

REMARKS BY  
SENATOR HUBERT H. HUMPHREY  
PRESIDENTIAL CLASSROOM FOR YOUNG AMERICANS  
FEBRUARY 18, 1975

It is a pleasure to be able to visit with this fine group once again. I am well acquainted with the Presidential Classroom program. It offers a fine opportunity to learn about government first hand. I hope your experiences thus far have been rewarding.

You probably have come to Washington with certain ideas about how the Federal government works -- or doesn't work -- to meet the needs of its citizens.

Washington is the place to test your impressions of history against the realities of the present and your hopes for the future.

I hope your minds are open to the new information you are gaining this week.

I hope your thoughts are being challenged, worked over, and measured against what civics books say government in our democracy should be.

Today you are giving special attention to the United States Senate. Hopefully we will be able to talk later about its interrelationship with the other instruments of government.

One of the purposes of Presidential Classroom is to develop a "humanized appreciation of the political relationships and influences that shape our system of government and the conduct of its affairs."

Let me give you some advice at the outset.

As you study the various organs of the Federal government, keep in mind that it is composed of human beings. The scenery around here is very impressive. But the Senate is not marble halls or vast rotundas. That is just the shell, the casing.

The United States Senate has 100 members. Each of us is a human being with human weaknesses. But we also have human strengths.

We are individuals who come from different parts of the country. We are the products of different sets of experiences, and our approaches to problems differ a good deal.

Take me, for example. I was born in a small town in South Dakota. I didn't even see a large city until I was 18 years old. My most profound early memories were of dust storms and depression.

I grew up in a time of severe hardship. Many of the families I knew -- including my own -- lost their farms or their homes. Many of them had to take their children out of school. Life was very uncertain. So it bred in me not only a deep sense of gratitude but a clear understanding that you have to work to reach your goals. I grew up in my father's drugstore. I started when I was very young. By the time I was 10 years old I was taking inventory and working behind the soda fountain.

I sold newspapers every day from the time I was seven years old until I was 18.

I didn't like working so hard, but you had to work for what you got in those days.

So in order to understand the way I do things, you have to know something about my youth -- the values my parents taught me, and the goals which I came to believe are worthwhile. I grew up on hard work.

If you are going to understand an institution, you have to take a good look at the individuals who breathe life into that institution. You have to know a little about their backgrounds.

Now, let's talk a little about the way government functions in general.

You know, Mr. Dickens probably would agree that the America of 1975 offers both the best of times and the worst of times.

Many would say that the worst of times are upon us. We have witnessed over two years of the most turbulent, trying times in the history of our nation.

The President and the Vice President of the United States resigned in a cloud of scandal and corruption; the integrity of our constitutional system has been threatened; the system by which we elect public officials has been maligned. In short, our Constitution has met its greatest test outside of the Civil War.

And while the White House and the Congress tried to sort out the facts and bring about a solution to our Constitutional problems, economic and social problems almost got out of hand.

As a result, our economic stability and national well-being have been threatened with a burning inflation and the worst recession since the Great Depression of the 1930's.

More than 6 1/2 million Americans are out of work, and this is a conservative figure.

Many of our people literally cannot afford to buy groceries for next week.

And there is lingering insecurity about the long-range availability of fuel supplies to keep factories in operation, to heat our homes, and to move people and products across this great land.

You don't need me to tell you that we have big problems -- problems which might qualify these as the worst of times.

But I'm not a pessimist by nature. I don't like to go around preaching gloom and doom, so I won't start now. While we must face our problems realistically, we must also acknowledge that we have the ability and the tools to transform these into the best of times.

Look at the evidence. Even with a serious recession, America is the most prosperous country on earth.

While our rate of inflation is totally unacceptable at 12 percent, it's not as bad as in England, say, where it is 18 percent. Or France, which has an inflation rate of 13 percent. In Italy, it's 20 percent.

And while we worry, with good reason, about a fuel shortage, we are one of the major oil producing countries. We consume more fuel than any country on the face of the earth, but we have the capability to develop alternative forms of energy -- unlike many countries.

Our constitutional system has indeed been threatened and abused. But our government is still standing. Our commitment to the purposes and ideals of the Constitution has been greatly strengthened. We have proven that we are, indeed, a government of laws and not of men. And our political and election systems are undergoing extensive reforms -- proving that ours is a living, vibrant, constantly improving democracy.

We have the resources, and we have the tools, to make these the best of times.

We are fortunate to live in the United States of America -- a land where natural resources, education, technology and communications are among the finest in the world. We have the tools to meet almost any challenge.

