

AMERICA PROVES ITS PRINCIPLES

Keynote Address Delivered Before the
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By

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Thank you very much. I said at the table as I listened to Jane's very warm introduction, that I have now to try to remember which one of those bicentennial talks she heard.

It's a great pleasure for me to be with you. Jane did not overstate my interest in and commitment to the celebration of our bicentennial these past many years, and, I hope, still for several years to come. I have regarded this as an extremely important opportunity for us to learn once again how it is we require to profit by the treasures of our past. And we all too easily neglect sometimes to return to those treasures on the assumption that we have made automatic or reflexive the arts that are necessary to live in accord with the founding spirit.

And one of the things I like most about our approach to the bicentennial in the recent years has been the fact that it's been cerebral. Now I don't mean to say it's been academic, and I certainly don't mean to say it's been merely intellectual. But I do mean to say it's been cerebral; we've gone forth to the people of this country presenting the words, the deeds, of the founders, the text of the Constitution, challenging people to think through our own lives in precisely the manner that Americans thought through their lives in the late 18th century. And while I much like tall ships, and I like fireworks, and I like great and gorgeous displays, I like all that much more the seriousness with which Americans throughout this country, the small hamlets and large cities, have gathered in circles small and large just to think what it means to live under this Constitution.

One of the most inspiring moments I had came when I was making the circuit in southeastern Alaska, giving bicentennial talks and going to places like Ketchikan and Juneau and Sitka, there gathering in libraries with small groups of people who wished to spend an evening simply talking about what that accomplishment was and how it is we should understand it. That seems to me to recapture in the way that's most important for us what it was that animated the Founding Fathers themselves originally. Several years ago when we opened the bicentennial season, I used to give a talk that I called "the Constitution to end all constitutions." And I chose that title most deliberately because I wished to invoke that sense, that spirit of the Founding Fathers whereby they conveyed the notion that this was not just another constitution but all that human beings needed in the way of a constitution. We required only to live up to its opportunities in order to make it therefore the lasting benefit, not just of America, but of humankind itself.

As I talked about the Constitution to end all constitutions, I characteristically talked about the 18th century. I characteristically talked about the expectations that you could assume people to have in that day and age—not just Americans but human beings anywhere—and, in the process, about how it is the Founders came to those ideas which animated them and to that understanding of human political possibilities and human moral opportunities that led to the founding itself. I did that because it seemed to me important for us always to be able to explain to ourselves why they were so optimistic. What was it in the face of the manifest evidence of thousands of years of human tradition and experience that led them to strike out on a course set fully athwart the accumulated wisdom of humankind. And as we would go through recovering, repeating the kinds of things that led them to this breakthrough, we came to focus above all on the language of self-government. We came to talk about what that word meant to the Founding Fathers and how in it they saw not mere procedures of government, not simply majority rule, not merely democracy, but a moral proposition that mankind was itself capable of self-government. Every self needs governing, but more importantly, every self can acquire the decency, the moderation, the virtue, which self-government means.

And it was rediscovering that affirmation in the founding that provided for me the insignificance, you might say, to the entire season of bicentennial celebrations. Rediscovering that they spoke not just of themselves, not just of their day, not of their communities or of their hopes, but that they spoke of us when they affirmed mankind's capacity for self-government. They set this nation on a course which means that we are ever challenged to live up to that affirmation, to that expectation.

And to show you its particular relevance today, I want to focus not on the 18th century, for a change and indeed for the first time in this bicentennial season that I have talked about our Constitution. I want to focus on today, and the way we approach certain problems in order to show precisely what it is that the Constitution brings to us by way of strength and capacity as we try to understand and articulate our own opportunities. One of the questions most frequently asked during the celebrations of the bicentennial has indeed been the question, what is the continuing relevance of the Constitution today, 1988? What meaning can the 18th century vision of the founders have for people living amid the challenges and the changes of the late 20th century? Today for the first time, then, I'm going to talk directly about that question. And I want to show not only that the original principles remain relevant but indeed, that they remain urgent for us.

