

Remarks at the University of Kansas, March 18, 1968

(The following text was transcribed from the original recording.)

Robert F. Kennedy
University of Kansas
March 18, 1968

Thank you very much. Chancellor, Governor and Mrs. Docking, Senator and Mrs. Pierson, ladies and gentlemen and my friends, I'm very pleased to be here. I'm really not here to make a speech. I've come because I came from Kansas State and they want to send their love to all of you. They did. That's all they talk about over there, how much they love you. Actually, I want to establish the fact that I am not an alumnus of Villanova.

I'm very pleased and very touched, as my wife is, at your warm reception here. I think of my colleagues in the United States Senate, I think of my friends there, and I think of the warmth that exists in the Senate of the United States - I don't know why you're laughing - I was sick last year and I received a message from the Senate of the United States which said: "We hope you recover," and the vote was forty-two to forty.

And then they took a poll in one of the financial magazines of five hundred of the largest businessmen in the United States, to ask them, what political leader they most admired, who they wanted to see as President of the United States, and I received one vote, and I understand they're looking for him. I could take all my supporters to lunch, but I'm - I don't know whether you're going to like what I'm going to say today but I just want you to remember, as you look back upon this day, and when it comes to a question of who you're going to support - that it was a Kennedy who got you out of class.

I am very pleased to be here with my colleagues, Senator Pierson, who I think has contributed so much in the Senate of the United States - who has fought for the interests of Kansas and has had a distinguished career, and I'm very proud to be associated with him. And Senator Carlson who is not here, who is one of the most respected members of the Senate of the United States - respected not just on the Republican side - by the Democratic side, by all of his colleagues and I'm pleased and proud to be in the Senate with Senator Carlson of the State of Kansas.

And I'm happy to be here with an old friend, Governor Docking. I don't think there was anyone that was more committed to President Kennedy and made more of an effort under the most adverse circumstances and with the most difficult of situations than his father, who was then Governor of the State of Kansas - nobody I worked with more closely, myself, when I was in Los Angeles. We weren't 100 percent successful, but that was a relationship that I will always value, and I know how highly President Kennedy valued it and I'm very pleased to see him - and to have seen his mother, Mrs. Docking today also, so I'm very pleased to be in his State.

And then I'm pleased to be here because I like to see all of you, in addition.

In 1824, when Thomas Hart Benton was urging in Congress the development of Iowa and other western territories, he was opposed by Daniel Webster, the Senator from Massachusetts. "What," asked Webster, "what do we want with this vast and worthless area? This region of savages and wild beasts. Of deserts of shifting sands and of whirlwinds. Of dust, and of cactus and of prairie dogs.

"To what use," he said, "could we ever hope to put these great deserts? I will never vote for one-cent from the public treasury, to place the west one inch closer to Boston, than it is now." And that is why, I am here today, instead of my brother Edward.

I'm glad to come here to the home of the man who publicly wrote: "If our colleges and universities do not breed men who riot, who rebel, who attack life with all the youthful vision and vigor, then there is something wrong with our colleges. The more riots that come out of our college campuses, the better the world for tomorrow." And despite all the accusations against me, those words were not written by me, they were written by that notorious seditionist, William Allen White. And I know what great affection this university has for him. He is an honored man today, here on your campus and around the rest of the nation. But when he lived and wrote, he was reviled as an extremist and worse. For he spoke, he spoke as he believed. He did not conceal his concern in comforting words. He did not delude his readers or himself with false hopes and with illusions. This spirit of honest confrontation is what America needs today. It has been missing all too often in the recent years and it is one of the reasons that I run for President of the United States.

For we as a people, we as a people, are strong enough, we are brave enough to be told the truth of where we stand. This country needs honesty and candor in its political life and from the President of the United States. But I don't want to run for the presidency - I don't want America to make the critical choice of direction and leadership this year without confronting that truth. I don't want to win support of votes by hiding the American condition in false hopes or illusions. I want us to find out the promise of the future, what we can accomplish here in the United States, what this country does stand for and what is expected of us in the years ahead. And I also want us to know and examine where we've gone wrong. And I want all of us, young and old, to have a chance to build a better country and change the direction of the United States of America.

