

REMARKS OF HONORABLE JOHN E. FOGARTY, U. S. REPRESENTATIVE
SECOND CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT OF RHODE ISLAND AT NORTH KINGSTOWN
HIGH SCHOOL COMMENCEMENT, FRIDAY, JUNE 9, 1961.

Distinguished guests, teachers, parents, friends, and members of the graduating class.

A very wise man once said that the trouble with most speakers at commencements is that they feel called upon to sound learned and end up by being too long. What I have to say to you concerns a few simple truths which my own experience of public life leads me to believe should be stressed in our state and nation today. And you may rest assured that I intend to express them briefly. After working for their diplomas for four years, the graduates deserve not to be kept waiting much longer.

I would, however, like to take just a moment to exercise the privilege of extending my personal congratulations to each and every member of this class, and to their parents. As Chairman of the House Subcommittee on appropriations for health, education and welfare, I have heard a great deal of testimony about the problems of our youth and our schools in these complicated modern times. And I have devoted much time to the formation of programs of legislation which are designed to help in meeting these same problems. We need to know what is wrong in the life of our schools and our youth so that we may take practical steps to overcome our deficiencies. But as we look at this fine school and this graduating class, we can also be thankful that so much is right with our schools and our youth.

All who have had a part in making this occasion possible -- teachers, parents, and the good people of this community--have a just share in the congratulations which are traditionally extended to the graduates. Our whole educational system, from the elementary schools to the universities, is a fundamental part of the defense system of American freedom. And the high school is one of its most vital links. Studies, like the famous Conant Report, have made this very clear, and today we have a better knowledge than ever before of how important it is that all of our young people should take the fullest advantage of improved high schools. Far too many drop out, and far too many -- in some parts of the country -- do not have schools that are adequate to their needs.

Here in North Kingstown the members of this graduating class have persevered in their studies and are now prepared to begin a new phase of their lives, either in institutions of higher learning or in the business and industrial life of our state. That is how it should be in every American community, and I am happy to be able to join with all of you in saying "Well done" to these graduates, who represent so much of our hope for the future.

That future depends upon all of us working together for a better, stronger America. What is so often said to those who are graduating, applies to our whole country today: we cannot afford to rest upon our past accomplishments. We must look to the future

together, putting aside outworn group distinctions and antagonisms. We must re-discover the common responsibility of our American citizenship.

The members of this graduating class have been well trained by their teachers so that as free citizens they will in the very near future exercise enlightened judgment on public questions as full members of our democratic society. Such phrases as "We, the People ..." or "Government of the people, by the people" are still fresh in their minds. These are not new ideas to any of us here, but the trouble sometimes is that they are so familiar that we forget to take them seriously.

The privilege and responsibility of the government of our democracy does not belong to any one of the many ethnic groups that make up America. The common good of all, and the cause of freedom itself, cannot be well served when citizens permit political life to become a self-interested competitive struggle between ethnic factions.

Those who founded this republic repudiated the old idea that government was the limited field of a special group. They rejected the notion of distinctions based upon birth and blood. Just a few years ago, in the Second World War, thousands of Americans gave their lives fighting against the Nazi doctrine of a so-called "Master Race."

The most fundamental feature of the American system of government is the belief that every citizen, without regard to his birth or ancestry, should participate in the process by which the community is governed. This goes beyond the idea that a career in politics should be included among the opportunities open to all in American life. It means that the responsibility and the dignity of every citizen must never be threatened nor neglected, either through the tyranny of group domination or the failure of individuals to assert and exercise their proper roles in the tribunal of public opinion. It has been well said that the character which each one of us brings to the office of citizen is the crucial test of the ability of our nation to survive.

Mr. C. Scott Fletcher, President of the Ford Fund for Adult Education, put the issue well when he said: "Let us ask ourselves a vital question: Are the American people using our power in the service of the cause of freedom as effectively as the Soviet people are being used to achieve the goals of the Soviet State? The answer is no. Most of us in our private and public roles, through our various organizations and institutions, serve our ideal only by fits and starts, with only a small fraction of our attention and energy."

One of the greatest proofs of the way in which we are not serving the democratic ideal to the best of our ability can be seen in the extent to which we allow group prejudices to govern our affairs.

Looking at our country and the world today, with its newly independent nations groping for direction, the late John Foster Dulles said: "Racial discrimination in the United States is our greatest national scandal and our most dangerous international hazard." I believe that if in "racial discrimination" we include group prejudices of every kind, we can heartily agree with these words of a great Secretary of State.

Recent events involving racial violence in the South have made dramatic headlines. It is evident that we still have a long way to go in winning the battle for the most elementary civil rights for all of our citizens. I am happy to be identified with legislation to help bring about this, but we all know that legislation alone is not enough. Prejudices based upon race, creed, or ethnic origin do not yield to law or to reason. They can be overcome only by a fundamental change in the hearts of men. A great writer of the last century summed the matter up when he said that the greatest single need of modern society is "the consciousness that our well-being, both material and spiritual, lies in the growth of brotherhood among

all men and in their harmony with one another."

This may sound very idealistic, but I believe that without the struggle to reach such an ideal on the part of all Americans, the essence of our goal as a free people will be lost. It is a direct contradiction of the whole spirit of the American Revolution and the true meaning of our history when group prejudices are, for example, permitted to dictate the choice of candidates for public office.

