

Price

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SOTU 1974: THOUGHTS TOWARD A THEME

The lessons of 1973 have been difficult for the entire Nation.

The torments and the questions of this year have taught us a great deal about the limits of power, the potential for abuse of power and also the limits we should set on what we expect of Government.

For forty years now, Government has been growing more powerful -- and in particular, the central government in Washington has been growing more powerful. Along the way, there have been those -- myself among them -- who warned that we should not concentrate so much power in Washington; that when we give up power over our own lives, even in the hopes that our lives can thereby be made more secure or more abundant, we give up something that can be gravely abused -- and not

only by those with evil intentions, but even more dangerously by those with good intentions.

The best cure for the abuse of power in Washington is to reverse the flow of power to Washington, and send it instead back to the States and communities and to the people, all across America.

Remember: the power that you hold in your own hands cannot be misused by another. Only when you give up that power to someone else is there the danger that it can be used against you, or against your interests.

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Those who complain most loudly about the abuse of power are those who lobbied most vigorously for the concentration and amassing of power in Washington.

For years now, those who warned against the concentration of power in Washington were sneered at as mossbacks or as unconcerned with the poor, or as lacking in social conscience. But in fact, these people saw the dangers of concentrating too much power in one place; they knew that the whole history of the concentration of power is that it creates dangers that are bound to be realized sooner or later.

Now the abuse of power is being blamed on those who fought against its creation, because they knew that once created it had the potential for abuse.

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Let us read very carefully the lessons of this year.

The real lesson is not the fashionable one: it is not that a few evil persons sought to exploit power for their own ends; rather, it is that the power should not have been concentrated there in the first place. The abuses did not begin in 1972, any more than the power first was lodged there in 1972.

We will not properly learn the lessons of this experience if we fall into the moral myopia of placing all the blame on a few individuals, and not examining the system in which those individuals operated.

We will not learn the lessons if we fall into a narrowly vengeful or vindictive spirit; if we ignore history, or act as if history began with this morning's newspaper.

If there is one lesson to be learned above all from 1973, it is this: that the rights of the individual can be truly secure only if he keeps in his own hands the power to make those rights secure. We cannot sell our birthright for a mess of pottage, without waking up after the pottage is eaten to find that the birthright is gone.

That is what has happened in the something-for-nothing atmosphere of recent decades, in the political shell game of pretending that power can be given to the Federal Government without taking it away from someone else.

The time has come to break up that particular shell game -- and, as I said in my State of the Union message three years ago, to reverse the flow of power and start it going back from Washington to the States and communities and, more important, to the people, all across America.

Those with a vested interest in keeping power in Washington -- those who have fought the return of power to the people -- cannot hide this truth behind a smokescreen of personal vituperation, and of pretending that the evil lies in the people who hold power rather than in the concentration of power itself.

If the particular abuses that took place had not happened, there would have been others. The nature of power is that it breeds abuse.

Government is just as fragile and just as fallible as any other human institution. This is what conservatives have been saying for years. It has not special virtue, no immunity from all the failings man is heir to. And the more powerful it becomes, the more likely it is to be subject to abuse, to fall into disastrous errors, to blunder, and to fall

short of the exaggerated hopes that are vested in it along with its exaggerated power.

America became the world's greatest and strongest and richest nation not because it had the most powerful government, but rather because it kept its government limited -- because it relied on the basic energies and genius of its people, free and unfettered.

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The most tragic irony of all would be if those who are philosophically opposed to letting power go back to the people, were to succeed in using this abuse of concentrated power as an excuse to continue the concentration of power.

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To say that these abuses were merely the fault of evil people is scapegoating, pure and simple. Whether the abuses that finally occurred were these or others, the potential for abuse was there and the prospect of abuse was certain.

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From a personal standpoint, it has hurt me deeply that it was in my Administration that these abuses took place. But from the standpoint of the nation's future, my most fervent hope is that this will at last drive home the truth of what so many of us have said for so long: that you cannot look to Washington to solve all of your problems without having Washington become your problem.

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The more government regulates, the more it controls, the more it interferes, the more it becomes almost obsessively the target of the influence-peddlers -- and the more difficult it becomes to draw the proper line between improper influence and the necessary redress of grievances.

The more power is concentrated, the less it can be controlled, the more it has to be delegated.

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Of course State and local governments will make mistakes. But so will Washington -- and when Washington makes one, it's a whopper.

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Those who trust too much to Government are doomed to disappointment, not because Government is made up of untrustworthy people but simply because Government is made up of people -- and people unwilling to trust to themselves should not be surprised if Government is no better than they are.

Government in the 1970s has been asked to redeem the overpromises of the 1960s -- and the fact is that it cannot redeem those overpromises, because the promises were false in the first place.

The more Government strains to do the impossible, the less it is able to do the possible.

The more it seeks to make good on exaggerated expectations,
the more likely it is to fail to meet reasonable expectations.

The answer is not a revolving-door Congress, any more than
it is a revolving-door Presidency. The answer is a sharp, cold dose
of realism about what Government can do and what it cannot do, what
it should attempt and what it should not attempt.

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