This morning I spoke about the war in Vietnam, and I will speak briefly about it in a few moments. But there is much more to this critical election year than the war in Vietnam.

It is, at a root, the root of all of it, the national soul of the United States. The President calls it "restlessness." Our cabinet officers, such as John Gardiner and others tell us that America is deep in a malaise of spirit: discouraging initiative, paralyzing will and action, and dividing Americans from one another, by their age, their views and by the color of their skin and I don't think we have to accept that here in the United States of America.

Demonstrators shout down government officials and the government answers by drafting demonstrators. Anarchists threaten to burn the country down and some have begun to try, while tanks have patrolled American streets and machine guns have fired at American children. I don't think this a satisfying situation for the United States of America.

Our young people - the best educated, and the best comforted in our history, turn from the Peace Corps and public commitment of a few years ago - to lives of disengagement and despair - many of them turned on with drugs and turned off on America - none of them here, of course, at Kansas - right?

All around us, all around us, - not just on the question of Vietnam, not just on the question of the cities, not just the question of poverty, not just on the problems of race relations - but all around us, and why you are so concerned and why you are so disturbed - the fact is, that men have lost confidence in themselves, in each other, it is confidence which has sustained us so much in the past - rather than answer the cries of deprivation and despair - cries which the President's Commission on Civil Disorders tells us could split our nation finally asunder - rather than answer these desperate cries, hundreds of communities and millions of citizens are looking for their answers, to force and repression and private gun stocks - so that we confront our fellow citizen across impossible barriers of hostility and mistrust and again, I don't believe that we have to accept that. I don't believe that it's necessary in the United States of America. I think that we can work together - I don't think that we have to shoot at each other, to beat each other, to curse each other and criticize each other, I think that we can do better in this country. And that is why I run for President of the United States.

And if we seem powerless to stop this growing division between Americans, who at least confront one another, there are millions more living in the hidden places, whose names and faces are completely unknown - but I have seen these other Americans - I have seen children in Mississippi starving, their bodies so crippled from hunger and their minds have been so destroyed for their whole life that they will have no future. I have seen children in Mississippi - here in the United States - with a gross national product of \$800 billion dollars - I have seen children in the Delta area of Mississippi with distended stomachs, whose faces are covered with sores from starvation, and we haven't developed a policy so we can get enough food so that they can live, so that their children, so that their lives are not destroyed, I don't think that's acceptable in the United States of America and I think we need a change.

I have seen Indians living on their bare and meager reservations, with no jobs, with an unemployment rate of 80 percent, and with so little hope for the future, so little hope for the future that for young people, for young men and women in their teens, the greatest cause of death amongst them is suicide.

That they end their lives by killing themselves - I don't think that we have to accept that - for the first American, for this minority here in the United States. If young boys and girls are so filled with despair when they are going to high school and feel that their lives are so hopeless and that nobody's going to care for them, nobody's going to be involved with them, and nobody's going to bother with them, that they either hang themselves, shoot themselves or kill themselves - I don't think that's acceptable and I think the United States of America - I think the American people, I think we can do much, much better. And I run for the presidency because of that, I run for the presidency because I have seen proud men in the hills of Appalachia, who wish only to work in dignity, but they cannot, for the mines are closed and their jobs are gone and no one - neither industry, nor labor, nor government - has cared enough to help.

I think we here in this country, with the unselfish spirit that exists in the United States of America, I think we can do better here also.

I have seen the people of the black ghetto, listening to ever greater promises of equality and of justice, as they sit in the same decaying schools and huddled in the same filthy rooms - without heat - warding off the cold and warding off the rats.

