

URBAN COALITION ACTION COUNCIL

Remarks by

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I should like to make what is as close, perhaps, to a personal statement that as would be appropriate for someone holding public office.

In the course of the month of July events that will occur quietly here in Washington are going to determine much of the fate of the United States in the decade ahead, and probably even beyond that.

It is no good omen that these events will occur quietly. We have become a querulous country. The importance of any measure is very much judged by the shrillness with which it is advocated or opposed. Yet I believe it to be the fact that many of the most important and enduring measures of social change which we would associate with the history of democratic government have in fact occurred quietly. And I continue to believe that it is in the nature of some forms of social change that they can only occur in an atmosphere that is not tense with confrontation, aggression, and fear.

There are some things too important in themselves, and inevitably too unknowable in the ramifications they will have throughout the social system, ever to win acceptance in an atmosphere in which one man's gain is presumed to be another's loss, where one man's justification is another's disgrace.

The July events of which I speak refer first of all to the decision that will be made by the Senate Finance Committee as to whether to report out the Family Assistance Act, as passed by the House and proposed by the Administration. If this is done, the bill will certainly pass the Senate, and thereupon the most important piece of social legislation in thirty-five years -- one of the dozen or half dozen most important such bills in American history -- will become law. Thereafter America will commence to change in directions that all of us know, and for some time have known, are desperately needed. It will be said of us that in a time of prolonged crisis and eroding confidence we did the impossible because it was necessary.

It seems to me especially appropriate that I should be saying this before an assembly of the Urban Coalition, gathered here in Washington for the purpose of helping to do this "impossible" thing.

I was present at the first meeting of the Urban Coalition, three years ago, toward the end of the terrible summer of 1967. The circumstances in which the Urban Coalition was founded surely cannot by now have been forgotten. Calamitous events had occurred within the nation. Neither the executive nor legislative branches seemed

able to respond, even to react. A kind of paralysis had occurred.

That paralysis ran its course. There was a change of party.  
A new set of opportunities.

There was also a change of style.

This was in part personal, but also, fundamentally, political.  
The President chose to put forward his most important proposals  
in his quietest voice. The reasons for doing so would, I should think,  
be clear.

It would seem to me a wholly defensible decision. For the most  
important of any of these proposals was the Family Assistance Plan,  
a proposal to put a floor under the income of every American family  
with children; a proposal finally to abolish poverty in America, finally  
to heal the hoary, , festering wounds of the South, a proposal finally  
to make one people out of one nation. From the outset there has been  
no mistaking the significance of this proposal. The media has  
understood, the Congress has understood, organizations such as the  
Urban Coalition have understood.

In the spring, what John Osborne has called "the legislative  
miracle" of this time in history, Family Assistance passed the House  
of Representatives by a thumping majority. This was the consequence

of integrity and competence on the part of the legislative leaders who handled the measure. But it was also, and primarily the consequence of the measure being so necessary, so right, so immediately important.

The reason for this could not be more clear. America needs a success. Here at home. What Hamilton termed "energy in the executive," and which he rightly considered the precondition of successful democracy, needs to manifest itself. We need to show what we are made of.

This is our chance. It is a chance of such utter consequence, that only complete candor is admissable in discussing it.

The chance is slipping away.

You will imagine what it means to me to say that. I can imagine what it means to you to have to hear it. But it is true, as best I can know the truth.

I would be hard pressed to know exactly why. From the outset we have assumed that if the bill could get by the House it would readily be enacted.

Two things, at very least, have intervened. Neither of them arising in the Senate, but each very much affecting the atmosphere in which the fate of the legislation will be determined.

First, as none need be told, there has been a precipitous rise in social and political tension, and with it something very like that paralysis which gripped the nation in the face of not dissimilar convulsions in the year the Urban Coalition was founded.

Second, and this is the harder to take as it is so very much more the consequence of individual decisions, far too many of the people and the organizations who should be with us in this critical hour are nowhere to be seen. They do not want us to fail. That part of their spirit and their goodness survives. But they somehow do not want us to succeed. They do not, I sometimes think, want anything to succeed. A dance of death has commenced....

And so I do not know what will happen.

If we succeed, I think we shall have started spirally upwards again. The war is going to end, everyone knows that, or should know it. The economy has had to go through its present state in order to resume a balanced and vigorous growth, and that too seems to be happening. But social reconciliation in America is not happening, and that is what is at issue in Family Assistance.

If we fail I can only imagine that the downward spiral will continue, albeit somewhat more slowly. More an unwinding than

a plunge. But in the meantime another generation of Southern children, black and white, will grow up on too little, and their manhood and womanhood will show it. Another generation of the howling slums, the worn out hollows, the endless days of half broken men and their families harvesting other men's crops. It is an America we have come to know. The question is whether we will learn to live with it. That is the question Family Assistance will determine.

If we do not get family assistance in this Congress, I do not see how we will get it in this decade.

By no means do I despair. I have spoken with Senator Long, and have ever assurance that he wants to act on the measure. But he needs our support.

Much is asked of you. But also much is given, for if this most important piece of domestic legislation in two generations should become law it will constitute the first great achievement of American business in the field of social welfare. I believe I know something about this subject, and I believe this to be true. From the outset, apart from a few religious organizations which I would mention with special affection, the U. S. Catholic Conference, the National Council of Churches, and the Synagogue Council of America, a few municipal executives such as Mayor John V. Lindsay, and a few inspired

individuals, it has been the corporation presidents of America who have carried the burden of public support for this great measure that will so much determine the achievement of racial equality and social justice in the United States.

Wilson of Xerox, Heiskell of Time, Inc., MacNaughton of Prudential, Heineman of Northwest Industries -- these are the men who have borne the heat of battle in this moment of great need. Whether we succeed or fail I hope they will be remembered, and that the name of John Gardner and the Urban Coalition will be remembered with them.

Too much talk would be just the wrong thing at this moment. It is time as the Marines say, to saddle up. I would like simply to thank you for what you will be doing in the fateful hours and days ahead. Win or lose it has been no small thing to be with you in a great enterprise.