

# **"Some Elements of the American Character" Independence Day Oration by John Fitzgerald Kennedy, Candidate for Congress from the 11th Congressional District, July 4, 1946**

Mr. Mayor; Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen.

We stand today in the shadow of history.

We gather here in the very Cradle of Liberty.

It is an honor and a pleasure to be the speaker of the day – an honor because of the long and distinguished list of noted orators who have preceded me on this platform, a pleasure because one of that honored list who stood here fifty years ago, and who is with us here today, is my grandfather.

It has been the custom for the speaker of the day to link his thoughts across the years to certain classic ideals of the early American tradition. I shall do the same. I propose today to discuss certain elements of the American character which have made this nation great. It is well for us to recall them today, for this is a day of recollection and a day of hope.

A nation's character, like that of an individual, is elusive. It is produced partly by things we have done and partly by what has been done to us. It is the result of physical factors, intellectual factors, spiritual factors.

It is well for us to consider our American character, for in peace, as in war, we will survive or fail according to its measure.

## **Religious Element**

Our deep religious sense is the first element of the American character which I would discuss this morning.

The informing spirit of the American character has always been a deep religious sense.

Throughout the years, down to the present, a devotion to fundamental religious principles has characterized American thought and action.

Our government was founded on the essential religious idea of integrity of the individual. It was this religious sense which inspired the authors of the Declaration of Independence:

"We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights."

Our earliest legislation was inspired by this deep religious sense:

"Congress shall make no law prohibiting the free exercise of religion."

Our first leader, Washington, was inspired by this deep religious sense:

"Of all of the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports."

Lincoln was inspired by this deep religious sense:

"That this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people and for the people shall not perish from the earth."

Our late, lamented President was inspired by this deep religious sense:

"We shall win this war, and in victory we shall seek not vengeance, but the establishment of an international order in which the spirit of Christ shall rule the hearts of men and nations."

Thus we see that this nation has ever been inspired by essential religious ideas. The doctrine of slavery which challenged these ideas within our own country was destroyed.

Recently, the philosophy of racism, which threatened to overwhelm them by attacks from abroad, was also met and destroyed.

Today these basic religious ideas are challenged by atheism and materialism: at home in the cynical philosophy of many of our intellectuals, abroad in the doctrine of collectivism, which sets up the twin pillars of atheism and materialism as the official philosophical establishment of the State.

Inspired by a deeply religious sense, this country, which has ever been devoted to the dignity of man, which has ever fostered the growth of the human spirit, has always met and hurled back the challenge of those deathly philosophies of hate and despair. We have defeated them in the past; we will always defeat them.

How well, then, has de Tocqueville said: "You may talk of the people and their majesty, but where there is no respect for God can there be much for man? You may talk of the supremacy of the ballot, respect for order, denounce riot, secession – unless religion is the first link, all is vain."

## **Idealistic Element**

Another element in the American character that I would bring to your attention this morning is the idealism of our native people – stemming from the strong religious beliefs of the first colonists, developed as they worked the land.

This idealism, this fixed regard for principle, has been an element of the American character from the birth of this nation to the present day.

In recent years, the existence of this element in the American character has been challenged by those who seek to give an economic interpretation to American history. They seek to destroy our faith in our past so that they may guide our future. These cynics are wrong, for, while there may be some truth in their interpretation, it does remain a fact, and a most important one, that the motivating force of the American people has been their belief that they have always stood at the barricades by the side of God.

In Revolutionary times, the cry "No taxation without representation" was not an economic complaint. Rather, it was directly traceable to the eminently fair and just principle that no sovereign power has the right to govern without the consent of the governed. Anything short of that was tyranny. It was against this tyranny that the colonists "fired the shot heard 'round the world."

This belief in principle was expressed most impressively by George Washington at the Constitutional Convention in 1787. "It is probable that no plan we propose will be adopted. Perhaps another dreadful conflict is to be sustained. If, to please the people, we offer what we ourselves disapprove, how can we afterwards defend our work? Let us raise a standard to which the wise and honest can repair, the event is in the hands of God."

This idealism, this conviction that our eyes had seen the glory of the Lord – that right was right and wrong was wrong – finally led to the ultimate clash at Bull Run and the long red years of the war between the States.

Again, the cynics may apply the economic interpretation to this conflict: the industrial North against the agricultural South; the struggle of the two economies. Say what they will, it is an undeniable fact that the Northern Army of Virginia and the Army of the Potomac were inspired by devotion to principle: on the one hand, the right of secession; on the other, the belief that the "Union must be preserved."

In 1917, this element of the American character was stimulated by the slogans "War to End War" and "A War to Save Democracy," and again the American people had as their leader a man, Woodrow Wilson, whose idealism was the traditional idealism of America. To such a degree was this true that he was able to say, "Some people call me an idealist. Well, that is the way I know I am an American. America is the only idealistic nation in the world."

It is perhaps true that the American intervention in 1917 might have been more effective if the case for American intervention had been represented on less moralistic terms. As it was, the American people eventually came to look upon themselves as giving food and guns to a general cause in which all other people had material ends and in which they alone had moral ends.

The idealism with which we had entered the battle made the subsequent disillusionment all the more bitter and revealed a dangerous facet to this element of the American character, for this bitterness, a direct result of our inflated hopes, brought a radical change in our foreign policy and a resulting withdrawal from Europe. We failed to make the adjustment between what we had hoped to win and what we actually could win. Our idealism was too strong. We would not compromise.