This week you are in Washington to take a first-hand look at the government. You might be thinking the government is in pretty lousy shape, that nobody is coming up with answers, that all they do is spend a lot of time fighting over ideas and proposals.

Some of you might like me to tell you that the government is perfect. Well, I'm here to tell you that it isn't perfect. And do you want to know why? Because it's run by 215 million people, none of whom are perfect. That's right. Representative Democracy is not -- it cannot be -- perfect, and I, for one, don't think that it has to be perfect to be successful.

Winston Churchill once said: "Many forms of government have been tried, and will be tried in this world of sin and woe ... no one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time."

The Founders, in their great wisdom, created what Daniel Webster called, "The People's government, made For the people, made By the people, and answerable To the people."

Tempered by years of bitter struggle in the American colonies for justice and equal treatment by the "Mother Country" of Great Britain, the framers of the Constitution left no doubt where the concentration of power was to be in our government.

"We the People," they wrote, not we the rich, or we the poor, or we the blacks, or we the whites, or we the politicians, or we the corporate executives, but we the People. There are no words more beautiful in our heritage than these.

They knew that democracy is not an efficient form of government. The word "efficiency" is not mentioned one time in any of our national documents. But you will find the words: compassion, justice, liberty, equality.

And how will we secure the blessings of liberty for all Americans? How will we harness the resources of this land and put them to work for the common good? How will we guide our inefficient democracy toward the goals we share? The answer to all these questions is -- You.

Yes, these could be considered the worst of times. But you, more than any other group of Americans alive, face the challenge of making these the best of times -- the best of beginnings.

I have a poster in my office which bears this slogan: "Today is the first day of the rest of your life." This expression appeals to me because it is a reminder that each day can be a new beginning.

In our dynamic democracy there always will be one constant -- the inevitability of change.

The problems and the challenges will always be replaced by new ones, which will require new approaches, new ideas, new solutions.

In a few years, it will be you who are proposing the solutions, and you must be prepared.

This week, you have a unique opportunity to begin your preparations to assume leadership. As you continue to meet with government officials, open your minds to accept new ideas. Listen well and then challenge what you hear.

When you go home, get involved in community activities -- in political affairs. Share what you have learned with your classmates, with your families, and make it your business to know what's going on in the world.

Because it is your business. In this country, government is everybody's business.

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IT IS A PLEASURE TO BE ABLE TO VISIT WITH THIS  
FINE GROUP ONCE AGAIN. I AM WELL ACQUAINTED WITH THE  
PRESIDENTIAL CLASSROOM PROGRAM. IT OFFERS A FINE  
OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN ABOUT GOVERNMENT FIRST HAND.  
I HOPE YOUR EXPERIENCES THUS FAR HAVE BEEN REWARDING.

YOU PROBABLY HAVE COME TO WASHINGTON WITH  
CERTAIN IDEAS ABOUT HOW THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT WORKS --  
OR DOESN'T WORK -- TO MEET THE NEEDS OF ITS CITIZENS.

WASHINGTON IS THE PLACE TO TEST YOUR IMPRESSIONS  
OF HISTORY AGAINST THE REALITIES OF THE PRESENT AND YOUR  
HOPES FOR THE FUTURE.

I HOPE YOUR MINDS ARE OPEN TO THE NEW INFORMATION  
YOU ARE GAINING THIS WEEK.

I HOPE YOUR THOUGHTS ARE BEING CHALLENGED, WORKED  
OVER, AND MEASURED AGAINST WHAT CIVICS BOOKS SAY GOVERNMENT  
IN OUR DEMOCRACY SHOULD BE.

TODAY YOU ARE GIVING SPECIAL ATTENTION TO THE  
UNITED STATES SENATE. HOPEFULLY WE WILL BE ABLE TO  
TALK LATER ABOUT ITS INTERRELATIONSHIP WITH THE OTHER  
INSTRUMENTS OF GOVERNMENT.

ONE OF THE PURPOSES OF PRESIDENTIAL CLASSROOM  
IS TO DEVELOP A "HUMANIZED APPRECIATION OF THE  
POLITICAL RELATIONSHIPS AND INFLUENCES THAT SHAPE OUR SYSTEM  
OF GOVERNMENT AND THE CONDUCT OF ITS AFFAIRS."

LET ME GIVE YOU SOME ADVICE AT THE OUTSET.

AS YOU STUDY THE VARIOUS ORGANS OF THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT, KEEP IN MIND THAT IT IS COMPOSED OF HUMAN BEINGS. THE SCENERY AROUND HERE IS VERY IMPRESSIVE, BUT THE SENATE IS NOT MARBLE HALLS OR VAST ROTUNDAS. THAT IS JUST THE SHELL, THE CASING.

