

Faith In Liberalism

August 28, 1952

Address to the State Committee of the Liberal Party in New York City

Excerpt:

“The challenge to all of us is to prove that a free society can remain free, humane and creative, even when it is under heavy and ruthless fire; that it can combat poverty, injustice and intolerance in its own midst, even while resisting a monstrous foreign despotism; and that it can give man a glimpse of serenity and of hope, even while calling on them for sacrifice.”

Background:

Founded in 1944, the Liberal Party of New York often endorsed Democrats for local, state, and national office. In the 1952 presidential campaign, Adlai Stevenson received the support of this socially progressive and anti-communist party. He spoke to Liberal Party leaders one month after accepting the Democratic nomination for president.

In this speech, Stevenson warned of abuses stemming from the anti-communist crusades of U.S. Senator Joseph McCarthy, a Republican from Wisconsin. McCarthy was infuriated over the “loss” of China to Mao Zedong and the communists. McCarthy also made unsubstantiated allegations that the U.S. State Department was riddled with communist spies. He accused Dean Acheson and George Marshall (the then current and former secretaries of state) of colluding with communists.

Stevenson too was an anti-communist. After all, in the excerpt above he called upon the U.S. to resist “monstrous foreign despotism,” a clear reference to the Soviet Union. Nonetheless Stevenson’s anti-communism was not one of domestic witch hunts and bald partisan gain. His liberal philosophy translated into a commitment to protecting freedoms and individual liberties both here and abroad. During the campaign, he talked of “phony patriots” and “self-appointed thought police.”

Stevenson’s liberal faith also included open-mindedness, a toleration—if not always understanding—of differing worldviews. “Only men who confuse themselves with God would dare to pretend in this anguished and bloody era that they know the exact road to the promised land,” he declared. Even so, he was equally clear that there were truths worth fighting for, like free speech.

Optimism, even in the face of daunting odds, was for Stevenson another defining

characteristic of his liberalism. “We shall be accused of idealism,” he told his audience at the end of this speech. “To which the only truthful answer is that we plead guilty. This is not to say that we guarantee a happy ending; it is only to say that we retain our confidence in man’s ability to achieve the triumph of decency and of compassion in our lifetime.”

FULL TEXT of August 28, 1952 speech, “Faith in Liberalism, New York City

I appreciate very much this opportunity to meet with you men and women of the Liberal Party, and I’m deeply grateful for your confidence and for the honor that you have done me. That your nomination of me (for President) was unanimous only increases my respect for your judgment and discrimination!

After listening to what Mr. Dubinsky [David Dubinsky, president of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union; founder and vice chairman of the Liberal Party of New York] had to say a moment ago, I was tempted to think that when he concluded he was going to introduce not me but Benjamin Franklin. Evidently he couldn’t get here.

Dr. Counts [George S. Counts, professor of education at Teachers College, Columbia University, and later chairman of the New York Liberal Party,] said here a moment ago that the Liberal Party has tried to serve us as sort of a political conscience. Now I have, of course, read about you in the published writings of certain columnists and I am fully aware that you are very dangerous characters. I’m informed that attacks on you from the right are equaled in violence only by denunciations in the communist press.

Well, I know how that is. In my very brief political career I’ve sometimes wondered if I had any friends left. And then they suddenly nominated me for President, and I wondered if I hadn’t too many friends. But if I have, by any chance, too many friends I am sure time will take care of that!

You know how it is in an election year—they pick a President and then for four years they pick on him.

I hope that the alert members of the press here present will note that I arrived at your convention under my own power. I was not escorted or dragged to this platform. And what’s more I think I’m standing on my own feet. And, to the best of my knowledge, I’ve neither been drugged nor hypnotized. Now I offer this testimony in advance since, as you know, I’m alleged by the Republicans to be in a state of multiple captivity and you will, sooner or later, undoubtedly be included on the distinguished list of my jailers.

I’ve been much interested in the continued debate that’s been raging in the newspapers as to whether I was headed right, center or left. I think it would have been rather more relevant had they asked: Is the man moving forward, backward, or is he grounded?

Now I sometimes think we're far more tolerant of a quarterback than we are of our candidates. An advance on the football field through left guard, or through right guard, or even straight through center, is generally counted as yardage gained. I think that is the sports writer's word for it. The only unforgivable thing is to be trapped by the Old Guard behind your line. Whatever may happen, I trust that it will at least be said of me that I know the difference between the goal line and the sideline.

Now there's no mystery about my program, whatever label may attach to it. I am running on the Democratic platform. I am for it; and I'll fight for it and I expect to win on it.

No platform, of course, can resolve all of our dilemmas. As vital, it seems to me, as the written word is the spirit and the resolution of those who embrace the written word. The real question is whether a platform represents the clicking of a ghost's typewriter, if I may put it that way, or the beating of a human heart.

Our opponents also have a platform. In modern times they've honored us Democrats by borrowing many phrases from past Democratic platforms. Now because of the timing of the conventions, this inevitably leaves them four years behind. But I suppose plagiarism must, nevertheless, be considered a form of progress.

And this is open season for that kind of progress. This is the time when even the most obsolete Republican becomes momentarily reconciled to the machine age. He listens—he's very apt to listen with a stiff upper lip—while his candidate calls for those greater social gains which a few minutes before they called wild-eyed socialism. In this season Republican candidates are even forgiven for whispering that there could be a better law than the Taft-Hartley Act.