To do that I want to tell the story about a city, which in fact is near here, a city which I have come to call the most important city in America. That city is East Palo Alto, California. Now those of you from this area know East Palo Alto. Others of you may from time to time have read about East Palo Alto in the newspapers. You probably know at least this much: that East Palo Alto became a city only within the last five or six years, having become incorporated, and that earlier this year there was the loss of a policeman's life in that city, a policeman lost in the struggle against a drug trade which has in fact completely overrun the city of East Palo Alto. And yet I call this troubled city the most important city in America.

The reason for that has to do with the impressions I gained as I visited East Palo Alto last August. I spent two days walking about the city, meeting the city's fathers and mothers and talking to all the people I could assemble, just to get a sense of what it was that had transpired in East Palo Alto. Briefly, you need to know this. East Palo Alto is situated in the southern tip of the peninsula up here, therefore right along side Palo Alto where the university is, Stanford University. It was for a long time unincorporated territory. It is in the county of San Mateo, if I remember correctly. And it has been an area which changed dramatically in population starting somewhere about the 1950s. For a time the city of East Palo Alto came to be almost exclusively black. Today its population is 65% black, the balance Hispanic and Anglo, as they say today, with a fairly substantial senior population.

It is therefore a city which, having experienced dramatic demographic change, came into cityhood with almost none of the advantages and resources that one ordinarily relies upon in order to secure a city's future. Further, back in the 1960s, East Palo Alto, at that time about 90% black, participated in the movements of the day; it participated in the movement towards integration, in the growing black consciousness movement, and in all of those political and moral energies that in so many ways seemed to flail about in our society, all with very well-intentioned motives to be sure but not always with a fine sense of what it was that was to be accomplished and where they were going. In those days people wanted to incorporate East Palo Alto and to rename it Nairobi. They wanted to build a junior college and call it the University of Nairobi, or some such thing. There was an intense political environment in East Palo Alto.

East Palo Alto today remains intense but a lot of the black nationalist aspirations have disappeared as the city has come to face the realities of political life, given the resources they have available to them. It is a city that has imposed rent control and is suffering the usual kinds of difficulties that come along with it. It's a city that has virtually no sales tax base. I believe the sales tax runs about \$8 per capita in revenue to the city. Palo Alto, by contrast, would have at least \$250 per capita sales tax revenue. You see the difference it will make. The property base is not strong; there is virtually no industry as well as the absence of commerce.

Why would I call a city in such desperate straits the most important city in America? One of the things I discerned in my talks with people in East Palo Alto was that there were signs about what had happened to East Palo Alto, which were buried scarcely beneath the surface of the continually volatile life of that city. Signs which people hadn't always grasped but which were there. And signs that the people who were concerned about that city might yet turn to their advantage. One of the first things I noticed, for example, is that they have a problem with drugs in East Palo Alto. They have lost virtually all of their youngsters in that town. People—and I saw this, mind you, during my tour there—people run through the streets willy-nilly selling drugs; they will approach your vehicle to offer you a sale. It is so much out of control that even the county's drug task force is unable to make a dent in it. Shootings are common. When the citizens gather at night to meet in someone's home to talk about the problem, after the meeting closes the home is shot up. They have a police force, and a very professional police captain, Dan Nelson, who struggles mightily to deal with the problem.

But the fact is, they seem to be overwhelmed. One of the reasons they are overwhelmed is because it is their own children who are swept up in this process. It turns out, as you get to know East Palo Alto, that one of the first things you discover is that they no longer control their own children. I don't mean to say that their children have gone bad and that parents don't control them. That's true in some cases. I mean that the fathers and mothers of East Palo Alto in general don't control them whatever. One of the things they decided in the 1960s was that integration was important. And therefore, this black school—it was called Ravenswood, if I recall correctly—needed to be done away with so these students could be shipped out into other schools and integrated with other schools in surrounding areas. Then they could have the advantage of integrated education.

