

PART I
THE PRESIDENCY

Chapter 1

Address at the University of North Dakota September 25, 1963¹

President John F. Kennedy

Mr. President, Governor Guy, Senator Burdick, Secretary Udall, Senator Mansfield, Senator Metcalf, other Members of the Senate who may be here, ladies and gentlemen:

Politics is a somewhat abused profession in the United States. Artemus Ward once said, "I am not a politician and my other habits are good also." But I would like to say it has some advantages. It permitted me to go from being a somewhat indifferent lieutenant in the United States Navy to becoming Commander in Chief in the short space of 15 years, and it has also permitted me to become a graduate of this university in 30 seconds, when it takes you 4 years. So in determining what career you should follow, you might consider this lowly profession.

I am glad to be here at this college. Prince Bismarck, who was named after Bismarck, North Dakota, once said that one-third of the students of German universities broke down from overwork, another third broke down from dissipation, and the other third ruled Germany. I do not know which third of the student body from this school is here today, but I am confident that I am talking to the future rulers of not only North Dakota, but the United States, in the sense that all educated citizens bear the burden of governing, as active participants in the democratic process.

I have come on a journey of 5 days across the United States, beginning in Pennsylvania and ending in California, to talk about the conservation of our resources, and I think that it is appropriate that we should come here to North Dakota where the whole struggle for the maintenance of the natural resources of this country, for the development of the natural resources of this country, in a sense, began. I do not argue whether it was Harvard University or North Dakota that made Theodore Roosevelt such a man and such a conservationist, but I am sure that his years here in North Dakota helped make him realize how expensive, how wasteful was indifference to this great resource

¹ "Address at the University of North Dakota. September 25, 1963," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, John F. Kennedy, 1963* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1964), 715-719.

and how valuable it could become. He put it on much more than the material plane. He said it was the moral obligation of a society, in order to preserve that society, to maintain its natural endowment.

In 1963 we face entirely different problems than we faced at the time of Theodore Roosevelt. The fact of the matter is that because we have so much in surplus in the United States, there is some feeling in many parts of the country, and I am sure not here, that we can afford to waste what we have. I don't believe that at all. I think what we have to decide is how we can put it to best use, how we can provide in 1963, and in the whole decade of the 1960's, a use of our natural and scientific and technological advances, so that in the years to come the 350 million people living in the United States in the year 2000 can enjoy a much richer and happier life than we do today. And unless we make the proper decisions today on how we will use our water and our air, and our land, and our oceans, unless we make the comparable effort, an effort comparable to what Theodore Roosevelt and others made fifty years ago, we are going to waste it.

The fact of the matter is that, in the field of conservation, every day that is lost is a valuable opportunity wasted. Every time, particularly in the East where they have such a massive concentration of population—every time an acre of land disappears into private development or exploitation, an acre of land that could be used for the people, we have lost a chance. We will never get it back. The fact of the matter is that land will rise in value, and unless we set it aside and use it wisely today, in 1970 or '75 we won't have the chance. As you know, along the Atlantic coast, nearly all the sea, the beach, is owned by comparatively few people. We were able to set aside, a year ago, Cape Cod Park, which is near to all the people of New England. We are talking about doing the same on the Delaware River. We are talking about doing the same in northern Indiana, near Gary. We have to seize these opportunities--we are now talking about doing the same in northern Wisconsin--we have to seize these opportunities to set aside these wilderness areas, these primitive areas, these fresh water areas, these lakes. We have to set them aside for the people who are going to come after us.

Now we have to not only to set them aside, but we have to develop them. We have to purify our water. We have to make this a richer country in which to live, and it can be done. This State of North Dakota should know it better than any. This state had, 30 years ago, three out of every hundred farms lit by electricity, and now, nearly all are. What was 30 years ago a life of affluence, in a sense today is a life of poverty. This country moves ahead. This is a much richer country than it was 15 years ago, but it is so because decisions were made in those days which made it possible for us to live much better today. You cannot live in North Dakota, you cannot fly over this State, without realizing how wise were those who went before us and how necessary it is that we make the proper decision.

