welfare legislation would now have you believe?

Let's get our history straight tonight. It was the concern over the plight of the ordinary plain citizen that led to the throwing off of the yoke of a tyrannist government and the establishment of American freedom.

The state or the nation that our founding fathers established 160 years ago was a welfare state. This is proclaimed in the Constitution. It has been underlined and implemented down through the years by the many acts of Congress and by the great decisions of our Supreme Court.

Tonight we ask ourselves, then, "Are we depending too much on government for our general welfare?"

My answer, again, is "No."

In our concern for the general welfare, we, the American people, are working in the vineyards of American Constitutional democratic government. The welfare state is what we've been striving for ever since 1789. This welfare state has required some regulation and much federal aid. Lincoln gave us a concise and meaningful definition when in 1854 he said, "The purpose of government is to do for the people what they cannot do for themselves, or cannot do so well for themselves." Lincoln identified our government with the people.

Alexander Hamilton found it fitting and proper for the government to promote the general welfare when he advanced his plan for federal aid to manufacturers. This was the beginning of the use of government for the promotion of the general welfare.

Henry Clay championed federal aid, internal improvements, and public works as vital to the American economy. The development of the public school system, the disposal of the vast public domain, government aid in providing roads and canals and railroads were all acts of our government in promoting the general welfare.

The partnership with the people in promoting the general welfare is as much a part of American tradition as the Boston Tea Party, Bunker Hill, or Yorktown.

Then, what's all this argument about? What's all the fuss and fury over?

My answer is, the argument centers around the application of the term, "general welfare." In other words, whose welfare, and how is it to be done?

There are two distinct theories about the use of government for promoting the general welfare. The first, historically known as the Hamiltonian Theory - in our time championed by Republican leadership and known as the "trickle down" theory - provides for subsidies, tariffs, and direct aid to business. The political advocates of this "trickle down" economics believe that, to promote the general welfare you load the table of business and rely upon the crumbs that fall from the table to sustain the people. We saw this theory in operation from 1920 to 1932.

The other theory of promoting the general welfare is best known as the New Deal - Fair Deal - Program. It places its faith in the security, in the productivity, and in the basic prosperity of the people. The New Deal - this Fair Deal - is a system wherein government agrees to underwrite certain levels of employment in common education, social security, and housing for all of its citizens.

The government does not try to do all of these things, itself. But the government seeks to foster conditions that encourage maximum private and individual enterprise. The role of government is that of providing minimum levels or floors below which the economy is not to fall. The emphasis is on a sound foundation, above which the individual enterprise may grow and prosper.

History has demonstrated for us that the "trickle down" theory, alone, does not insure the general welfare. This theory provides for special welfare. It is too limited. It fails to recognize the needs of our people.

Government has always been considerate of the welfare of business, and it should be. Why, then, should the opponents of the Fair Deal find government assistance reprehensible when bestowed upon farmers and workers, and yet beneficial when bestowed upon business? We may well wonder why this brazen, boisterous opposition to government assistance.

Do we hear that we should discontinue our program to aid and comfort business? Do we hear that? Are those who are now crying out against the welfare state asking for lower tariffs, and the elimination of subsidies to shipping and transportation?

Are they asking for an increase in postal rates so we won't have to give subsidies to magazine publishers and the newspapers?

Do they wish us to do away with federal aid in safeguarding our navigation?

Of course not.

These welfare state programs are the ones that they want. These welfare state programs make dollar sense to these modern Tories. Then what programs and what legislations are these self-appointed guardians of their kind of free enterprise so bitterly attacking?

Here they are: Effective price supports for farmers, school lunches, adequate social security, unemployment compensation, development of public health facilities, more adequate distribution of our splendid medical services, sound soil conservation practices, the developments of our rivers and our harbors, cheap electrical power, minimum wages, slum clearance, and low-cost public housing. These are the targets of those who would abuse the term, "welfare".

Now, call this the welfare state, call it what you will, but one fact stands out in bold relief - the American people now know that their government is their partner and their servant.

Facts and figures conclusively prove that American business has never been bigger, it has never been richer than at this very day and hour. The facts and figures prove that the New Deal has helped business. In fact, it has saved it.

The Fair deal has made business more profitable than at any period in our history. This prosperity, then, is based on the sound foundation of the prosperity and the increasing security of the American people. It is a prosperity underwritten by a firm and sound economic base of fair deal and welfare state legislation.

November 1, 1949 - "America's Town Meeting"

SENATOR HUBERT H. HUMPHREY

When the war of words about the nature of the state is stripped of its rhetoric, its irrelevance, and its propaganda, what do we see? That an attempt is being made to besmirch the word "welfare" so that the impression it gives bears no relation either to its definition in the dictionary or to the meaning it has had throughout the history of our democratic government. Do you imagine that if we were to go back in time to 1789 that Jefferson and Madison could be persuaded to omit the word "welfare" from the Constitution? Do you imagine that anyone could make them believe that the general welfare was not related to freedom and liberty but had something to do with loss of individual freedom as the opponents of welfare legislation would have us believe? It was concern with the plight of the common man that led to the throwing off of the yoke of tyrannous government and the formulation of the Constitution whose preamble reads:

We, the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquillity, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

In defining the powers of the Federal Government, Congress was given the "power to lay and collect taxes, duties, imposts and excises, to pay the debts and provide for the common defense and general welfare of the United States; ... (Art. I Sec. 8). In America the welfare state is the state our Founding Fathers established 160 years ago in which the government is conceived and used as an instrument for the common good -- a government of, by and for the people. This conception of the state has been implemented down through the years by many acts of Congress passed in the exercise of its constitutional power. The welfare state which I favor is the "service state" which we have here in the United States. Its validity has been upheld by the Supreme Court in a long series of historic decisions which have enabled our democratic government to keep abreast of changing economic and social conditions.

