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REMARKS

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NATIONAL FEDERATION OF ITALIAN AMERICAN ORGANIZATIONS

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Horatio

Yesterday -  
a wonderful  
Day

When Mike Revisto invited me several weeks ago to address this conference, he suggested: "Just deliver an inspirational message of your own choosing."

Quite a lot has happened in the meantime -- at least to me. I guess I've been thinking less about my inspirations than about my aspirations.

↳ As for my message: I want you to know that while I respect and admire Leif Ericson, I still believe Christopher Columbus discovered America. (That's dangerous when you come from Minnesota, and I may have to change my mind a little about it -- in an agonizing reappraisal -- as I move around the country in this campaign.)

↳ Yesterday, I joined with members of this organization in paying homage to a great American, Constantino Brumidi -- whose marvelous paintings adorne our Capitol. Near the end of his life, Brumidi wrote a letter to a friend which sums up what I want to say here this morning:

"I see things differently here in America," he wrote.

"I see that man is not a helpless, inconsequential creature at all. Man is the greatest wonder of all, and in this country he may dare to be fully and completely himself."

What has happened to that kind of belief -- so that to speak today in those terms would seem to be leaving too much out?

It is an important fact that we have set ourselves, since Brumidi's time, an infinitely higher standard.

He talked about man's daring to be himself.

That kind of freedom we have indeed established -- beyond anything achieved anyplace else in the world (which was Brumidi's comparison) or ever before in our own history.

↳ But today that isn't enough.

It isn't enough that anybody can dare in America to be what he wants to be. We have set ourselves the goal of making it possible for him to be what he wants to be.

↳ To understand this difference is to sense a little more clearly how a nation can make the gains we have -- especially in these last few years -- and end up more dissatisfied with ourselves than we started.

↳ We have told ourselves a kind of truth about ourselves that we never faced before:

-- That unprecedented economic advance is not enough -- unless its benefit can be fully shared;

-- That material progress is not enough -- unless it is matched by improvement in the quality of living;

-- That the measure of progress is not the gross national product but what is happening in human lives;

-- That America is not stronger if the cancers in city slums are spreading;

-- That there is not freedom if you can't walk in safety on the streets at night;

-- That national well-being is not something that can be measured in averages;

-- That there can be no satisfaction until there is peace.

But Brumidi was expressing more than a satisfaction with a status quo. He was speaking a confidence in man -- "not a helpless, inconsequential creature" but "the greatest wonder of all."

∟ I agree. So do you. So does America.

And it isn't going to weaken either our resolution or our effectiveness to lead from that confidence and that strength instead of from fear and from weakness.

My vision of America -- and yours -- is so far beyond what we see around us -- and know is hidden in the slums of despair -- that we can only feel an uneasy restiveness and a great discontent.

↳ I reject, though, in this political year, any politics of pessimism.

↳ I reject any politics of devisiveness -- of contrived disunity.

↳ I believe in a politics of higher expectation -- with muscles as strong as its heartbeat.

↳ I believe in a politics that searches out and finds the strength of common purpose -- instead of feeding on dissension.

↳ I take great satisfaction from sharing in the unprecedented record of national achievement we have built in the last four years.

↳ Yet that record is only our performance bond for the future, giving validity to new proposals, new plans.

↳ We have done more than ever before to deal responsibly with our problems and fairly with our purposes. But past achievement is no longer the proper measure of today's performance or tomorrow's promise.

Woodrow Wilson said once: "Sometimes people call me an idealist. Well, that is the way I know I am an American. America is the only idealistic nation in the world."

We share, today, Woodrow Wilson's idealism.

We match it with Constantino Brumidi's belief in the capacity of the human being.

Together they give us fair reason for saying "yes" to a future neither of them could have dreamed of.

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