

FOR RELEASE: 10/11/66
Tuesday PM's

REMARKS OF VICE PRESIDENT HUBERT H. HUMPHREY
GANNON COLLEGE
ERIE, PENNSYLVANIA
October 11, 1966

When I'm with young people, I like to talk about the future.

I know you're far more interested in the good new days than the good old days, and so am I.

Today I want to talk about something of vital concern to all of you -- the air you are going to breathe and the water you are going to drink . . .and swim and water-ski in as well.

Back in my home state of Minnesota, they tell a story about an old farmer and his mule. The mule stalled right in the middle of the road one day.

First the old man took a two-by-four and smacked the mule between the eyes. Then he shouted: "Giddup!" and the mule got.

"Why the two-by-four?" a bystander asked. The old man answered, "The first thing I've got to do is get his attention."

I sometimes think we Americans are a little like that mule. Often, we don't seem to get going until something hits us between the eyes.

That has been particularly the case when it comes to our natural heritage. We have been blessed with so rich an endowment that we sometimes have been deluded into seeing it as limitless.

We took our forests for granted until they were threatened with exhaustion.

We misused our high central plains until they began blowing away as dust in the wind.

In both these cases, we did wake up and take remedial action -- but, as in the old-time movie serials, it was just in the nick of time.

Now another crisis of immense proportions has hit us squarely between the eyes -- the galloping deterioration of our Great Lakes.

These magnificent inland seas contain a third of all the fresh water on the world's surface. They are an asset of incalculable value to the nation.

We have carelessly treated them as inexhaustible -- and now we are finding they are not. By using them as a dumping ground for all the wastes that our civilization produces, we have done grave damage to them.

You here in Erie know this all too well. For it is not too much to say that Lake Erie is dying before our eyes. Large areas of it are already as lifeless as a desert.

My good friend Secretary of the Interior Udall has said: "To fly over Lake Erie and look down into the cloudy mess of murderous pollution is like reading the flyleaf of a book on the end of civilization."

Last month I convened a Great Lakes Conference on Water Pollution, in Chicago, to bring to national attention what we see happening.

If we permit this to go on, it will be a tragedy of vast proportions. For there will not be another Lake Erie in this geologic age.

And this is more than a matter of sentiment and esthetics. It would be an immense economic disaster for the 25 million people who live and work on the Lake's shores -- and for the nation as a whole.

I am confident that we can save Lake Erie. I have enough faith in the ingenuity of our scientists and engineers to believe that they can devise the means to do the job. And I have enough knowledge of the power of an aroused public opinion to believe that it will be done.

At Put-In Bay there is a great monument to our victory in the first Battle of Lake Erie, back in 1813. I hope that, before too many years, we shall be able to celebrate victory in the second Battle of Lake Erie -- the battle to make it fit -- and keep it fit for our children and our children's children.

Lake Erie is by all odds America's number one water pollution problem. But Lake Michigan and Lake Ontario are also in bad shape. The experts say that, even if all the pollution of Lake Michigan were controlled, it would still take 500 years to make its water really clean again.

Congressman Vigorito has been one of the most diligent and effective Members of Congress in pushing for action to scrub the Great Lakes clean -- notably in his bill to secure Congressional consent for the Great Lakes Basin Compact. Under this Compact, the eight states and two Canadian provinces bordering the Lakes can plan together and work together for their conservation -- and their continued uses for the many purposes of our civilization.

This problem of water pollution is nation-wide in scope, and it is getting worse -- a sharp reminder to us that, in this changing world, not all change is for the better.

Indeed, the first man to identify change as the most pervasive element in life -- the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus -- put it in words that make sadly ironic reading today. He wrote:

"You cannot step twice into the same river, for fresh waters are ever flowing upon you."

All too often nowadays, the waters that flow upon us are the very opposite of fresh. They are laden with industrial and human debris. The U. S. Division of Water Supply calculates that 1900 communities, where 20 million Americans live, have inadequate facilities for the treatment of waste. In many, raw untreated sewage flows into the municipal fresh water supply every day.

The Hudson River is so badly polluted that, if absolutely no more sewage were dumped into it, the experts say it would still continue to contaminate itself for the next 15 years. That's a measure of the filth that has become an integral part of the river's bed. It used to purify itself every 15 miles. Now it repollutes itself every seven miles.

The Potomac River, which flows right past the doorstep of our nation's capital, is another case in point. President Theodore Roosevelt used to swim it regularly. Even in the heat of the Washington summer, no one in his right mind would do that today.

At long last -- but far better late than never -- we in America are beginning to tackle head-on the job of cleaning up our rivers and lakes -- a task comparable, in classic mythology, to Hercules cleansing a thousand Augean stables.

Some 300 communities -- and a great many industries -- have in recent years joined in an all-out war against pollution. We are already up-grading the water used by more than 40 million people.

The combined efforts of federal, state, and local governments -- and of many other public and private institutions -- are being concentrated on this urgent task.

Scientists and technologists, supported by federal funds, are working out new ways of disposing of waste. They are sorely needed because, in important respects, our methods have hardly improved during the past generation.

Federal grants available to help municipalities construct new sewage facilities have been greatly stepped up.

