

REMARKS BY SENATOR HUBERT H. HUMPHREY

"KNOW AMERICA" SEMINAR

NATIONAL 4-H CENTER

Washington, D.C.

September 16, 1975

Let me welcome you to Washington. You have come to learn more about the government, and I hope you will return home with a deeper understanding of what the American political system is all about. Washington is the place to test your impressions of history against the realities of the present and your hopes for the future.

I want to talk with you tonight about the nature of citizenship in our country -- how this concept is interpreted today and how we might view it in the days ahead.

We were schooled on the principle that citizenship is a duty -- the fulfillment of which is vital to the survival of our democracy. Our Nation was founded, 200 years ago, as a Social Contract. Adopting significant parts of the British tradition, the Founders believed that men and women acting together under a social contract could govern their own affairs.

No one ever said that democracy was perfect -- that it was flawless. In fact, that great leader 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."

No, our government is not always efficient. Sometimes it is a bumbling, awkward giant. But the unique aspect of our political system is that it was created for its citizens -- not for a monarch -- not for a few elites at the top -- but for the people.

"We the People." No more beautiful words exist in the dictionary of our heritage than these. Not we the rich, or we the poor, or we the blacks, or we the whites, or we the politicians, or the corporate executives, but we the people.

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."

These are cherished principles of participatory democracy. Belief in them has made us the oldest surviving democracy in the world.

But something is wrong. We need to re-examine the underlying premises of citizenship. What is citizenship in the United States of the 1970's?

Through the years the Congress and the Legislatures have expanded eligibility for participation in voting. We have added four Amendments to the Constitution -- the 15th, 19th, 24th and 26th -- aimed at wiping out any arbitrary barriers to voting. The Voting Rights Act and numerous other Federal and State statutes have been passed to assure every American the right to vote.

Yet we are told that voting participation in our country has steadily decreased since 1960.

Some 62 million voting-age Americans did not vote in the elections of 1972. The United States -- leader of the Free World, champion of democracy, has the lowest voting turnout record in the world.

-- In Australia, 94 percent of the voting-age citizens vote;

-- West Germany boasts an 85 percent turnout;

-- In Britain, it's 80 percent, and in Japan, 74 percent.

This is a national disgrace. Why are our citizens so willing to let the other fellow decide things? Surely the stakes are high enough.

I guarantee you the stakes are high enough.

-- We are threatened with an energy crunch that could severely hamper our economic growth and security as we move into the 21st century;

-- Our system of transportation -- from the roadbeds in rural Minnesota right up through the question of supersonic aircraft -- needs a good going-over. Transportation is vital to the well-being of our economy, and we need to work on a national transportation policy.

-- Schools. The cost of educating our young people has skyrocketed. Where is this additional funding going to come from? What is to be the role of the Federal government and State governments in our schools?

-- Health. We have the best-trained doctors and the most modern equipment of any country in the world. Yet our people still don't have full access to this kind of health care. The costs for extensive medical care are astronomical. Infant and early childhood care is almost non-existent on any kind of rational program basis. Rural areas are medically underserved. We have the knowledge, the skill, the training and the equipment, but we still haven't quite figured out how to distribute this expertise to all our people.

-- We have a housing crisis. Housing starts are down in most parts of the country. Construction in many areas is at a standstill. This not only brings about severe economic consequences, but it makes impossible the attainment of our national goal of decent housing for every American family.

These are just a few of the serious questions facing our government. And somewhere along the line priorities will be established. Who will establish them is the question that only our citizens can answer.

I believe we have the tools -- the procedures -- the resources, and the will to establish priorities which reflect the needs and wishes of average Americans. But it is the average citizen who will determine who makes the decisions in the years to come.

It is startling, perhaps, but I believe many Americans are willing to relinquish these responsibilities to the government.

Oh, people complain that government is too big -- that it's not responsive to people. They believe Washington is spending loads of money and that people aren't getting much return for their investment. People tell me they don't have much faith in the Congress, or in the bureaucrats in the Executive branch.

I know that our people are not staisfied with the way the government is going. But let me tell you that it will take more than complaining. It will take more than simply reacting to what happens. Our people must act if they want to change the direction the government takes.