Theodore Roosevelt once said that the White House is a great pulpit, from which to preach, and I would like to preach not only for the vigorous life which he preached for us physically, but also for us in our time, facing entirely different problems, to make the same wise, vigorous decisions which he made for the conservation of our natural resources so that you and your children can enjoy this great and rich country. Nature has been so generous to us that we have mistreated her. Now, when our country is becoming increasingly crowded, when science and technology waste so much of what we have, we have to realize that time is running out for us.

So we come on this trip to remind the American people of what they have, and to remind the people what they must do to maintain it. Here, only a few minutes from here, is the Garrison Dam. Just to show you what decisions made by us today can do for the people in North Dakota in the 1970's, that one dam alone will have a water area, man made, as great as the total water area in North Dakota when this project was begun in 1946. Nature put the lakes there fifty years ago. Now, man makes them. And man improves what nature has done. I have strongly supported the Garrison reclamation project, which will use water stored behind the Garrison Dam, and I am confident it will make a major contribution to the development of America.

This is a matter of concern to all Americans. I think sometimes we read too much about the problems of particular areas, and maybe North Dakota may not be so interested in the beaches along the Atlantic coast or along the Gulf, or along the West Coast, and people in the East not so much interested in the Garrison project in North Dakota, which is far away, but this country is not far away. It is closer than it has ever been before. When you can fly across it in 5 hours, when more importantly than transportation is the fact that we are one people, living in 50 States and living in hundreds of communities, what happens on the East Coast where your children may some day live, what happens in the Middle West, where the children of the people in New England may some day live, and what happens on the West Coast, are of concern to of all of us.

Therefore, this impressive chain of dams, which includes Garrison, has been called with some accuracy the Great Lakes of the Missouri, which belongs to all of the people. Behind these dams, the Big Muddy is turning blue, and soil is being saved, crops are being irrigated, recreation opportunities are growing. And this whole problem of recreation is going to be one of one of our most promising and important areas of human activity in the next 10 or 15 years.

Automation, which is a technical word, and which brings grief, can also bring a good deal of pleasure. If you realize that we are moving more on the railroads of the United States with half as many people working on them as worked 15 years ago, the question is, what has happened to those 50 percent of the people and what are they doing,

and how are they spending their time? And what is true on the railroads is true on the farms, where with a steadily diminishing population, we farm more and more.

How are we going to find work for those people? Those of you who are studying here and are concerned with the social sciences, which you must be, must wonder how you are going to find work for the millions of people who are coming into the market every year seeking jobs. I said, in speaking on our tax bill the other night, that we are going to have to find 10 million jobs in 2 ½ years. How are we going to find them? What individual actions must be taken and what national actions must be taken to find 10 million jobs for your sons and daughters in the short space of 2 ½ years? What are you going to do with 8 million people coming into the labor market in the rest of this decade who haven't graduated from high school? How are they going to find work? Fifty years ago, 30 years ago, they might have worked on a farm, or could have done heavy labor. But today what is needed are skills and the uneducated man or woman is left behind. It is as inevitable as nature.

These are the problems which face the great democracy of ours. They cannot be solved by turning away, but can be solved, I believe, by the united intelligent effort of us all. And what is true of people is true of animals. We have only about half as many cows as we had 30 years ago, and they are producing about 25 percent more milk. What is going to happen to all of the people who once did all of the jobs which are no longer needed? By wise national policy, involving monetary and fiscal policy, I believe that we can stimulate this economy of ours to absorb these people. And also we should make life in this country so beautiful that, as the hours of work lessen, and they are now 40 hours and some day there will be less, people will have some place to go and some place to find close to nature to enrich their lives.

So what I am saying now, in a sense, is that we are the heirs of Theodore Roosevelt, and what we must do today is prepare for those who are our heirs. The steps we take in conservation and reclamation will have very little effect upon all of us here immediately and in this decade. What we are doing in the real sense is preparing for those who come after us.

We are gradually narrowing the differences between the standards of living of our city and our rural populations. Parity of farm income is important. But beyond that, we are gradually, too slowly but gradually, achieving a parity between urban and rural people in other aspects of life, in their ability to obtain electrical service, in their power and resources available for economic development, in their facilities and opportunities for recreation. We are seeking, in short, a true parity of opportunity for all of our people, north and south, east and west. It will not come overnight, but the example of what has been done to light the farms of this state in 30 years shows what can be done when the government and the people, working closely together, work for the common interest.

