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Remarks of J. L. Robertson

**Vice Chairman of the Board of Governors
of the
Federal Reserve System**

**at a Meeting of Omaha and Lincoln Bankers
and Members of the Boards of Directors
of the
Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City
and Its Omaha Branch**

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May 22, 1969

Temper Tantrums

A truck driver was sitting all by himself at the counter of the Neverclose Restaurant down by the depot in my home town, Broken Bow, Nebraska. The waitress had just served him when three swaggering, leather-jacketed motorcyclists - of the Hell's Angels type - rushed in, apparently spoiling for a fight. One grabbed the hamburger off his plate; another took a handful of his French fries; and the third picked up his coffee and began to drink it. The trucker did not respond as one might expect of a Nebraskan. Instead, he calmly rose, picked up his check, walked to the front of the room, put the check and his half-dollar on the cash register, and went out the door. The waitress followed him to put the money in the till and stood watching out the window as he drove off. When she returned, one of the cyclists said to her: "Well, he's not much of a man, is he?" She replied, "Nope. He's not much of a truck driver either - he just ran over three motorcycles."

Like the trucker's response, mine will be different, too - hopefully though without running over any motorcycles. As a central banker, I might be expected to talk about the awesome domestic and international financial problems which are the subject of my official concern. I am concerned about those problems, and especially the need to combat inflation hard enough and fast enough to keep it from getting out of hand. I will be glad to discuss those matters later, in response to questions, if first you will let me speak briefly, not as a central banker, but as a concerned citizen, about a matter which is or should be of deep concern to each and every citizen of this great land. I refer to the crisis that is manifest in the chaotic conditions that have developed in many of our institutions of higher learning, and even in some of our high schools.

I find myself increasingly troubled by these developments. It might be inaccurate to say that people are apathetic about it, but too many of us are seemingly content to be hand-wringers, head-shakers, and condemners.

This is not the way Americans typically respond to difficulties. We tend to be activists and problem solvers.

Our motto when confronted with a difficulty is: "Don't just stand there; do something!" Today, we appear to have too many people, mostly young ones, who think of themselves as problem solvers and activists but who want to undo something. They want to undo and destroy what it has taken men centuries to build. They have an almost ferocious conviction of their own righteousness and wisdom. They see themselves as the only real devotees in the world of the true, the good, and the beautiful. But to those of us who have lived a little longer and acquired a little more knowledge, and a little more experience, what they seek is neither true, nor good, nor beautiful.

One of the advantages that age has over youth is that we have been in their position, but they have never been in ours. We know those fiery passions, that hot idealism, that unshakeable certainty that one has within his grasp the solutions to all the world's problems. But experience has taught us that reason is a better guide to action than passion, that beautiful dreams of the young idealists sometimes end up as bitter nightmares, and that those men who had the greatest certainty that they had the final solution to all problems have ended up portrayed in the history books as tyrants and enemies of mankind.

This is not to say that we should discourage the dreams of the idealists and the aspirations of our youth. Quite the opposite, we should encourage those dreams and aspirations and pay heed to the expressions of dissent which flow therefrom, for there is the source of orderly change and progress. But we must teach them what we taught their older brothers, what we ourselves were taught, and what our fathers were taught - that our wants and aspirations must be tempered to accommodate the legitimate wants and aspirations of others who live with us on this planet; that other people have rights and that these rights are embodied in laws that have been worked out over hundreds of years to make it possible for men to live together in some degree of harmony and to work for common ends; that these laws are our protection against others trampling on our rights; that if we ignore or destroy the law, we jeopardize our own liberty as well as the liberty of others.

We have recently seen a distinguished Harvard professor and Nobel Prize winner explain and justify the behavior of those who would destroy the law by saying in effect that these young people want something very badly and they have not been able to get it in any other way. This is very much like explaining and justifying the behavior of a child who throws a tantrum in a department store by saying that the youngster wanted a toy fire engine very badly and had no other way of getting it. Sensible parents know that children must be taught at an early age that throwing temper tantrums is not an acceptable way of getting what they want. This is done by punishing - not rewarding - those who engage in unacceptable conduct. Society must do the same. The good parent is not the permissive one who tolerates and encourages temper tantrums in children. The overwhelming majority of parents realize this and hence it is possible to walk through our department stores without having to step over the bodies of screaming children lying in the aisles pounding their fists upon the floor. Unfortunately, this is not true of our colleges, where mass teen-age temper tantrums have become a regular part of the campus scene.

The other day the Chief of Police of Los Angeles retired after a quarter of century of service and stated that he was about ready to write off a whole generation of young Americans because of their attitude toward authority. Now, we cannot afford to write off a whole generation of young Americans - not even its small minority about whom I am talking. Every generation plays a vital role in the process of keeping civilization alive. We cannot write off a generation if we hope to transmit to the generations to come the values that man has laboriously nurtured and protected over the centuries.

Our country has survived and prospered because of the ideas on which it was founded. People from all parts of the globe came here to live. They spoke a variety of languages and had widely disparate economic, social, and cultural backgrounds. Yet they succeeded in building a great nation. A nation is more than a collection of human beings who live in the same geographical area. To constitute a viable nation, these human beings must sense a

community of interest, must share a common set of operational values. America's glory lies in the fact that it won voluntary acceptance of its values from men and women of widely different backgrounds. This was perhaps largely because so many were attracted to this wild country in its early days precisely because they were impressed by what we stood for. Many had fled from authoritarianism and tyranny, to live in a land that offered them both liberty and justice.