Americans who care how their government is run have to inject themselves into the political picture and take an active part in the process.

I propose that we develop a new pluralism. I believe that we need to mold new partnerships among groups that often work in opposition to each other.

Our people need to understand that a sick economy is not only bad for business -- but it affects labor, farmers, every segment of our society.

Our people need to understand that the needs of rural Americans and those of city-dwellers are inextricably tied together. If we are to develop sound, rational policies, we must make those in urban areas understand the importance of rural America to their own livelihood. All of us depend on rural America for food, fibre, minerals -- the very sustenance of life.

And those in rural America need to develop a greater understanding of the problems of the cities as centers of commerce, communications, and culture which enhance the lives of all Americans.

We must remove the barriers which pit American against American -- young against old -- rural against urban -- labor against business, and which pit the government against its people.

For in this country, government is the people. The government will be no better and no worse than the people who get involved.

There are many ways you can become involved in your community, and I hope you will do so. For the effort you make can truly determine the course of America's future.

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LET ME WELCOME YOU TO WASHINGTON. YOU HAVE COME TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE GOVERNMENT, AND I HOPE YOU WILL RETURN HOME WITH A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT THE AMERICAN POLITICAL SYSTEM IS ALL ABOUT. WASHINGTON IS THE PLACE TO TEST YOUR IMPRESSIONS OF HISTORY AGAINST THE REALITIES OF THE PRESENT AND YOUR HOPES FOR THE FUTURE.

I WANT TO TALK WITH YOU TONIGHT ABOUT THE NATURE OF CITIZENSHIP IN OUR COUNTRY -- HOW THIS CONCEPT IS INTERPRETED TODAY AND HOW WE MIGHT VIEW IT IN THE DAYS AHEAD.

WE WERE SCHOOLED ON THE PRINCIPLE THAT CITIZENSHIP IS A DUTY -- THE FULFILLMENT OF WHICH IS VITAL TO THE SURVIVAL OF OUR DEMOCRACY. OUR NATION WAS FOUNDED, 200 YEARS AGO, AS A SOCIAL CONTRACT. ADOPTING SIGNIFICANT PARTS OF THE BRITISH TRADITION, THE FOUNDERS BELIEVED THAT MEN AND WOMEN ACTING TOGETHER UNDER A SOCIAL CONTRACT COULD GOVERN THEIR OWN AFFAIRS.

NO ONE EVER SAID THAT DEMOCRACY WAS PERFECT -- THAT IT WAS FLAWLESS. IN FACT, THAT GREAT LEADER 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."

NO, OUR GOVERNMENT IS NOT ALWAYS EFFICIENT. SOMETIMES IT IS A BUMBLING, AWKWARD GIANT. BUT THE UNIQUE ASPECT OF OUR POLITICAL SYSTEM IS THAT IT WAS CREATED FOR ITS CITIZENS -- NOT FOR A MONARCH -- NOT FOR A FEW ELITES AT THE TOP -- BUT FOR THE PEOPLE.

"WE THE PEOPLE." NO MORE BEAUTIFUL WORDS EXIST IN THE DICTIONARY OF OUR HERITAGE THAN THESE. NOT WE THE RICH, OR WE THE POOR, OR WE THE BLACKS, OR WE THE WHITES, OR WE THE POLITICIANS, OR THE CORPORATE EXECUTIVES, BUT WE THE PEOPLE.

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."

THESE ARE CHERISHED PRINCIPLES OF PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY. BELIEF IN THEM HAS MADE US THE OLDEST SURVIVING DEMOCRACY IN THE WORLD.

BUT SOMETHING IS WRONG. WE NEED TO RE-EXAMINE THE UNDERLYING PREMISES OF CITIZENSHIP. WHAT IS CITIZENSHIP IN THE UNITED STATES OF THE 1970'S?