And thus we brought to our shoulders much of the burden of the responsibility for World War II – a burden which we would not then acknowledge but for which we have paid full price in recent years on distant shores, on faraway fields and valleys and hills, on pieces of foreign soil which will be forever ours.

It was perhaps because of this failure that the second world war never did become a crusade as did the first.

Our idealism had become tarnished, but extraordinary efforts were made to evoke it, and it is indubitably true that the great majority of Americans had strong convictions as to which side spoke for the right before our entry into the war.

It is now in the postwar world that this idealism – this devotion to principle--this belief in the natural law – this deep religious conviction that this is truly God's country and we are truly God's people – will meet its greatest trial.

Our American idealism finds itself faced by the old-world doctrine of power politics. It is meeting with successive rebuffs, and all this may result in a new and even more bitter disillusionment, in another ignominious retreat from our world destiny.

But, if we remain faithful to the American tradition, our idealism will be a steadfast thing, a constant flame, a torch held aloft for the guidance of other nations.

It will take great faith.

Our idealism, the second element of the American character, is being severely tested. Now, only time will tell whether this element of the American character will be true to its historic tradition.

## **Patriotic Element**

The third element of the American character that I would bring to your attention this morning is the great patriotic instinct of our people.

From our pioneer days, perhaps because we were a people who developed from a beachhead on a tremendous continent, this American patriotism has always had as its core a strange and almost mystical love of the land.

Early in our history we acquired, as James Truslow Adams has pointed out, "a sense of unlimited energy face to face with unlimited resources."

Land, land, land, stretching with incredible richness across half a world. Its sheer vastness has made it a challenge to the American spirit. The endless land stretching to, the western sun caught the imagination of men who founded this nation and awakened the patriotic spirit that has become a characteristic of the American people.

In the words of America's poet, Walt Whitman, we note this deep sense of the land:

"Land of the pastoral plains, the grass-field of the world, land of those sweet-air'd interminable plateaus!

Land of the herd, the garden, the healthy house of adobe!

Land where the northwest Columbia winds, and where the southwest Colorado winds!

Land of the eastern Chesapeake! Land of the Delaware!

Land of Ontario, Erie, Huron, Michigan! Land of the Old Thirteen! Massachusetts land! Land of Vermont and Connecticut!

Land of the ocean shores! Land of sierras and peaks!

Land of boatmen and sailors! Fishermen's land!"

This preoccupation with the land records itself in the catalogue of the colonists' grievances against George III. It has always been reflected in the highest moments of our patriotism, for, throughout the years, in the early days here at home and in recent years abroad, Americans have been ever ready to defend this native land.

From the birth of the nation to the present day, from the Heights of Dorchester to the broad meadows of Virginia, from Bunker Hill to the batteries of Saratoga, from Bergen's Neck, where Wayne and Maylan's troops achieved such martial wonders, to Yorktown, where Britain's troops surrendered, Americans have heroically embraced the soldier's alternative of victory or the grave. American patriotism was shown at the Halls of Montezuma. It was shown with Meade at Gettysburg, with Sheridan at Winchester, with Phil Carney at Fair Oaks, with Longstreet in the Wilderness, and it was shown by the flower of the Virginia Army when Pickett charged at Gettysburg. It was shown by Captain Rowan, who plunged into the jungles of Cuba and delivered the famous message to Garcia, symbol now

of tenacity and determination. It was shown by the Fifth and Sixth Marines at Belleau Wood, by the Yankee Division at Verdun, by Captain Leahy, whose last order as he lay dying was "The command is forward." And in recent years it was shown by those who stood at Bataan with Wainwright, by those who fought at Wake Island with Devereaux, who flew in the air with Don Gentile. It was shown by those who jumped with Gavin, by those who stormed the bloody beaches at Salerno with Commando Kelly; it was shown by the First Division at Omaha Beach, by the Second Ranger Battalion as it crossed the Purple Heart Valley, by the 101st as it stood at Bastogne; it was shown at the Bulge, at the Rhine, and at victory.

Wherever freedom has been in danger, Americans with a deep sense of patriotism have ever been willing to stand at Armageddon and strike a blow for liberty and the Lord.

### **Individualistic Element**

The American character has been not only religious, idealistic, and patriotic, but because of these it has been essentially individual.

The right of the individual against the State has ever been one of our most cherished political principles.

The American Constitution has set down for all men to see the essentially Christian and American principle that there are certain rights held by every man which no government and no majority, however powerful, can deny.

Conceived in Grecian thought, strengthened by Christian morality, and stamped indelibly into American political philosophy, the right of the individual against the State is the keystone of our Constitution.

Each man is free.

He is free in thought.

He is free in expression.

He is free in worship.

To us, who have been reared in the American tradition, these rights have become part of our very being. They have become so much a part of our being that most of us are prone to feel that they are rights universally recognized and universally exercised. But the sad fact is that this is not true. They were dearly won for us only a few short centuries ago and they were dearly preserved for us in the days just past. And there are large sections of the world today where these rights are denied as a matter of philosophy and as a matter of government.

We cannot assume that the struggle is ended. It is never-ending.

Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty. It was the price yesterday. It is the price today, and it will ever be the price.

The characteristics of the American people have ever been a deep sense of religion, a deep sense of idealism, a deep sense of patriotism, and a deep sense of individualism.

Let us not blink the fact that the days which lie ahead of us are bitter ones.

May God grant that, at some distant date, on this day, and on this platform, the orator may be able to say that these are still the great qualities of the American character and that they have prevailed.

Source: David F. Powers Personal Papers, Box 28, "Faneuil Hall, Boston, MA, 4 July 1946."  
John F. Kennedy Presidential Library.