This has always been the kind of country that allowed wide latitude to its citizens in both speech and action. However, it was expected in return that the citizens would respect and support the institutions, laws, and customs that were essential to the survival of a society of this kind. It was expected, for example, that the citizens would accept the principle of majority rule, and obey the laws approved by the majority. It was expected that the majority would respect the constitutional safeguards erected to curb its power and safeguard the rights of minorities. It was expected that when the majority decided that the national interest led the country into conflict with a foreign enemy, all citizens, regardless of their personal views or national origin, would support and defend the United States. Thus it was that Nebraska's great statesman, Senator George W. Norris, after having vigorously opposed America's entry into the first World War, declared his unstinting support for the Commander-in-Chief once war was declared.

Underlying these operational principles were some commonly accepted moral values that helped bind the American people together. We shared a belief in the Judeo-Christian religious and ethical values - respect for truth, respect for human dignity, consideration of the rights of others, and a common conviction that man had a higher purpose in life than animalistic gratification of his sensual desires. It is true that we have made many mistakes and that our practices have not always matched our beliefs, but we have generally recognized the value of aspiring for more than we could hope to achieve. And we were generally understanding and tolerant of our human and social imperfections, knowing that it was vain to expect to build Utopia here on earth.

The ideas that made this nation what it has become - a beacon in a dark world - did not spring up overnight. They were not the product of any single individual. They grew and developed over centuries before they reached their present development here. These ideas will not die overnight, but what is transpiring at this moment in our country is a concerted effort to bring about their demise. The turmoil on the college campuses is but a symptom of it. A minority, but an articulate and activist minority of young people - young people who may be future teachers, writers, and political leaders - apparently have been persuaded that the cementing ideas that made this a great nation are false. Indeed, some of them deny that this nation has achieved anything praiseworthy.

These young people have a different set of ideas and ideals. They believe that freedom of expression for those with whom they disagree should not be tolerated. They believe that laws which are not to their liking should be ignored and flouted. They believe that their country is generally wrong in its disputes with foreign countries and hence they have no obligation to give it any support or to rise to its defense. They proclaim their respect for truth, but they show little interest in undertaking the kind of arduous and dispassionate search for facts that is essential if truth is to be found. They profess profound respect for the rights of all men, but they physically assault those whose opinions differ from their own, invade the privacy of their offices, rifle their files, and boastfully publish private correspondence of others to achieve some political advantage.

John W. Gardner, in his recent Godkin Lectures at Harvard, put it well when he said:

"Sad to say, it's fun to hate....
That is today's fashion. Rage and hate
in a good cause! Be vicious for virtue,
self-indulgent for higher purposes,
dishonest in the service of a higher
honesty."

But as he and many others have pointed out, it takes little imagination to visualize the kind of state these youthful revolutionaries would create if they had the power. Constitutional safeguards for the rights of even those who arrogate power unto themselves - let alone everyone else - would cease to exist. There would be no freedom of expression. Truth would be what the rulers believed, not what objective investigation might show. Personal privacy would disappear. The age of Orwell's Big Brother would be upon us, for the historic pattern of continuing violent protest is clear. First comes revolution, with the overthrow of the good along with the bad, followed by chaos, and finally by dictatorial control. Only then could the long, agonizing struggle to obtain the four freedoms begin anew.

Perhaps because of the obvious risk of losing so much for so little, some of us are tempted to say: "It can't happen here!" But it happened, in our lifetime - in Russia, Italy, Germany, all of Eastern Europe, China, and Cuba. It could not happen here if we took greater pains to preserve and protect the operational values of our society. It will happen here if through carelessness we permit these values to be lost to that generation that some people are already prepared to write off.

We must appreciate that changes in basic ideas take place slowly, almost imperceptibly. What has happened on our college campuses is merely a reflection of an attack on our basic ideas that has been going on for many years. When the competing ideas begin to produce the kind of overt behavior we now observe they have already secured a strong and dangerous foothold.

The question is, are we prepared to battle for the preservation of the ideas that made this country great? Do we believe in them enough to insist that they be transmitted to succeeding generations? Or will we - beset by doubts and uncertainty - decide that it is too much trouble to stave off the onslaught of the totalitarians?

Our survival as a free nation may well depend on our answer to this question: Is it too much to ask that our youth be taught - at school as well as at home - to value and respect the ideas that have given this country unexampled freedom as well as material abundance?

I, for one, do not think we price liberty too high when we ask that those who wish to enjoy it give their allegiance to the institutions and ideas that make it possible, even while seeking to change them through nonviolent dissent.

Edmund Burke once said, "The people never give up their liberty but under some delusion". What is the source of the delusion that has led so many of our brightest youth to place liberty in jeopardy? If we are to be more than hand-wringers and head-shakers, we must probe for the answer to that question. For me, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the finger points at those of us who have neglected the education of our youth, and especially at those who condone, forgive, and even justify violations of law and outrageous assaults upon the rights of others.

Would that every parent and teacher take upon himself the responsibility of conveying to the young the wisdom contained in Burke's words:

"Men are qualified for civil liberty in exact proportion to their disposition to put chains upon their own appetites; in proportion as their love of justice is above their rapacity; in proportion as their soundness and sobriety of understanding is above their vanity and presumption; in proportion as they are more disposed to listen to the counsels of the wise and the good, in preference to the flattery of knaves."