THROUGH THE YEARS THE CONGRESS AND THE LEGISLATURES HAVE EXPANDED ELIGIBILITY FOR PARTICIPATION IN VOTING. WE HAVE ADDED FOUR AMENDMENTS TO THE CONSTITUTION -- THE 15TH, 19TH, 24TH AND 26TH -- AIMED AT WIPING OUT ANY ARBITRARY BARRIERS TO VOTING. THE VOTING RIGHTS ACT AND NUMEROUS OTHER FEDERAL AND STATE STATUTES HAVE BEEN PASSED TO ASSURE EVERY AMERICAN THE RIGHT TO VOTE.

YET WE ARE TOLD THAT VOTING PARTICIPATION IN OUR COUNTRY HAS STEADILY DECREASED SINCE 1960.

SOME 62 MILLION VOTING-AGE AMERICANS DID NOT VOTE IN THE ELECTIONS OF 1972. THE UNITED STATES -- LEADER OF THE FREE WORLD, CHAMPION OF DEMOCRACY, HAS THE LOWEST VOTING TURNOUT RECORD IN THE WORLD.

-- IN AUSTRALIA, 94 PERCENT OF THE VOTING-AGE CITIZENS
VOTE;

-- WEST GERMANY BOASTS AN 85 PERCENT TURNOUT;

-- IN BRITAIN, IT'S 80 PERCENT, AND IN JAPAN, 74 PERCENT.

THIS IS A NATIONAL DISGRACE. WHY ARE OUR CITIZENS SO
WILLING TO LET THE OTHER FELLOW DECIDE THINGS? SURELY THE
STAKES ARE HIGH ENOUGH,

I GUARANTEE YOU THE STAKES ARE HIGH ENOUGH.

-- WE ARE THREATENED WITH AN ENERGY CRUNCH THAT COULD
SEVERELY HAMPER OUR ECONOMIC GROWTH AND SECURITY AS WE MOVE
INTO THE 21ST CENTURY;

-- OUR SYSTEM OF TRANSPORTATION -- FROM THE ROADBEDS
IN RURAL MINNESOTA RIGHT UP THROUGH THE QUESTION OF SUPERSONIC
AIRCRAFT -- NEEDS A GOOD GOING-OVER. TRANSPORTATION IS VITAL
TO THE WELL-BEING OF OUR ECONOMY, AND WE NEED TO WORK ON A
NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION POLICY.

-- SCHOOLS. THE COST OF EDUCATING OUR YOUNG PEOPLE HAS SKYROCKETED. WHERE IS THIS ADDITIONAL FUNDING GOING TO COME FROM? WHAT IS TO BE THE ROLE OF THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT AND STATE GOVERNMENTS IN OUR SCHOOLS?

-- HEALTH. WE HAVE THE BEST-TRAINED DOCTORS AND THE MOST MODERN EQUIPMENT OF ANY COUNTRY IN THE WORLD. YET OUR PEOPLE STILL DON'T HAVE FULL ACCESS TO THIS KIND OF HEALTH CARE. THE COSTS FOR EXTENSIVE MEDICAL CARE ARE ASTRONOMICAL. INFANT AND EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE IS ALMOST NON-EXISTENT ON ANY KIND OF RATIONAL PROGRAM BASIS. RURAL AREAS ARE MEDICALLY UNDERSERVED. WE HAVE THE KNOWLEDGE, THE SKILL, THE TRAINING AND THE EQUIPMENT, BUT WE STILL HAVEN'T QUITE FIGURED OUT HOW TO DISTRIBUTE THIS EXPERTISE TO ALL OUR PEOPLE.

-- WE HAVE A HOUSING CRISIS. HOUSING STARTS ARE DOWN IN MOST PARTS OF THE COUNTRY. CONSTRUCTION IN MANY AREAS IS AT A STANDSTILL. THIS NOT ONLY BRINGS ABOUT SEVERE ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES, BUT IT MAKES IMPOSSIBLE THE ATTAINMENT OF OUR NATIONAL GOAL OF DECENT HOUSING FOR EVERY AMERICAN FAMILY.

THESE ARE JUST A FEW OF THE SERIOUS QUESTIONS FACING OUR GOVERNMENT. AND SOMEWHERE ALONG THE LINE PRIORITIES WILL BE ESTABLISHED. WHO WILL ESTABLISH THEM IS THE QUESTION THAT ONLY OUR CITIZENS CAN ANSWER.