If we believe that we, as Americans, are bound together by a common concern for each other, then an urgent national priority is upon us. We must begin to end the disgrace of this other America.

And this is one of the great tasks of leadership for us, as individuals and citizens this year. But even if we act to erase material poverty, there is another greater task, it is to confront the poverty of satisfaction - purpose and dignity - that afflicts us all. Too much and for too long, we seemed to have surrendered personal excellence and community values in the mere accumulation of material things. Our Gross National Product, now, is over \$800 billion dollars a year, but that Gross National Product - if we judge the United States of America by that - that Gross National Product counts air pollution and cigarette advertising, and ambulances to clear our highways of carnage. It counts special locks for our doors and the jails for the people who break them. It counts the destruction of the redwood and the loss of our natural wonder in chaotic sprawl. It counts napalm and counts nuclear warheads and armored cars for the police to fight the riots in our cities. It counts Whitman's rifle and Speck's knife, and the television programs which glorify violence in order to sell toys to our children. Yet the gross national product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages, the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials. It measures neither our wit nor our courage, neither our wisdom nor our learning, neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country, it measures everything in short, except that which makes life worthwhile. And it can tell us everything about America except why we are proud that we are Americans.

If this is true here at home, so it is true elsewhere in world. From the beginning our proudest boast has been the promise of Jefferson, that we, here in this country would be the best hope of mankind. And now, as we look at the war in Vietnam, we wonder if we still hold a decent respect for the opinions of mankind and whether the opinion maintained a descent respect for us or whether like Athens of old, we will forfeit sympathy and support, and ultimately our very security, in the single-minded pursuit of our own goals and our own objectives. I do not want, and I do believe that most Americans do not want, to sell out America's interest to simply withdraw - to raise the white flag of surrender in Vietnam - that would be unacceptable to us as a people, and unacceptable to us as a country. But I am concerned about the course of action that we are presently following in South Vietnam. I am concerned, I am concerned about the fact that this has been made America's War. It was said, a number of years ago that this is "their war" "this is the war of the South Vietnamese" that "we can help them, but we can't win it for them" but over the period of the last three years we have made the war and the struggle in South Vietnam our war, and I think that's unacceptable.

I don't accept the idea that this is just a military action, that this is just a military effort, and every time we have had difficulties in South Vietnam and Southeast Asia we have had only one

response, we have had only one way to deal with it - month after month - year after year we have dealt with it in only on way and that's to send more military men and increase our military power and I don't think that's what the kind of a struggle that it is in Southeast Asia.

I think that this is a question of the people of South Vietnam, I think its a question of the people of South Vietnam feeling its worth their efforts - that they're going to make the sacrifice - that they feel that their country and their government is worth fighting for and I think the development of the last several years have shown, have demonstrated that the people of South Vietnam feel no association and no affiliation for the government of Saigon and I don't think it's up to us here in the United States, I don't think it's up to us here in the United States, to say that we're going to destroy all of South Vietnam because we have a commitment there. The commander of the American forces at Ben Tre said we had to destroy that city in order to save it. So 38,000 people were wiped out or made refugees. We here in the United States - not just the United States government, not just the commanders of and forces in South Vietnam, the United States government and every human being that's in this room - we are part of that decision and I don't think that we need do that any longer and I think we should change our policy.

I don't want to be part of a government, I don't want to be part of the United States, I don't want to be part of the American people, and have them write of us as they wrote of Rome: "They made a desert and they called it peace."

I think that we should go to the negotiating table, and I think we should take the steps to go to the negotiating table.