THE UNITED STATES SENATE HAS 100 MEMBERS. EACH OF US IS A HUMAN BEING WITH HUMAN WEAKNESSES, BUT WE ALSO HAVE HUMAN STRENGTHS.

WE ARE INDIVIDUALS WHO COME FROM DIFFERENT PARTS OF THE COUNTRY, WE ARE THE PRODUCTS OF DIFFERENT SETS OF EXPERIENCES, AND OUR APPROACHES TO PROBLEMS DIFFER A GOOD DEAL.



TAKE ME, FOR EXAMPLE, I WAS BORN IN A SMALL TOWN IN SOUTH DAKOTA. I DIDN'T EVEN SEE A LARGE CITY UNTIL I WAS 18 YEARS OLD. MY MOST PROFOUND EARLY MEMORIES WERE OF DUST STORMS AND DEPRESSION.

I GREW UP IN A TIME OF SEVERE HARDSHIP. MANY OF THE FAMILIES I KNEW -- INCLUDING MY OWN-- LOST THEIR FARMS OR THEIR HOMES. MANY OF THEM HAD TO TAKE THEIR CHILDREN OUT OF SCHOOL. LIFE WAS VERY UNCERTAIN. SO IT BRED IN ME NOT ONLY A DEEP SENSE OF GRATITUDE BUT A CLEAR UNDERSTANDING THAT YOU HAVE TO WORK TO REACH YOUR GOALS. I GREW UP IN MY FATHER'S DRUGSTORE. I STARTED WHEN I WAS VERY YOUNG. BY THE TIME I WAS 10 YEARS OLD I WAS TAKING INVENTORY AND WORKING BEHIND THE SODA FOUNTAIN.

I SOLD NEWSPAPERS EVERY DAY FROM THE TIME I WAS SEVEN YEARS OLD UNTIL I WAS 18.

I DIDN'T LIKE WORKING SO HARD, BUT YOU HAD TO WORK FOR WHAT YOU GOT IN THOSE DAYS.

SO IN ORDER TO UNDERSTAND THE WAY I DO THINGS, YOU HAVE TO KNOW SOMETHING ABOUT MY YOUTH -- THE VALUES MY PARENTS TAUGHT ME, AND THE GOALS WHICH I CAME TO BELIEVE ARE WORTHWHILE. I GREW UP ON HARD WORK.

IF YOU ARE GOING TO UNDERSTAND AN INSTITUTION, YOU HAVE TO TAKE A GOOD LOOK AT THE INDIVIDUALS WHO BREATHE LIFE INTO THAT INSTITUTION. YOU HAVE TO KNOW A LITTLE ABOUT THEIR BACKGROUNDS.

NOW, LET'S TALK A LITTLE ABOUT THE WAY GOVERNMENT FUNCTIONS IN GENERAL.

YOU KNOW, MR. DICKENS PROBABLY WOULD AGREE THAT THE  
AMERICA OF 1975 OFFERS BOTH THE BEST OF TIMES AND THE  
WORST OF TIMES.

MANY WOULD SAY THAT THE WORST OF TIMES ARE UPON US.  
WE HAVE WITNESSED OVER TWO YEARS OF THE MOST TURBULENT,  
TRYING TIMES IN THE HISTORY OF OUR NATION.

THE PRESIDENT AND THE VICE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES RESIGNED IN A CLOUD OF SCANDAL AND CORRUPTION; THE INTEGRITY OF OUR CONSTITUTIONAL SYSTEM HAS BEEN THREATENED; THE SYSTEM BY WHICH WE ELECT PUBLIC OFFICIALS HAS BEEN MALIGNED. IN SHORT, OUR CONSTITUTION HAS MET ITS GREATEST TEST OUTSIDE OF THE CIVIL WAR.

AND WHILE THE WHITE HOUSE AND THE CONGRESS TRIED TO SORT OUT THE FACTS AND BRING ABOUT A SOLUTION TO OUR CONSTITUTIONAL PROBLEMS, ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL PROBLEMS ALMOST GOT OUT OF HAND.

AS A RESULT, OUR ECONOMIC STABILITY AND NATIONAL WELL-BEING HAVE BEEN THREATENED WITH A BURNING INFLATION AND THE WORST RECESSION SINCE THE GREAT DEPRESSION OF THE 1930's.

MORE THAN 6 1/2 MILLION AMERICANS ARE OUT OF WORK, AND THIS IS A CONSERVATIVE FIGURE.