Now this is a wonderful idea—if indeed what it does is extend a people's reach within their own community and extends their control over their own fate. But as you go back to East Palo Alto you discover that what really happened is that the community was step by step taken apart. These reform measures took the children out from under the hands of their own parents. The children came to be educated in conditions over which their parents had no control, no say whatever, and very little knowledge. And you multiply that process through the years, starting in kindergarten, going through high school, and there you see in microcosm why they lost their children in East Palo Alto.

That is a symbol of many such things that took place in that community as a result of reform efforts, which meant that when the day came in 1982-83 that East Palo Alto was finally incorporated, there was no East Palo Alto left. For cities, communities are always communities of families. And families must indeed control their own fate. Parents must control their own children. They must be able to provide for them. They must be able to set that moral standard whereby the children themselves come into a mature state able to resume or assume the art of self-government. East Palo Alto lost all that and lost it in a frenzy of reform that was not thoughtful.

And yet I called this the most important city in America. Why do I say that? It is simple. It is clear. The American founders affirm that all human beings are capable of self-government. We live today confronted with this choice, with this test. Do we also affirm that all human beings are capable of self-government? I know that question sounds innocent enough, and probably those of you gathered here think it is easy to answer. But I want to tell you that it's not so easy to answer for many people any more. I have been traveling this country, I have been asking very well educated people, I have been asking very responsible people: do you believe mankind to be capable of self-government? And I want you to know they hesitate in answering me. And when they do answer they do not universally answer yes. There are many out there who have witnessed what the people did with their schools in Detroit just this last election in which, in a great outcry, they said, "let us have our schools, you have ruined our children for long enough, put it back in our hands. And there are many who don't think that these people's hands are fit to educate their own children. There are people who talk about a permanent underclass in America today. You ask yourself why they put the word "permanent" in front of underclass. And you will discover that they think these are people who never will be able to govern themselves.

I spoke only two days ago in a forum in Claremont alongside my colleague Clarence Thomas, who is Chairman of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. We exchanged views with academics and others, and one professor sat there and said to this entire assembled group, quite frankly, “there are these people in our society who do not have the ability to be citizens. And unless we give it to them, they can never exercise the rights and opportunities of citizenship in a meaningful way.” Those were his very words. He said that there are substantial numbers of people, classes of people in our society, who are inferior. And in whose name, therefore, we build various programs and policies that place the lives of those inferior peoples in the hands of governments or others rather than entrusting those lives to themselves.

I went to Milwaukee, where they have fought the battle of schools once again—and I want you to know, by the way, that when you start looking around this country, asking the question about self-government, asking the question about how our institutions operate today, you never find it so centrally raised as in the question of education. You ask who controls education and you will come closest in every single American community to finding out whether the Constitution still lives. I went to Milwaukee and there they fought the battle. And lost. They said, “let us run our schools.” The answer was, “You’re not good enough to run your schools.” It doesn’t matter if, as in Chicago, the schools and the administrations that are in place have failed generation after generation. The usual argument is that, yes, perhaps we’ve failed, but you haven’t persuaded us that you can do anything better. And I want you to know, I have never understood that argument. I have never understood why it is, when someone is standing with a foot across someone else’s neck, I ought to have to demonstrate that the person whose neck is being stood upon is a worthy human being before I can get the other person to take his foot off the neck. I don’t understand that. I think the first thing is to get your foot off the neck and then we’ll worry about what kind of life they can live. But that is in fact how the argument is discussed.

Now what does this mean? It means that there are many people who don’t believe that mankind is capable of self-government. Anyone who fails to believe that these people—call them permanent underclass, call them anything you want—anyone who fails to believe that they are capable of self-government also disbelieves the founding principles of the United States. I want you to think about that. It is not just a policy that fails when we don’t believe these people are capable of self-government. It is America that fails. It means that we have so far departed from the inspiration of the Founding Fathers that we are no longer capable of defending the results of their work.

