

California University of Pennsylvania Remarks for Constitution Day – Stephen V. Russell

Ethics in Government Forum, September 17, 2014 Duda Building Room 303 10 a.m. and 11 a.m.

PRESIDENTIAL RHETORIC: ITS ZENITH AND NADIR IN SHAPING GOVERNMENT ETHICS

First, let me thank Dr. Blumberg for inviting me to be a member of this distinguished panel. Ever since Senator Robert Byrd of West Virginia attached in an appropriations bill (2004) that schools receiving public funding honor our Constitution with educational programs, Cal U has been in the forefront of that effort to celebrate the day – September 17.

In a message to the Congress April 27, 1961, President John F. Kennedy wrote the following:

“No responsibility of government is more fundamental than the responsibility of maintaining the highest standards of ethical behavior by those who conduct the public business. There can be no dissent from the principle that all officials must act with unwavering integrity, absolute impartiality and complete devotion to the public interest. The principle must be followed not only in reality but in appearance; for the basis of effective government is public confidence, and that confidence is endangered when ethical standards falter or appear to falter.”

On May 5, 1961, the President signed Executive Order 10939 “to provide a guide on ethical standards to government officials”

Only a few months before, President-elect Kennedy had quoted the standard set by Puritan John Winthrop, who in 1629 was chosen as the first governor of the proposed Massachusetts Bay Colony. On the deck of the Arbella in 1630 during the voyage to the New World, he told his thousand shipmates as they faced the daunting prospect of establishing a government on a new and perilous frontier: “We must always consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill – the eyes of all people are upon us.” Kennedy gave the phrase currency. Many of his successors would echo this City-Upon-the Hill metaphor. President Ronald Reagan lifted the phrase intact from Winthrop several times, most memorably in his bid for a second term in 1984 and in his 1989 Farewell Address.

Ever since Theodore Roosevelt ushered in the modern presidency in 1901, American presidents have led the way in emphasizing ethical government. In his rhetoric, each chief executive has indicated his genuine belief in the country’s capacity to achieve its highest aspirations. To succeed, the President must build a “politics of belief” within his constituency, a political consensus, in order to maintain the public trust. Our history has shown that high rhetoric can carry a presidential candidate to victory at the polls. It can sustain a country through the depths of depression and war, and even more recently through the horror of the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Theodore Roosevelt demonstrated the power of the presidency when he mounted what he called his “bully pulpit” to move the American people to great heights of patriotism and national service. Roosevelt taught lessons in ethical pursuit: he ignited the Progressive Era by curbing the power of corporate America, preserving our spacious land’s natural beauty, and making the United States an international player, not for conquest but to set an example to the world of a better way of conducting

government. "My problems are moral problems, and my teaching has been plain morality," accords the Rough Rider of San Juan Hill. TR reminded the country that to be successful a national figure was required to restore ethics in public affairs – precisely the higher purpose that distinguished America from other nations. To this day, and especially in politics, we continue to debate and struggle with what TR initiated. Confidence in our government – and in our Presidents – was strong in the early twentieth century, especially in the two Roosevelt's, TR and FDR. Recall Teddy's "Man in the Arena" speech:

"It is not the critic who counts; not the man who pints out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds, who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at worst, if he fails, at least falls while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat." (From TR's remarks at the Sorbonne, Paris, France April 23, 1910)

Teddy Roosevelt sought to lead the nation and the world toward a more secure and peaceful future. He rekindled a sense of national self-worth. Inspiration appeared to be in the Roosevelt bloodline with cousin Franklin D. Roosevelt's confidence that the presidency was "pre-eminently a place of moral leadership" taking America through a depression and world war. Forty years later President Ronald Reagan modeled the jaunty confidence exuded by his childhood hero FDR. Moreover, those preaching presidents with their moral certainty had the conviction of warriors at Armageddon battling for the Lord.

Like TR, Woodrow Wilson viewed presidential power as a means of improving the moral life of the nation. His broad agenda included reducing poverty and disparities of wealth, protecting the weak from exploitation, broadening democracy by weakening the grip of political machines, and teaching the world's nations "to elect good men" and avoid war through an international league practicing collective security. His expression of the "civic duty" struck resonant chords with Americans tired of selfish politicians and eager to restore traditional beliefs in government as a noble enterprise. President Wilson promised a renaissance of public spirit, a reawakening of sober public opinion, and a revival of the power of the people.

Voters took President Wilson at his word. His speeches – which were described as so lyrical they could be danced to stirred the country as few American presidents had. He declared: "This great people is in love with the realization of what is equitable, pure, just and of good repute." His was a vision of an America where the leader reflected the people's needs and wishes, a government once more "of the people, by the people, and for the people." As World War I president, Wilson had a vision in twentieth century politics that has no equal for inspiring greater hope of human advance or done more to secure a president's reputation as a great leader than Wilson's peace program of 1918-19.