When I think what REA has done for this state and all of the fight against it when it was first put into effect, isn't it astonishing to you that this country, after the end of World War I, in many ways, a much more virgin country, passed through a recession in 1921, 1922, and 1923, a depression, in fact, and a panic, passed through a period of low farm income and depression on the farm through the rest of the twenties, and then moved through a depression of such staggering dimensions that it existed from 1929 to the outbreak of World War II, and yet from 1945, while we have moved through periods of recession, we have almost tripled our wealth in the short space of 18 years. And we have not passed through a period in any way comparable to the early twenties, or the desperate days of the thirties. And a lot of that is because the decisions which the Government and the people made in the thirties, which makes it possible for us, moving on that base, to determine wise policies in the sixties.

There is an old saying that things don't happen, they are made to happen. And we in our years have to make the same wise judgments about what policies will ensure us a growing prosperity as were made in the years before. The whole experience between two world wars, which was so tragic for this country, should tell us we cannot leave it to mere chance and accident. It requires the long range judgment of all of us, the public judgment, not only the pursuit of our private interests but the public judgment of what it takes to keep 180 million people gradually rising. And anyone who thinks it can be done by accident and chance should look back in history of 1919 to 1939 to know what can happen when we let natural forces operate completely freely.

Five billion dollars were advanced under REA to 1,000 borrowers. More than 1,500,000 miles of power lines have been built serving 20 million American people. This has been a sound investment. Out of roughly 1,000 borrowers, co-ops, only one is delinquent in payment, and the total losses on the \$5 billion advanced is less than \$50,000. Here in North Dakota, REA-financed rural co-ops serve on the average, barely more than one electric meter per mile of line, compared to an average in urban based utility systems of 33 meters to each mile of line.

There are the things which can make the great difference. What I urge upon those of you who are students here is to make determinations based on life as it is, on facts as they are, not merely here in this community, not merely in North Dakota, not merely in the United States, but in this dangerous and varied world of hours in which we play such a leading and responsible part. Unless the United States can demonstrate a sound and vigorous democratic life, a society which is not torn apart by friction and faction, an economy which is steadily growing- unless it can do all those things we cannot continue to bear the responsibilities of leadership which I think almost alone have prevented this world of ours from being overrun. The fact of the matter is that there are many things happening in the world which should serve to encourage us, as well as discourage us.

If 5 or 6 years ago anyone had ever visualized what has happened behind the Iron Curtain and the Bamboo Curtain they would have been regarded as completely unrealistic. All of the pressures which have been brought to bear on life in the Communist world have been brought to bear in part not only because of the inner contradictions of the Communist system itself, but also because the United States chose in 1945 to assume the burdens of maintaining a watch at the gate of freedom when so many other countries who so long had carried a heavy responsibility around the world were prostrate and defeated. So this country has done a good deal.

I come here today to say it can do a good deal more. And I urge those of you who are students here to recognize the obligation which any educated man or woman must bear to society as a whole. This school was not developed merely to give its graduates an economic advantage in the life struggle. We do not seek merely, I am sure, at this school to graduate lawyers, or farmers, or doctors who may lead their communities in income. What we seek to advance, what we seek to develop in all of our colleges and universities, are educated men and women who can bear the burdens of responsible citizenship, who can make judgments about life as it is, and as it must be, and encourage the people to make those decisions which can bring not only prosperity and security, but happiness to the people of the United States and those who depend upon it.

So in that great effort, I urge you to participate. Nothing will give you more satisfaction. No need is greater. And I hope that all of us, not only in our field of immediate interest, but in the field of our resources, will also make the necessary and immediate decisions.

Marshal Lyautey, who was the great French Marshal in North Africa, was once talking to his gardener and he suggested that he plant a tree, and the gardener said, "Well why plant it? It won't flower for 100 years." And Marshal Lyautey said, "In that case, plant it this afternoon."

I think this is good advice for all of us.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke in the University field house at Grand Forks after receiving an honorary degree of doctor of laws. In his opening words he referred to the University's President, Dr. George W. Starcher; governor William L. Guy and U.S. Senator Quentin N. Burdick of North Dakota; Secretary of the Interior Stewart L. Udall; and U.S. Senators Mike Mansfield and Lee Metcalf of Montana.