And I've said it over the period of the last two years, I think that we have a chance to have negotiations, and the possibility of meaningful negotiations, but last February, a year ago, when the greatest opportunity existed for negotiations the Administration and the President of the United States felt that the military victory was right around the corner and we sent a message to Ho Chi Minh, in February 8th of 1967 virtually asking for their unconditional surrender, we are not going to obtain the unconditional surrender of the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong anymore than they're going to obtain the unconditional surrender of the United States of America. We're going to have to negotiate, we're going to have to make compromises, we're going to have to negotiate with the National Liberation Front. But people can argue, "That's unfortunate that we have to negotiate with the National Liberation Front," but that is a fact of life. We have three choices: We can either pull out of South Vietnam unilaterally and raise the white flag - I think that's unacceptable.

Second, we can continue to escalate, we can continue to send more men there, until we have millions and millions of more men and we can continue to bomb North Vietnam, and in my judgment we will be no nearer success, we will be no nearer victory than we are now in February of 1968.

And the third step that we can take is to go to the negotiating table. We can go to the negotiating table and not achieve everything that we wish. One of the things that we're going to have to accept as American people, but the other, the other alternative is so unacceptable. One of the things that we're going to have to accept as American people and that the United States government must accept, is that the National Liberation Front is going to play a role in the future political process of South Vietnam.

And we're going to have to negotiate with them. That they are going to play some role in the future political process of South Vietnam, that there are going to be elections and the people of South Vietnam, are ultimately going to determine and decide their own future.

That is the course of action, that is the course of action that I would like to see. I would like to see the United States government to make it clear to the government of Saigon that we are not going to tolerate the corruption and the dishonesty. I think that we should make it clear to the government of Saigon that if we're going to draft young men, 18 years of age here in the United States, if we're going to draft young men who are 19 years-old here in the United States, and we're going to send them to fight and die in Khe Sanh, that we want the government of South Vietnam to draft their 18-year-olds and their 19-year-olds.

And I want to make it clear that if the government of Saigon, feels Khe Sanh or Que Son and the area in the demilitarized zone are so important, if Khe San is so important to the government of Saigon, I want to see those American marines out of there and South Vietnamese troops in there.

I want to have an explanation as to why American boys killed, two weeks ago, in South Vietnam, were three times as many - more than three times as many, as the soldiers of South Vietnam. I want to understand why the casualties and the deaths, over the period of the last two weeks, at the height of the fighting, should be so heavily American casualties, as compared to the South Vietnamese. This is their war. I think we have to make the effort to help them, I think that we have to make the effort to fight, but I don't think that we should have to carry the whole burden of that war, I think the South Vietnamese should.

And if I am elected President of the United States, with help, with your help, these are the kinds of policies that I'm going to put into operation.

We can do better here in the United States, we can do better. We can do better in our relationships to other countries around the rest of the globe. President Kennedy, when he campaigned in 1960, he talked about the loss of prestige that the United States had suffered around the rest of the globe, but look at what our condition is at the present time. The President of the United States goes to a meeting of the OAS at Montevideo- can he go into the city of Montevideo? Or can he travel through the cities of Latin America where there was such deep love and deep respect? He has to stay in a military base at Montevideo, with American ships out at sea and American helicopters overhead in order to ensure that he's protected, I don't think that that's acceptable.

I think that we should have conditions here in the United States, and support enough for our policies, so that the President of the United States can travel freely and clearly across all the cities of this country, and not just to military bases.

I think there's more that we can do internally here, I think there's more that we can do in South Vietnam. I don't think we have to accept the situation, as we have it at the moment. I think that we can do better, and I think the American people think that we can do better.

George Bernard Shaw once wrote, "Some people see things as they are and say why? I dream things that never were and say, why not?"

So I come here to Kansas to ask for your help. In the difficult five months ahead, before the convention in Chicago, I ask for your help and for your assistance. If you believe that the United States can do better. If you believe that we should change our course of action. If you believe that the United States stands for something here internally as well as elsewhere around the globe, I ask for your help and your assistance and your hand over the period of the next five months.

And when we win in November, and when we win in November, and we begin a new period of time for the United States of America - I want the next generation of Americans to look back upon this period and say as they said of Plato: "Joy was in those days, but to live." Thank you very much.