Anyone who takes the trouble to study the course of our national growth can see how the evil of groupism has grown up among us. Each succeeding wave of immigration, from the earliest colonists to the most recent arrivals, helped to build this country's greatness. Yet the newest group of immigrants, wherever they came from, always tended to be looked down upon. Seeking freedom from tyranny and want, they were, at first, willing to accept low wages and perform the most menial tasks, just for the privilege of living in America.

Here in Rhode Island, early in this century, laboring men and their families who had come here from abroad experienced housing segregation and many other social restrictions. It is no wonder that group differences based upon language, religion, and

national origin developed. The various ethnic groups were, in effect, forced into competition with one another. They had to seek recognition by the combined force of their numbers.

The America of those earlier days was sometimes described as a "melting pot" of all nations. There was necessarily a good deal of heat and friction generated by the melting process, but as we look about us at the modern scene, I believe that we can say that we have reached a stage where the heat of group conflicts and competitions must be steadily diminished by a greater and more mature sense of our national unity.

Our influence abroad, especially among the newly developing nations, will be measured to a great degree by our ability to attain this sense of national unity at home. And our national defense itself cannot be separated from the firm foundation which such unity alone can provide.

Even the conquest of space cannot be regarded as of greater importance than the conquest of the unreasoning fears and competitive suspicions which create conflicts between ethnic groups in our own land. Here is a civic responsibility which no good American can rightly avoid. It rests upon those of us who are directly responsible for the conduct of public affairs. But it is equally the concern of every citizen, and especially of those who, like the members of this graduating class, will guide the destinies of our state and nation in the future.

Young people today are being called upon to volunteer their energy and their skill for the work of the Peace Corps, and I certainly hope that some of you graduates have given this matter your most serious consideration. But I would like to suggest that each one of you is needed, in whatever work you may undertake, to join the company of men and women of good will who are doing all that they can to promote peace, justice, and a true fraternal charity among all Americans.

We need young people who are not indifferent to those areas of conflict where the democratic ideal of the common brotherhood of men is being tried and tested in American life today. Of course, we need mature political leadership which will not consider ethnic origins as a basis for determining fitness for public office. But political leaders are, of necessity, responsive to the expressed will of the people. For that reason, I believe that we will be well on the way to overcoming the injustices of group discrimination only when the majority of the people make it clear that they intend to vote for or against candidates on the basis of their records and abilities rather than on the basis of who their grandfathers happen to have been. We cannot be ruled by our ancestors. We have to govern ourselves in the light of our own best judgment.

There is, of course, a sense in which each of us should respect and value the national origins from which his own family may have come. If there are some things in the past which are better forgotten, we all have something of which we can nevertheless be justly proud. When the King of Belgium addressed a joint session of Congress last year, he remarked that America is not so much a melting pot as it is a mosaic, "for in it each nation, people or race which has come to its shores has been privileged to keep its individuality, contributing at the same time its share to the unified pattern of a new nation."

The beauty of any mosaic arises from the arrangement of each of its many pieces. Where one piece is missing, the design is broken. But the practical strength of the mosaic is in the cement which holds all of it together. We in America need and desire the rich variety of the distinguishing features of the various ethnic groups in our population. But in the mosaic of our national life we also need to make sure that the cement of American unity, which binds us all together, is not only strong but kept in good repair.

I am, as I feel sure each one of you is, justly proud of my own ancestral background. I have never thought it necessary or proper for any American to lack respect for the

traditions of his own family or the accomplishments of other nations with which he has ties of blood. By the same token, I would have an equal respect for the traditions and beliefs of others and seek to improve my understanding of them.

It is in this mutual respect and understanding that all Americans must come together to meet the issues of our times. I am greatly encouraged by such things as the work of the Women's Conference on Intergroup Relations here in Rhode Island. This group, now sponsored by 66 organizations of Rhode Island women, will be holding its second annual meeting at Brown University this coming Sunday and Monday. The integrity of communication between groups is of the very heart of democracy, and that is what these Rhode Island women's organizations are seeking to achieve. As one of their leaders put it, "If we can establish lines of communication, we can break down some of the barriers."

Whenever in the past our country has been attacked by a foreign enemy, all of us have put aside ethnic distinctions to defend this good land. The bombing of Pearl Harbor, for example, was a simple challenge which all could understand. What we must get firmly in mind now is the fact that the complex operations of Communism all over the world are, in the last analysis, no less of an attack upon all that we stand for

and believe in. This means that the process by which old group prejudices are being overcome must be greatly speeded up. Whatever divides Americans deeply against one another cannot but serve the cause of their enemies.

The members of this graduating class will, we all hope, grow to the fulness of maturity in a country where their opportunities will not be dependent upon ethnic distinctions, a country made strong against every adversary by the inner harmony of all its many people. They themselves can help to make it so by their own efforts and attitudes, but all of us must share that responsibility, not only with them but with all the young people of America. More than ever before, our country today needs the best that each of her children can bring to her. Let no barriers of group prejudice bar the way. The well-known words of Lincoln carry the same simple truth today; the house we live in must stand united if it is to stand at all.