I BELIEVE WE HAVE THE TOOLS -- THE PROCEDURES -- THE RESOURCES, AND THE WILL TO ESTABLISH PRIORITIES WHICH REFLECT THE NEEDS AND WISHES OF AVERAGE AMERICANS. BUT IT IS THE AVERAGE CITIZEN WHO WILL DETERMINE WHO MAKES THE DECISIONS IN THE YEARS TO COME.

IT IS STARTLING, PERHAPS, BUT I BELIEVE MANY AMERICANS ARE WILLING TO RELINQUISH THESE RESPONSIBILITIES TO THE GOVERNMENT.

OH, PEOPLE COMPLAIN THAT GOVERNMENT IS TOO BIG -- THAT IT'S NOT RESPONSIVE TO PEOPLE. THEY BELIEVE WASHINGTON IS SPENDING LOADS OF MONEY AND THAT PEOPLE AREN'T GETTING MUCH RETURN FOR THEIR INVESTMENT. PEOPLE TELL ME THEY DON'T HAVE MUCH FAITH IN THE CONGRESS, OR IN THE BUREAUCRATS IN THE EXECUTIVE BRANCH.

I KNOW THAT OUR PEOPLE ARE NOT SATISFIED WITH THE WAY THE GOVERNMENT IS GOING. BUT LET ME TELL YOU THAT IT WILL TAKE MORE THAN COMPLAINING. IT WILL TAKE MORE THAN SIMPLY REACTING TO WHAT HAPPENS. OUR PEOPLE MUST ACT IF THEY WANT TO CHANGE THE DIRECTION THE GOVERNMENT TAKES.

AMERICANS WHO CARE HOW THEIR GOVERNMENT IS RUN HAVE TO INJECT THEMSELVES INTO THE POLITICAL PICTURE AND TAKE AN ACTIVE PART IN THE PROCESS.

I PROPOSE THAT WE DEVELOP A NEW PLURALISM. I BELIEVE THAT WE NEED TO MOLD NEW PARTNERSHIPS AMONG GROUPS THAT OFTEN WORK IN OPPOSITION TO EACH OTHER.

OUR PEOPLE NEED TO UNDERSTAND THAT A SICK ECONOMY IS NOT ONLY BAD FOR BUSINESS -- BUT IT AFFECTS LABOR, FARMERS, EVERY SEGMENT OF OUR SOCIETY.

OUR PEOPLE NEED TO UNDERSTAND THAT THE NEEDS OF RURAL AMERICANS AND THOSE OF CITY-DWELLERS ARE INEXTRICABLY TIED TOGETHER. IF WE ARE TO DEVELOP SOUND, RATIONAL POLICIES, WE MUST MAKE THOSE IN URBAN AREAS UNDERSTAND THE IMPORTANCE OF RURAL AMERICA TO THEIR OWN LIVELIHOOD. ALL OF US DEPEND ON RURAL AMERICA FOR FOOD, FIBRE, MINERALS -- THE VERY SUSTENANCE OF LIFE.

AND THOSE IN RURAL AMERICA NEED TO DEVELOP A GREATER UNDERSTANDING OF THE PROBLEMS OF THE CITIES AS CENTERS OF COMMERCE, COMMUNICATIONS, AND CULTURE WHICH ENHANCE THE LIVES OF ALL AMERICANS,

WE MUST REMOVE THE BARRIERS WHICH PIT AMERICAN AGAINST AMERICAN -- YOUNG AGAINST OLD -- RURAL AGAINST URBAN -- LABOR AGAINST BUSINESS, AND WHICH PIT THE GOVERNMENT AGAINST ITS PEOPLE,

FOR IN THIS COUNTRY, GOVERNMENT IS THE PEOPLE. THE GOVERNMENT WILL BE NO BETTER AND NO WORSE THAN THE PEOPLE WHO GET INVOLVED.

THERE ARE MANY WAYS YOU CAN BECOME INVOLVED IN YOUR COMMUNITY, AND I HOPE YOU WILL DO SO. FOR THE EFFORT YOU MAKE CAN TRULY DETERMINE THE COURSE OF AMERICA'S FUTURE.

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