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There are some persons who wish to maintain the status quo and never make any changes regardless of need. Because they are against every positive proposal which seeks to deal with the various problems which naturally arise in a dynamic society, they have lumped all progressive ideas under the term "welfare state" and seek to deride and ridicule welfare as something "UnAmerican," "totalitarian," and "Communitistic." I deplore this attempt to turn the word "welfare" into a red rag and the people into a mad and unreasoning bull. As a political technique such name-calling is timeworn and not even historically effective. How often have we heard legislation called "socialistic" in order to bring about its defeat! Workmen's Accident Compensation was condemned because it was "the opening wedge to get the state in every kind of business." The direct primary was "radical, far-reaching and extra-constitutional." The Federal Reserve system was opposed as "an invasion of the liberty of the citizen in the control of his own property..." The Federal Trade Commission was likened to the "Spanish Inquisition." And we may well wonder how the people ever survived the "loss" of liberty involved in the establishment of the eight-hour day when its opponents said that "The deadening, cramping effect of limiting man's energies, of forbidding him the full use of his full powers, must be admitted..." Every piece of legislation which has been designed to enable the government to function in its economic context has been subjected to cries of alarm and propaganda slogans.

Now I do not mind it if my political opponents are against public housing, against federal aid to education, against health insurance, and against anything which comes under the heading of promoting the general welfare. I would defend their right to be against these legislative proposals. The Congress was established for the purpose of debating measures which are introduced with the intent of solving or alleviating our economic and political problems. It is a part of our democratic government for the representatives of the people to hammer out public policy on the anvil of discussion. I think it is a healthy thing that bills have to run the gamut of 28 steps in the legislative process; that they are subjected to analysis and criticism before they are enacted and become public policy. These laws must rest for their acceptance upon a preponderant public

opinion and in the end the people have the last word. They can change their representatives, and see that laws are enacted, amended, or repealed. Some persons seem to labor under the mistaken assumption that there is a small group in Washington trying to foist upon the people something they don't want. Nothing could be further from the truth. The impetus toward a solution of our problems stems from the people. The Congress and the President have to do something about these problems.

As I say, I do not mind if my political opponents are against measures designed to promote the general welfare as that is their prerogative in a country where we have freedom of speech. What I object to is that instead of debating each measure on its merits, instead of examining the pros and cons and trying to figure out the probable consequences of each issue, there is an attempt to becloud the atmosphere of objective debate by labelling the Fair Deal program as the "welfare state" and then saying the word "welfare" in a tone of voice which indicates scorn, contempt and derision.

Another method of attack is to express fear and worry about the "trend" of events, and alarm lest we are taking a step-by-step approach toward some foreign "ism". In analyzing the nature of the state and the line to be drawn between authority and the individual, one may examine the institutions of foreign governments and study political theory from earliest times up to the present. But I hardly think we need another constitutional convention, so great and enduring was the work of our Founding Fathers. I do not fear the future because for our present and future guidance we already have sound political institutions based upon a great political philosophy.

I am content to examine legislative proposals in the light of the political philosophy embodied in our Constitution and in the decisions of the Supreme Court which have enabled us to make adjustments from an agricultural to an industrial economy. With this chart of our goals and this design of our governmental structure, there need never be any indecision as to our objectives. That means that as a legislator I am

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genuinely concerned with the promotion of the general welfare.

If we are not to be concerned with the general welfare, then what is to be our concern -- that of the special interests? There have been times in our history when the prosperity of the people was identified with the prosperity of a special group; when the government gave privileges to business in the form of tariffs, to railroads in the form of land grants. The policy of giving special privileges to business led to dissatisfaction among farm and labor groups and ultimately brought about government regulation. If anyone thinks that it is something new for groups to ask the Federal Government to do things for them, they should reread their American history. Practically speaking, a lack of concern for the general welfare would result in a political situation in which special groups competed for privileges to be handed out by the government. Our experience with the devastation of our natural resources has been enough to make us realize that only a public agency can be depended upon to look ahead and guard the heritage of the nation for future generations. We have had enough experience to be able to conclude that there must be some people in Washington who are concerned with the welfare of all the people.

Given a dynamic society we are never going to have a situation where we do not have problems. In deciding where to draw the line between what the government is to do and what the individual is to do, I think we can rely on the principle which Abraham Lincoln stated in 1854:

The purpose of government is to do for the people what they cannot do for themselves or cannot do so well for themselves.

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