

REMARKS OF SENATOR JOHN F. KENNEDY

YESHIVA UNIVERSITY CHARTER DAY DINNER
WALDORF-ASTORIA HOTEL, NEW YORK CITY
SUNDAY EVENING, OCTOBER 27, 1957

The honor you have bestowed upon me tonight touches me more deeply than I can say. The Annual Yeshiva University Charter Day Award is a coveted distinction and a high honor -- and no political tribute or Senatorial accolade could mean so much to me. I accept this Award with humility that stems from my deep admiration for those illustrious figures whom you have honored in earlier years; I accept it with gratitude to you for your generosity in bestowing this justly celebrated distinction upon me tonight; and I accept it with a determination to redouble and rededicate my efforts on behalf of those causes which you and I cherish uppermost in our hearts.

It is a particularly great honor to receive an award associated with Yeshiva University. For few other educational institutions in our country have made such an extraordinary and enduring achievement in so short a time. I am a graduate and member of the Board of Overseers of another great American University which started as a theological seminary and gradually broadened its scope of educational activity to become one of the foremost universities of our time. The story of Yeshiva seems certain to parallel the story of Harvard -- for in the twelve years since it attained the rank of University, its spectacular progress has won acclaim in all parts of the nation. The calibre of its academic courses, the competence of its faculty and students, the scholarship of its publications and programs, the achievement of its graduates in a host of fields and the leadership of the University itself in this area, in the academic world and in the American-Jewish community -- all of these entitle Yeshiva to rank among the finest institutions of our land.

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We are in danger today, unfortunately, of overlooking the value of a liberal arts institution such as the great university we honor tonight. Our nation is concerned, and properly so, with the wonders of science and engineering — with earth satellites, intercontinental ballistic missiles and atomic bombs with the ironic label of "clean". We are concerned with the Soviet Union's lead over this country in terms of the number of scientists and engineers available for military research and development, and in terms of the number of new and future scientists and engineers currently being graduated or enrolled in institutions of higher education. Certainly the shocking fact that about half of those with talents in these fields who graduate from our high schools are either unable or uninterested in going to college, and that an equally large proportion of those who enter college fail to graduate, needs our prompt attention — both in the legislative circles I represent tonight and the academic circles in which Yeshiva is a leader.

But in our concern over the training and production of additional scientists and engineers, we dare not lose sight of the equally important role to be played by our liberal arts institutions. We need something more than a nation of scientists and technicians — something more than an arsenal of super-weapons and ingenious inventions. We must have men and women capable of leading the "free world", of making the hard and unpopular decisions necessary to preserve world peace and national security. We must preserve the values and traditions that make our society worth defending. We need scientists and technicians in this day and age to make survival possible — but we need liberal arts institutions such as Yeshiva to make it meaningful.

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I do not say that our political and public life should be turned over to the college-trained experts who ignore public opinion. Nor would I adopt from the Belgian Constitution of 1893 the provision giving three votes instead of one to college graduates (at least not until more Democrats go to college). Nor would I give Yeshiva University a seat in the Congress as William and Mary was once represented in the Virginia House of Burgesses. But I do want to emphasize the significant role of our universities in molding the opinion and leadership of the nation. "A university," said Professor Woodrow Wilson, "should be an organ of memory for the state for the transmission of its best traditions. Every man sent out from a university should be a man of his nation, as well as a man of his time." And Prince Bismarck was even more specific — one-third of the students of German universities, he once stated, broke down from overwork; another third broke down from dissipation; and the other third ruled Germany. (I leave it to each of you to decide which category you fall in.)

But there may be some who would question whether Yeshiva University has any significant role to play in this critical area of developing courageous American leaders and mature public opinion. Their doubts stem from the fact that Yeshiva is a Jewish university, founded and financed under Jewish auspices, and stressing the Jewish history, culture and religion

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in its academic offerings. How, then, some may ask, can Yeshiva -- representing in this sense a minority interest and point of view -- properly play a role in influencing American policies and politics?