While some have reached the zenith of presidential rhetoric, others reached the nadir. This has been true even within a presidential term – Lyndon B. Johnson and George W. Bush are examples. Vice President Johnson assumed the office upon the tragic assassination of President Kennedy on November

22, 1963. Johnson reached his crescendo early in his partial term, with his high rhetoric and savvy, wily politicking in seeing through the passage of President Kennedy's Civil Rights Act, signed on July 2, 1964. But Vietnam soon took his attention, and dissipated the goodwill he had established, leading finally to his withdrawal from the 1968 presidential election, Johnson's nadir. Ethics in government took a severe blow when Senator J. William Fulbright of Arkansas spoke of the "credibility gap" created by the mistrust of the Johnson administrations prosecution of the Vietnam War.

Years later George H.W. Bush (Bush 41) and his son George W. Bush (Bush 43) both had high rhetorical ethical moments when they were President of the United States. Bush 41 with his response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait; Bush 43 in his response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Concerning the Persian Gulf War in August 1990, Bush 41 told a joint session of Congress, "In the life of a nation, we're called upon to define who we are and what we believe. Sometimes these choices are not easy. But today as President, I ask for your support in a decision I've made to stand up for what's right and condemn what's wrong, all in the cause of peace."

Bush 43 delivered a superb speech expressing the country's resolve in the face of this unprecedented crisis on the evening of the day of the 9/11 attacks. This was a key moment in history to win the worldwide war of freedom versus terrorism. But this zenith in George W. Bush's presidential tenure too soon became his low point. After the invasion of Iraq and the failure to find "weapons of mass destruction," the Middle East was destabilized which spawned new breeds of terrorism.

Both Bushes employed the "City-Upon-the-Hill" concept, Bush 41 in his "thousand points of light" and Bush 43 when he pursued the war on terrorism as a moral response, a mission blessed by God that the rest of the world would join in. America was targeted for attack, Bush said, because "we are the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world. And no one will keep that light from shining."

Successful presidents are candid in responding to the issues of both their victories and defeats. President Kennedy, for example, didn't dissemble his responsibility for the fiasco of the Bay of Pigs incident and errors in his administration. "Victory has a thousand fathers, but defeat is an orphan." This candor served President Kennedy well in crisis management.

President Kennedy made a concerted effort to make ethics in government high priority as addressed in my opening. His message to Congress on April 27, 1961, addressed "conflict of interest legislation and the general problems of ethics in government." Among the Presidents concerns, he listed gifts designed to influence official conduct, employees of the government transferring official status into private gain, and outside employment incompatible with government employment. Upon taking office, President Kennedy faced an atmosphere of businessmen in collusion and unions associated with organized crime. There were television quiz show scandal and fixed athletic contests. This milieu concerned the president, and he was intent upon raising the moral tone.

President Kennedy expressed his moral outrage in scolding the United States Steel Corporation for raising prices, confronting the audacity of the Soviet Union in the Cuban Missile Crisis, and in his June 1963 televised Civil Rights speech, his greatest presidential address:

“One-hundred years of delay have passed since President Lincoln freed the slaves, yet their heirs, their grandsons, are not fully free. They are not yet freed from the bonds of injustice; they are not yet freed from the social and economic oppression. And this nation, for all its hopes and all its boasts, will not be fully free until all its citizens are free.”

The President asked that the Civil Rights Act be passed “not merely for reasons of economic efficiency, world diplomacy and domestic tranquility – but above all, because it is right.” President Kennedy came to symbolize in death a period of comfort, truth, trust, and the calm before the storm in presidential leadership.

It is ironic that it is after the assassination of President Kennedy that America lost trust in American leadership: Vietnam, Kent State, Watergate, a first and so-far only presidential resignation, the malaise of the 1970s (oil shocks/energy crisis, inflation/interest, imperial presidency), Ira-Contra, a presidential impeachment, and the lost opportunity of 9/11 to reshape a new world order.

The lessons learned are that presidents who practice candor and have no hidden agenda, who are devoted to serve the American people, will be the most successful stewards of the American experience. Distinguished historian Robert Dallek maintains that presidents and public alike should not overlook the extent to which public support for the chief executive has depended on confidence in commitment to telling Americans the unvarnished truth. As Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., chronicler of the Kennedy presidency in *A Thousand Days*, reminds us, “The best leadership in a democracy will get rid of cant and hypocrisy.

As Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “Wise men pierce this rotten diction and fasten words to visible things; so that picturesque language is at once a commanding certificate that he who employs it is a man in alliance with truth and God.”