We are also in process of establishing federal standards for water quality -- recognizing that the waters of a single river often serve the needs of several states.

These standards will be particularly valuable to industry as guidelines for action. Many of our newest plants do a remarkable job in reducing and treating their wastes. Others do far less well -- some very badly. Standards applied to everyone, across the board, will spur those who are lagging to catch up.

Maybe we would have acted more promptly if, like fish, we'd actually been living in waters which were gradually becoming deadly to us. Or maybe not.

For it is only very recently that our smarting and watery eyes have opened up to the fact that many of us are living at the bottom of another kind of ocean -- the atmosphere -- which is becoming more and more contaminated and inimical to our health.

Only a few years ago, smog was regarded as an affliction peculiar to Los Angeles -- and a favorite target of comedians' jokes. Now, the laugh is on the rest of us -- and, if we're laughing at all, it's often through smog-induced tears.

The kind of clear day when one can see forever is, for many of us, increasingly rare. Already air pollution has increased to such an extent that, according to the United States Public Health Service, no fewer than 7,300 communities are affected to varying degrees. And they include desert and mountain cities which most of us still associate with the most sparkling crystal-clear kind of air.

We owe a very great debt to the harassed citizens of Los Angeles. They were the first to be hit by smog -- and the first to react to it. They are responsible for a great deal of the technological and administrative know-how for fighting air pollution -- including the kind of pollution-controlling devices which, under new federal law, will be mandatory equipment on all 1968 automobile models.

Other new federal programs are designed to develop more effective methods to control air pollution, and train hundreds of sorely-needed technicians.

Towns afflicted by air pollution generated in another state can now call for federal help -- as can any city which isn't able to deal with its own problem. Federal grants are available to pay two-thirds of the clean-up costs, but most cities are still unwilling to chip in their share.

According to a recent Public Health Service survey, there are only some 130 city, county, and regional air pollution programs in operation -- and some of these are token in character.

It's clear that, before much more can be done, a number of city halls will need a good swift kick in the seat of their apathy. That can only come from an aroused citizenry. And a great many people need to be aroused. A nation-wide survey undertaken by the chemical industry last year found that four-fifths of those interviewed did not consider air pollution a major community problem.

That kind of complacency is dangerous -- and not only to property, but to life itself.

There is no doubt that air pollution is a contributing factor to the rising incidence of chronic respiratory diseases, like lung cancer, emphysema, bronchitis and asthma.

We often speak of individuals as being spoiled by success. It is our own spectacular economic success, particularly in recent years, which has resulted in the massive spoilage of our air and water. As industry has boomed, as cars and freeways and people have multiplied -- so the wear and tear on our natural environment has doubled and re-doubled.

Unfortunately, as Justice Douglas has put it, our affluent society has also been an effluent society.

Where do you come in? As alert, active, and well-educated citizens, you have a vital and individual responsibility.

Experience shows that, in our American democracy, there are two essential pre-conditions to dealing with problems, like air and water pollution, which are nationwide in scope -- and you can help with both of them.

First, the public must become informed about the nature of the problem. Here's a job for you. Get the facts -- there are many more than I've been able to give you today -- and see that they get around.

When people generally are aware of the problem, it can be said to have entered the public consciousness.

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When people get up on their hind legs and holler, the problem has not only entered the public consciousness -- it has also become a part of the public conscience. At that point, things in our democracy begin to hum.

As I get around campuses, I run into many students who think that the individual has become the helpless victim of forces too vast for him to affect in any way.

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Man is the only animal who has succeeded in contaminating virtually every square inch of his surroundings. But what he has done, he is surely capable of undoing. So let us here and now resolve not to rest until we have cleansed our waters, so that we can use them in safety -- and cleared the air, so that we can all breathe easier.

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF
HEALTH, EDUCATION, AND WELFARE
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REMARKS

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ERIE, PENNSYLVANIA

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Arch Bishop
Gannon

④ Joe Vigoutto
Gannon College Teacher
1947-48
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Economics

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Don't ever think you are merely fodder for some
computing machine.

Archimedes said: "Give me but one firm spot on which to stand, and I will move the earth." And Americans have again and again proved this in ways that Archimedes never dreamed.

↳ Upon Sinclair revolutionized the packing industry with his novel, THE JUNGLE. ↳ Rachel Carson forced us to take a fresh, hard look at the use of pesticides with SILENT SPRING.

↳ These people had to start from scratch, or very near to it. With respect to air and water pollution, we are better off. Things are already moving -- and legislation now going through Congress will put a great deal more federal muscle into the fight.

↳ The job here is to get things moving much further and faster -- and in thousands of towns and cities where lethal garbage is still being dumped into the water and the air.

There is need for every concerned citizen -- for people like yourselves -- to speak up loud and clear.

For American public opinion is like an ocean -- it cannot be stirred by a teaspoon.

Man is the only animal who has succeeded in contaminating virtually every square inch of his surroundings.

But what he has done, he is surely capable of undoing.

So let us here and now resolve not to rest until we have cleansed our waters, so that we can use them in safety -- and cleared the air, so that we can all breathe easier.

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