I realize that this is a sensitive area for Jews and non-Jews alike -- and I am loathe to "rush in where Angels fear to tread." Particularly, as one who is not of the Jewish faith, I am reluctant to trespass before this audience on areas in which your insight and experience are certain to be greater than mine. But the problem is not limited to Jews -- or, for that matter, to Catholics or the Irish or Negroes or any other ethnic group. The question of whether the national interest suffers from or is benefitted by the relationship between our public policy and ethnic and religious group ties is of concern to all of us. I hope we can discuss the problem tonight with the frankness and understanding it deserves.

For more than half a century the popular tendency in political speeches has been to de-emphasize ethnic ties rather than appraise them. There is something noble and patriotic about denouncing hyphenated Americanism, and about commending the American "melting pot" in which all individual strains are lost in the mass product. Teddy Roosevelt was one of the great spokesmen for this point of view -- and an incident of some fifty years ago illustrates his desire to disavow ethnic identities even when they were relevant.

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In 1902 Roosevelt appointed Oscar Straus to succeed ex-President Harrison as American representative to the arbitration court at the Hague. Four years later he brought Straus into his cabinet as Secretary of Commerce and Labor, stating, "I want to show Russia what we think of the Jews in this country." But shortly thereafter, at a banquet held in Straus's honor, Mr. Roosevelt did not mention his intentions toward the imperial government of Russia. On the contrary, in his speech the President boasted that he named Straus because of his ability and devotion to high ideals. "I did not name him because he was a Jew," he said. "I would have named Mr. Straus if he had been a Methodist or of French blood. Merit and merit alone dictated his appointment. I would despise myself if I considered the race or religion of a man named for high political office."

The toastmaster at the dinner was the wealthy financier, Jacob Shiff, Roosevelt's good friend and frequent correspondent. But Shiff was quite deaf, and he did not hear a word that T.R. said. When Shiff's turn to speak came, he proudly told the audience how Roosevelt had called him to Washington specifically to tell him that he wished to appoint a Jew to his cabinet and to ask Shiff to recommend an able man who would be acceptable to American Jews. Roosevelt swallowed his embarrassment -- and his understanding audience applauded him vigorously.

When the men chosen are as thoroughly capable and qualified as Oscar Straus, there is nothing shocking about Presidents and Governors trying to distribute offices among various minority groups in order to give them a greater sense of participation in the governing process. This is quite different, however, from appointments made solely on the basis of the appointee's racial or religious identity, without regard to his merit. It is quite different from the kind of politics that seeks hypocritically to exploit the hopes and fears of a minority group in order to gain power,

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or that introduces irrelevant religious or racial factors into a campaign without regard to the consequences. If the influence of ethnic group loyalties in our political life leads on some occasions to demagoguery and to promises that ignore the national interest, that is to be deplored by all -- and the guilt lies more with the politicians than with the ethnic groups themselves.

But even when the relationship between politicians and ethnic groups is characterized on both sides by restraint and responsibility, there are those who question the very existence of such a relationship -- they question whether ethnic ties should play any role at all in our political life and policy development. Among these critics are the Jews and non-Jews who are opposed to the Zionist activities of the large Jewish organizations. These critics have raised the question of what they call dual-loyalty. The argument is not a new one. It has been leveled before at other minority groups. If it is valid, it applies with equal force to Irish-Americans, to Polish-Americans, to Italo-Americans, and to others. Implicit in the charge of dual loyalty are the allegations: First, that an interest by Americans of problems in the homeland is incompatible with loyalty to America; and second, that ties to other nations are necessarily harmful to American foreign policy.

Let us examine the question of the incompatibility of loyalties first. It seems to me that this argument is based on a closed concept of America. It is founded on the notion that loyalty to America means loyalty to one specific policy only, and that a plurality of loyalties is incompatible with loyalty to one's country. But we know very well that loyalty to the political community is actually a product of loyalties to lesser associations. We know that

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democratic authority is grounded in consent. And we know that American freedom has its deepest tradition in the toleration of multiple group loyalties.

A roll call of any infantry company during World War Two revealed the extent to which America had successfully captured the loyalty of its ethnic and religious minority groups. A similar roll call of Americans who were responsible for the discovery of nuclear energy would further show the importance of winning allegiance by tolerating diversity.