I call East Palo Alto the most important city in America for a very simple reason, then. This is a city in which we and the founders are being put to the test, and in which we have the opportunity, not ourselves but through them, representationally you might say, to demonstrate that not only do we affirm the capacity of mankind for self-government, but it works now as it always did. It’s ironic that we today should be in this position because unlike the Founding Fathers who had an unbroken record of centuries of evidence to the contrary, we have enjoyed 200 years proof of the affirmation that mankind is capable of self-government. We have no excuse to be weak in our adherence to the founding principles. It must be willful on our parts now at this late date to spurn the moral example of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States. And I suspect if you lived where I spend most of my time, on a university campus, you would conclude it really was willful indeed for no where else do I find so many people who spend so much time studying and who so consistently show that they understand so very little.

But in East Palo Alto, where if you want to see bleakness you can find it, where if you want to see misery you can find it, where if you want to find hardship you can find it, where if you look for an excuse to turn away from the founding you can find it. There, in that city, we are most challenged to reaffirm that they can do it themselves. You know, I walked in there, and the first meeting I had was with the mayor, or acting mayor, and some city councilmen and other city fathers there at the city's library. The first thing they did was in effect to say to me, what did you bring us from Washington? Do you have a check? It's marvelous, you know, this country of ours. We induce these habits and we really aren't, we shouldn't be surprised by them when people do that because we've built this up over a long time.

But I tried very hard to get them to say to me whether they deserved a check in the first place. I told them, the question isn't whether I can bring you something that will enable East Palo Alto to survive. I asked, is there anything here worth surviving? Only you can answer that question. I happen to believe that there is. And that you can make it work. All on your own. But you're going to have to spurn all those false prophets and nursemaids who for too long have prevented your undertaking the effort.

East Palo Alto comes closer to learning that lesson every day. You know, when I got there, I really expected the stories of hardship and want. But I really did not anticipate the bleak portrait of social disintegration which I found and as I've described it to you. The soul takes a beating when it consciously overrides the natural reflex to withdraw in the presence of such distress. And I believe there is such a natural reflex. When we see enormous pain, enormous distress, we want to go back, we don't want to step forward. Unlike the child who learns from a burn no longer to approach the flame, however, we who aim to extinguish the searing pain of resentment and rejection must suffer with the injured as a condition of doing our work. To staunch the bleeding we have to put our hands on the wound. To still the nightmares we must rouse the torpid, sleeping bodies. We must touch people before they can hear us, and they must hear before they can heed the voice of healing.

In responding to all of that, as I said to East Palo Alto in those two days, in responding to all you have told me, East Palo Alto, I'm going to speak not with my voice but with yours. It may be a voice no one of you has heard, but it is the voice that you all use, the voice I heard repeatedly in the course of these 48 hours. You spoke candidly and plaintively to me and I owe you nothing less than to summarize now your cries. When each of you shall learn to hear the voice that all of you use, you will see why I called this the most important city of America. You speak drugs, but what you mean is "our children." You weep like Rachel for your children because they are no more. True, their shadows still move among you, they sleep in their beds, they eat at your tables and play in your streets, but they no longer pray to your God. You no longer teach them the abba father, the ways of your fathers. Their futures belong to them and the others who have assumed control of their education. Little does it matter that the young are not educated any longer, and that they receive little moral guidance, if any. The point is, it's no longer your job, East Palo Alto, and when that job is not yours, you're unsure that you have any job whatever.

It is perhaps then the case that East Palo Alto is our most important city because East Palo Alto has the most important job that any American ever faces, and that is the job of resuming the control of its own life. That is what the American Founding Fathers in the late 18th century vouchsafed to all those who should come after them. They called it an experiment in liberty and self-government. Their experiment has been proved by the blood, the treasures, the hardships, of those who came after and fulfilled their hopes. We today no less than they face the obligation of reaffirming that hope and that belief that mankind is capable of self-government. Only if we do so in the most difficult cases will we then have succeeded in vindicating the promise that is America.