MANY OF OUR PEOPLE LITERALLY CANNOT AFFORD TO BUY GROCERIES FOR NEXT WEEK.

AND THERE IS LINGERING INSECURITY ABOUT THE LONG-RANGE AVAILABILITY OF FUEL SUPPLIES TO KEEP FACTORIES IN OPERATION, TO HEAT OUR HOMES, AND TO MOVE PEOPLE AND PRODUCTS ACROSS THIS GREAT LAND.

YOU DON'T NEED ME TO TELL YOU THAT WE HAVE BIG PROBLEMS  
-- PROBLEMS WHICH MIGHT QUALIFY THESE AS THE WORST OF TIMES.

BUT I'M NOT A PESSIMIST BY NATURE. I DON'T LIKE TO GO  
AROUND PREACHING GLOOM AND DOOM, SO I WON'T START NOW. WHILE  
WE MUST FACE OUR PROBLEMS REALISTICALLY, WE MUST ALSO  
ACKNOWLEDGE THAT WE HAVE THE ABILITY AND THE TOOLS TO  
TRANSFORM THESE INTO THE BEST OF TIMES.

LOOK AT THE EVIDENCE. EVEN WITH A SERIOUS RECESSION,  
AMERICA IS THE MOST PROSPEROUS COUNTRY ON EARTH.

WHILE OUR RATE OF INFLATION IS TOTALLY UNACCEPTABLE AT  
12 PERCENT, IT'S NOT AS BAD AS IN ENGLAND, SAY, WHERE IT IS  
18 PERCENT. OR FRANCE, WHICH HAS AN INFLATION RATE OF 13 PERCENT.  
IN ITALY, IT'S 20 PERCENT.

AND WHILE WE WORRY, WITH GOOD REASON, ABOUT A FUEL SHORTAGE, WE ARE ONE OF THE MAJOR OIL PRODUCING COUNTRIES. WE CONSUME MORE FUEL THAN ANY COUNTRY ON THE FACE OF THE EARTH, BUT WE HAVE THE CAPABILITY TO DEVELOP ALTERNATIVE FORMS OF ENERGY -- UNLIKE MANY COUNTRIES.

OUR CONSTITUTIONAL SYSTEM HAS INDEED BEEN THREATENED AND ABUSED. BUT OUR GOVERNMENT IS STILL STANDING. OUR COMMITMENT TO THE PURPOSES AND IDEALS OF THE CONSTITUTION HAS BEEN GREATLY STRENGTHENED. WE HAVE PROVEN THAT WE ARE, INDEED, A GOVERNMENT OF LAWS AND NOT OF MEN. AND OUR POLITICAL AND ELECTION SYSTEMS ARE UNDERGOING EXTENSIVE REFORMS -- PROVING THAT OURS IS A LIVING, VIBRANT, CONSTANTLY IMPROVING DEMOCRACY.

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WE HAVE THE RESOURCES, AND WE HAVE THE TOOLS, TO  
MAKE THESE THE BEST OF TIMES.

WE ARE FORTUNATE TO LIVE IN THE UNITED STATES OF  
AMERICA -- A LAND WHERE NATURAL RESOURCES, EDUCATION,  
TECHNOLOGY AND COMMUNICATIONS ARE AMONG THE FINEST IN  
THE WORLD. WE HAVE THE TOOLS TO MEET ALMOST ANY CHALLENGE.

THIS WEEK YOU ARE IN WASHINGTON TO TAKE A FIRST-  
HAND LOOK AT THE GOVERNMENT. YOU MIGHT BE THINKING THE  
GOVERNMENT IS IN PRETTY LOUSY SHAPE, THAT NOBODY IS COMING  
UP WITH ANSWERS, THAT ALL THEY DO IS SPEND A LOT OF TIME  
FIGHTING OVER IDEAS AND PROPOSALS.



SOME OF YOU MIGHT LIKE ME TO TELL YOU THAT THE  
GOVERNMENT IS PERFECT. WELL, I'M HERE TO TELL YOU THAT  
IT ISN'T PERFECT. AND DO YOU WANT TO KNOW WHY? BECAUSE  
IT'S RUN BY 215 MILLION PEOPLE, NONE OF WHOM ARE PERFECT.  
THAT'S RIGHT. REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY IS NOT -- IT CANNOT  
BE -- PERFECT, AND I, FOR ONE, DON'T THINK THAT IT HAS TO  
BE PERFECT TO BE SUCCESSFUL.

