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This holiday season, I continue a tradition that now begins its third year—to share an important statement about America and the values for which it stands.

In January 1968, Bobby Kennedy delivered a speech to the Commonwealth Club of California in which he challenged us to be, as Jefferson said, the best hope of all mankind.

Kennedy spoke at a time of challenge for America. Twenty-six years ago, America was about to begin a Presidential election year, divided by the war in Vietnam and the battle for civil rights.

In this speech, Kennedy challenges America: “What do we stand for? Where do we want to go?” He asks these questions not only about the immediate crises at hand, but also of the nature and direction of the civilization we wish to live in and grow.

In this speech, Kennedy reminds us that material wealth is not our measure of success. He reminds us that other countries will follow America only if they see in us a common interest and an understanding of their own ideals and their own aspirations. And he reminds us that for over 200 years America has stood for the liberation of the human spirit.

In this speech, Kennedy lays out the agenda for our own upcoming Presidential election: “What do we stand for? Where do we want to go?”

Six months after giving this speech, Kennedy would be dead, felled by an assassin’s bullet. But the vision, the values, and the commitment he articulated continue to live and thrive, as they have since before 1776.

The values we celebrate in Christmas, Hanukah, and Kwanzaa are the values of peace, of freedom, and of personal & family responsibility. These values are among humanity’s greatest and deepest aspirations; and as we’ve learned in the thousands of years we’ve walked this planet, they are inextricably bound together. Peace is attained only in the presence of freedom and responsibility. Kennedy’s speech articulates this basic truth.

Let us resolve in 2004 to conduct ourselves so that the rest of the world looks to America as the best hope of all humankind, as a bringer of freedom, responsibility, and peace to the world.

As always, if you are one of the few who perceive my writings as hogwash, please reply to this email with the word “remove” in the subject. I will be pleased to oblige.

Let Freedom Ring.

Cheers -

Stan

# **What Do We Stand For? The Liberation of the Human Spirit**

**Robert F. Kennedy**

## **Excerpts of a Speech Delivered to the Commonwealth Club of California, January 4, 1968**

From the beginning, we have known, as George Washington said, that the preservation of liberty is finally staked on the American experiment. We would be, as Jefferson said, the best hope of all mankind.

And so it has proven everywhere I have traveled around this globe, in great world capitals, but also in tiny villages. I have seen men looking to the principles, far up into the very words of our history, to find inspiration in their own struggles for freedom. Even Ho Chi Minh, who began the Vietnamese war against the French, he began by quoting not Marx, not Lenin, but the American Declaration of Independence.

This is a year in which America must examine not only the candidates, but also the country—must ask not only who will lead us, but also where we wish to be led. We must look not only to immediate crises, but also to the nature and the direction of the civilization that we wish to build, that we wish to take part in.

Entangled abroad and embattled at home, America searches for answers, not just to specific programs, but to the great question, What do we stand for? Where do we want to go? Do we stand for our wealth? Is that what is important about America? Is that what is significant about the United States? Asked better perhaps, are we really so wealthy?

Half a million American children suffer from serious malnutrition, and I have seen them, some of them, I have seen personally some of them starving in the state of Mississippi, their stomachs bloated, their bones and their bodies scarred, many of them retarded for life.

Up to 80 percent of some Indian tribes are unemployed. And the suicide rate among the high school children is shockingly high, dozens of times the national average.

For the black American of the urban ghetto, we really do not know what its unemployment rate is, because from one-fifth to one-third of these adult men in these areas have literally dropped out from sight, uncounted and unknown by all of the agencies of government, drifting about the cities, without hope and without family and without a future.

By these standards, we are not so rich a country.

Truly we have a great gross national product, but can that be the criterion by which we judge this country? Is it enough? For the gross national product counts air pollution and cigarette advertising and ambulances to clear our highways of carnage. It counts special locks for our doors and jails for the people who break them. It counts ... television programs, which glorify violence in order to sell toys to our children.

And the gross national product, the gross national product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education, the joy of their play.

It is indifferent to the decency of our factories and the safety of our streets alike.

It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages, the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials.

It measures neither wit nor courage, neither our wisdom nor our learning, neither our compassion nor our duty to our country.

It measures everything, in short, except that which makes life worthwhile, and it can tell us everything about America, except why we are proud to be Americans.

Is it then that, is it then our wealth or is it our military power that we stand for in the United States?

Beyond our borders, we have become the greatest force in the world. Some have even spoken of us as the new imperial power. Even if we should desire such a role, it is no longer possible, as the history of the last 20 years has so unmistakably shown. The day has passed when a country can successfully rule distant lands by force.

The issue for us is whether we will live as an island in the midst of a hostile world community or whether we will be joined with other independent nations in search of common goals. We must understand this, because so much depends on what is going to happen in the future as to whether this concept is clear to us.

Other countries will associate themselves with us, not because they will be forced to, but because they find in our acts and in our policies a common interest and an understanding of their own ideals and their own aspirations; an understanding of the values that they can respect and admire; an understanding of the values that they can strive to emulate; thus consideration of our wealth and our power brings us full circle to the question with which we began: What do we stand for? Nor should we be surprised, for this is the most powerful and constant lesson of all of history.

The mastery of transient events, our accomplishments, our victories will ultimately matter far less than what we contribute—all of us—in this country to the liberation of the human spirit.

That is what we have always stood for in the past, that it is what we must stand for at the moment. That is what has given us our unique position, our unprecedented strength.

That is why, in fact, we are proud to be Americans.

For two hundred years, America has meant a vision of national independence and personal freedom and justice between men. But whether it will continue to mean this will depend on the answers to difficult and complex problems.

It will depend on whether we sit content in our storehouses, dieting while others starve, buying eight million new cars a year while most of the world goes without shoes.

It will depend on whether we still hold, as the framers proclaimed, a decent respect for the opinions of mankind, or whether we will act as if no other nations existed, flaunting our power and flaunting our wealth against the judgment and desires of neutrals and allies alike.

It will depend on whether men still believe ... that this great nation, the United States, does not act in small ways.

These are the questions to debate in this election year.

This is the true agenda, which faces not just the contenders for office but all of the American people. This is what we must really examine in this election year; to meet and master these challenges will take great vision and will take great persistence. ... In this, the most dangerous and yet the most challenging period in our history, this is what is so desperately needed.