The season when Republican hearts regularly throb with such thoughts is, of course, the autumn of Presidential years. This is indeed a truly remarkable interval, a sort of pause in the Republican occupation and I've often thought that it might well be called the liberal hour. But it should never be confused with any period when Congress is in session.

Now it's a misfortune—deserved, I fear—of the Republican leadership not just to be taken too seriously during these moments of imitation. Their forward look sometimes seems to me like a costume taken out of the closet every four years for the big masquerade ball. It often looks nice after a dry cleaning, but the stuffed shirt still shows.

I think it's ironic—but nonetheless revealing—that my distinguished opponent, my very distinguished opponent, feels compelled to prove that he was innocent of any association with Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman. After all, there were four occasions on which the people of the United States indicated their desire to continue such an association. Nevertheless, my opponent's trepidation is perhaps understandable. Joe McCarthy may get him if he doesn't watch out.

I certainly, for one, don't envy the General having to listen to all the conflicting advice

about how to treat the slanderers of his dear friend and senior officer, General [George C.] Marshall. You can tell the size of a man by the size of the thing that makes him mad, and I hope that, regardless of my own political advantage, this matter is not finally resolved by the counsel of those who favor what has been described as the middle-of-the-gutter approach.

There is some low comedy in this minor Republican spectacle, but there is also, it seems to me, symbolic tragedy, too. For everything that our distinguished fellow citizen has accomplished in his great service to his country is imperiled by many men who propose to ride to Washington on his train.

They are not just the men who hunt communists in the Bureau of Wild Life and Fisheries while hesitating to aid the gallant men and women who are resisting the real thing in the front lines of Europe and Asia. They are also the men who would rather hold post-mortems over the loss of China than do something now to save India.

And they are, finally, the men who seemingly believe that we can confound the Kremlin by frightening ourselves to death. They would rather battle Democrats than communists any day. And, like the communists, their favorite sport is prophesying our imminent doom.

As I indicated at the start of this campaign, I don't intend to tell anyone that complicated things are simple and that all of the answers are in the back of a book which I will shortly produce. Only men who confuse themselves with God would dare to pretend in this anguished and bloody era that they know the exact road to the promised land.

You of the Liberal Party will perhaps understand me best when I vigorously disclaim infallibility. For it seems to me that an authentic humility, an awareness of the complexity of men's choices, a tolerance for diverse opinions, and a recognition for brave experimentation are the heart of any liberal faith.

But let no one make the mistake of believing that the liberal's tolerance for conflicting opinion makes him incapable of fighting hard for the things that he believes in.

For example, I yield to no man—if I may borrow that majestic parliamentary phrase—I yield to no man in my belief in the principle of free debate, inside or outside the halls of Congress. The sound of tireless voices is the price we pay for the right to hear the music of our own opinions. But there is also, it seems to me, a moment at which democracy must prove its capacity to act. Every man has a right to be heard; but no man has the right to strangle democracy with a single set of vocal cords.

There's another text that I should like to take from the Democratic platform. The near unanimity with which the civil rights plank was adopted at the Democratic Convention this year is in great part the result of things that have happened to us as a nation during the past decade. At the moment, as on so many occasions during World War II, Negro Americans are fighting and working side by side with their white countrymen in many

parts of the world. I venture to say that there are few men of either race who are not affected by that experience. And one could point to many other examples of the remarkable progress of the past decade, and I mean in the South as well as in the North.

The Federal Government has a direct responsibility to maintain this progress by helping to secure equal rights for all of our people.

I told the Democratic State Convention earlier this very evening that I have been impressed by the recent bill reported by Senator [Hubert H.] Humphrey on behalf of the Senate Labor Committee. Both your New York Senators joined in sponsoring the bill. We must continue to press forward along such lines as these—in our national Congress as well as in our states and our communities—until we have eradicated the curse of discrimination in this nation.

To meet the crisis of our day, we must have affirmative values and clear-cut objectives. The challenge to all of us is to prove that a free society can remain free, humane and creative, even when it is under heavy and ruthless fire; that it can combat poverty, injustice and intolerance in its own midst, even while resisting a monstrous foreign despotism; and that it can give man a glimpse of serenity and of hope, even while calling on them for sacrifice.

We shall be accused of idealism or some such crime for projecting so optimistic a vision. To which the only truthful answer is that we plead guilty. This is not to say that we guarantee a happy ending; it is only to say that we retain our confidence in man's ability to achieve the triumph of decency and of compassion in our lifetime.

After all, there was a man named Hitler, and it looked for a while as if he were invincible. Yet we despised and “decadent” peoples are still talking—and he hasn't made a speech in seven years. The “thousand-year Reich” already belongs to the history books while the idea of freedom has endured, even in the dreariest dungeons behind the Iron Curtain. So I say, let the demagogues beware.

I believe we are living in the twilight of the totalitarian gods; beyond the fury and the turmoil of our times lies an horizon of new hope for embattled humanity. With liberal faith, with cool heads, with warm hearts, we shall make that hope real for our nation and for our century.

— Adlai E. Stevenson II

Discussion Questions:

1. When Stevenson mentions heading “right, center, or left,” what is he referring to?
2. What is the Taft-Hartley Act?
3. Why was Stevenson identifying himself with Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman?

4. What was Stevenson proposing to save India from?
5. When Stevenson discusses “the sound of tireless voices”, which Constitutional amendment is he referring to?

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