WINSTON CHURCHILL ONCE SAID: "MANY FORMS OF GOVERNMENT  
HAVE BEEN TRIED, AND WILL BE TRIED IN THIS WORLD OF SIN  
AND WOE ... NO ONE PRETENDS THAT DEMOCRACY IS PERFECT OR  
ALL-WISE. INDEED, IT HAS BEEN SAID THAT DEMOCRACY IS THE  
WORST FORM OF GOVERNMENT EXCEPT ALL THOSE OTHER FORMS THAT  
HAVE BEEN TRIED FROM TIME TO TIME."

THE FOUNDERS, IN THEIR GREAT WISDOM, CREATED WHAT DANIEL WEBSTER CALLED, "THE PEOPLE'S GOVERNMENT, MADE FOR THE PEOPLE, MADE BY THE PEOPLE, AND ANSWERABLE TO THE PEOPLE."

TEMPERED BY YEARS OF BITTER STRUGGLE IN THE AMERICAN COLONIES FOR JUSTICE AND EQUAL TREATMENT BY THE "MOTHER COUNTRY" OF GREAT BRITAIN, THE FRAMERS OF THE CONSTITUTION LEFT NO DOUBT WHERE THE CONCENTRATION OF POWER WAS TO BE IN OUR GOVERNMENT.

"WE THE PEOPLE," THEY WROTE, NOT WE THE RICH, OR WE THE POOR, OR WE THE BLACKS, OR WE THE WHITES, OR WE THE POLITICIANS, OR WE THE CORPORATE EXECUTIVES, BUT WE THE PEOPLE. THERE ARE NO WORDS MORE BEAUTIFUL IN OUR HERITAGE THAN THESE.

THEY KNEW THAT DEMOCRACY IS NOT AN EFFICIENT FORM OF GOVERNMENT. THE WORD "EFFICIENCY" IS NOT MENTIONED ONE TIME IN ANY OF OUR NATIONAL DOCUMENTS. BUT YOU WILL FIND THE WORDS: COMPASSION, JUSTICE, LIBERTY, EQUALITY.

AND HOW WILL WE SECURE THE BLESSINGS OF LIBERTY FOR ALL AMERICANS? HOW WILL WE HARNESS THE RESOURCES OF THIS LAND AND PUT THEM TO WORK FOR THE COMMON GOOD? HOW WILL WE GUIDE OUR INEFFICIENT DEMOCRACY TOWARD THE GOALS WE SHARE? THE ANSWER TO ALL THESE QUESTIONS IS -- YOU.

YES, THESE COULD BE CONSIDERED THE WORST OF TIMES. BUT YOU, MORE THAN ANY OTHER GROUP OF AMERICANS ALIVE, FACE THE CHALLENGE OF MAKING THESE THE BEST OF TIMES -- THE BEST OF BEGINNINGS.

I HAVE A POSTER IN MY OFFICE WHICH BEARS THIS SLOGAN:

"TODAY IS THE FIRST DAY OF THE REST OF YOUR LIFE." THIS  
EXPRESSION APPEALS TO ME BECAUSE IT IS A REMINDER THAT EACH  
DAY CAN BE A NEW BEGINNING.

IN OUR DYNAMIC DEMOCRACY THERE ALWAYS WILL BE ONE  
CONSTANT -- THE INEVITABILITY OF CHANGE.

THE PROBLEMS AND THE CHALLENGES WILL ALWAYS BE  
REPLACED BY NEW ONES, WHICH WILL REQUIRE NEW APPROACHES,  
NEW IDEAS, NEW SOLUTIONS.

IN A FEW YEARS, IT WILL BE YOU WHO ARE PROPOSING THE  
SOLUTIONS, AND YOU MUST BE PREPARED.

THIS WEEK, YOU HAVE A UNIQUE OPPORTUNITY TO BEGIN  
YOUR PREPARATIONS TO ASSUME LEADERSHIP. AS YOU CONTINUE  
TO MEET WITH GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS, OPEN YOUR MINDS TO ACCEPT  
NEW IDEAS. LISTEN WELL AND THEN CHALLENGE WHAT YOU HEAR.

WHEN YOU GO HOME, GET INVOLVED IN COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES --  
IN POLITICAL AFFAIRS. SHARE WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNED WITH YOUR  
CLASSMATES, WITH YOUR FAMILIES, AND MAKE IT YOUR BUSINESS TO  
KNOW WHAT'S GOING ON IN THE WORLD.

BECAUSE IT IS YOUR BUSINESS. IN THIS COUNTRY,  
GOVERNMENT IS EVERYBODY'S BUSINESS.

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