To say that interest in the welfare of the Irish in Ireland or the Hungarians in Hungary makes Irish-Americans or Hungarian-Americans any less American is not only wrong, but it misses the main point.

Our loyalty to America is not mere allegiance to a piece of geography. We are loyal to a larger concept of American freedom precisely because we are free to keep the old ways if we wish to do so. We can sing the old songs and speak the old languages and meet in fraternal groups when we choose. We can keep all of our loyalties, as long as they do not threaten the system of freedom itself. This very freedom to be ourselves nurtures and sustains allegiance to America. It is not, in any sense of the word, disloyal.

Now let us look at the charge that other-nation interests are incompatible with the demands of American foreign policy. I disagree with this allegation mainly because I share John Stuart Mill's view that the freedom to advance ideas is valuable not just for the "speaker" but for society as well — as we have learned in this country on many occasions. Italian and Jewish agitation for a more liberal immigration policy, for example, while rising in part out of ethnic needs, would greatly strengthen our foreign policy if successful. The activities of many Polish Americans helped to give us a

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greater understanding of the Soviet menace. The interest of American Greeks in Cyprus, of Italian Americans in Trieste, of Latin Americans in trade with their part of the world, and so on and on -- all of these have played a beneficial role in helping shape American foreign policy.

In much the same way, ethnic influences have benefitted our domestic affairs. American Jewry, with its great tradition of intellectual freedom, has served as the conscience of America in questions of civil liberty. American Catholics have played an important historic role in promoting better labor relations, better race relations and better welfare legislation in this country.

The pollsters recognized long ago that there was such a thing as ethno-religious group influences on American politics, just as there are sectional, economic, occupational and other influences. I do not believe that a Polish view on foreign policy is necessarily more detrimental than a sectional view. I do not think a Lithuanian vote is essentially more dangerous than a labor vote or a farm vote. I do not say there is, could be or should be a unified Polish view, or a solid Lithuanian vote. But we would be deceiving ourselves if we denied that religious and ethnic group loyalties sometimes affect one's views on public policy.

This does not mean that Jews should only vote as Jews and Catholics as Catholics, or that they should vote for their co-religionists on that basis alone. We all agree that Jews, Catholics and everyone else ought always to think first of the welfare of all Americans when they vote. But this, in turn, does not mean that one's religious convictions should be devoid of social significance.

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In short, American freedom is not threatened by American pluralism -- it depends upon it. This nation has gained far more from its ethnic and religious diversity -- in building loyalty to America and strengthening the American national interest -- than it has lost. This is not to deny that American ethnic and religious diversity places a special strain on American society. But it is to assert that we have handled this special burden with remarkable success. To those who define America in terms of some closed system, her multiplicity of minority groups may seem to be an intolerable burden. It seems quite clear to me that they are wrong. America is an ongoing process. It is always in a state of becoming. Minority group pluralism, with all of its understandable dangers (for it would be foolish not to acknowledge and understand them) has been one of the richest and most rewarding aspects of the American experiment.

There are, of course, limitations to these influences of which all of us must be aware. While minority groups, like any other group, are entitled to and should vigorously urge a course of action which they believe to be right, they must exercise their claims with responsibility and self-restraint, respecting the claims of others and thinking primarily in terms of what is right for the nation as a whole. The National Association of Manufacturers and the Democratic Lithuanian Club of Chicago both should seek to determine the public interest. It is no inhibition on the right of any association to agitate on behalf of its special interests to insist that it have a corollary responsibility to search for the public interest.

The other general limit is a familiar but important one: that no group is free to destroy the system of freedom itself. This means that every

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ethnic and religious group must -- as, indeed, all groups must -- respect the first amendment in all its particulars. It is not too much to ask -- that our subcultural groups honor the system which enables them to flourish.

The freedom to assemble, organize, and speak on questions of public policy, guaranteed by the first amendment, enables each ethnic and religious group to be itself. Only in that way can they make their fullest contribution to American life. If each of us is true to himself, whatever he is, America will continue -- despite the pressures for conformity which crowd in on us -- to give the world an image of an open and dynamic society.