



DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

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REMARKS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY BY JOHN A VOLPE, SECRETARY OF TRANSPORTATION, AT THE BOYS' TOWNS OF ITALY FOR ABRUZZI DINNER, AT THE COMMODORE HOTEL IN NEW YORK CITY, NEW YORK, MAY 9, 1969

I hope that all of you here tonight will pause occasionally and in your mind's eye, look to the East -- across the ocean -- to the rocky hills of Abruzzi. I have seen first-hand what Boys' Towns of Italy means -- what Father Carroll has done. In past years I have been fortunate enough to have made four separate trips to the beautiful country of our forebearers -- most recently in 1966. Because of your generosity tonight, a bunch of youngsters there have bigger smiles, better meals, and a brighter outlook. Certainly, nobody here tonight needs to be convinced of the beauty and worth of providing an orphan child with those most precious gifts of love and a home. That's God's work and we know its value instinctively. But there is more to a Boys Town than this. There is another dividend that is of equal value.

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When we give to a charity, we grow. We think a little more about those who receive. We are joined to them; we have something at stake. Because we give, we have a new interest, we are more curious. We are, in fact, more alive and we have new enthusiasm.

This has been my experience with my work in the Boys' Towns of Italy. It has given me excitement and satisfaction. I, the contributor, am really a debtor. Try it and you'll see.

I am sometimes a little saddened when I attend certain of these meetings of various Italian-American societies. We join together because of a common heritage and a common love. But in our talks in the corridor before dinner and in our jokes and kidding later the subjects are seldom Italy or the problems of Italian-Americans. Business -- sports -- travel -- the 1969 cars -- the stock market. If anybody were to overhear us, we would sound just like any other American group.

I note, too, with the passage of time that the average age increases. If there is dancing, we are big on the waltz and fox trot -- but not very strong on the twist and the monkey. And what's that other awful thing -- the bugaloo? The kids are not with us much any more.

Perhaps the best way to understand this is by observing that most of the members of the Sons of Italy are grandfathers -- and at the other end of the scale are our youngsters -- we accept it that they don't speak Italian -- but the fact is most of them can't even read aloud from the menu in an Italian restaurant.

But if all this is a matter of regret and sorrow to some, it is to me a matter of pride and delight -- this is what I have worked for all my life!

All of us may look with varying emotions to this transition. That is not important. It is important, however, to realize that we Italian-Americans have a special story to tell. And that story is -- to use that silly and arrogant word -- relevant. I prefer to think that in the resolution of the difficulties our nation faces today there are very few things in the human story that are not relevant.

I cannot speak for you but I suspect that there is in the experiences of most people here -- and in my own -- a common theme.

WV

I was raised in a small town in Massachusetts. Our neighborhood was not the best one in town. I guess, in fact, it was one of the poorer ones. The houses were old and they often needed paint. And the neighbors...they were all Italian-Americans, too. As youngsters, we, of course, spoke English, but I suspect it had much of the music and lilt of our parents' native Italian. And we had our own grocery store -- and our own church. We were, in every sense of the word, as they say today, a minority group. And I suppose if one of our moderns were able to go backwards in time and visit my old neighborhood, he'd be astounded and probably start proposing government programs. But I want to note here there was on that street more love and laughter -- more friendship and community feeling -- than in any neighborhood I ever knew.

And if we were a minority, we didn't let it stop us. The good people of Massachusetts were too fine to permit discrimination. At the same time, I think it was harder for an Italian-American to get ahead. If someone had said in those days that we would see one of us be selected Governor of the State -- or that one of our sons would captain a Harvard football team, we would have laughed at him.

But some of us would have only been laughing on the outside because deep in our hearts we had tremendous faith in the American dream of freedom and opportunity. We had hope -- we were confident that we would each of us be given the opportunity to realize our potential. We were always looking to the future.

That was more than forty years ago and time has passed. And the dream has been realized. I am humble and grateful.

But there are those today who say this American dream is no longer relevant. The great opportunities are gone...the individual is powerless...

The first time I read of this attitude I was not angry -- but astonished -- absolutely stunned. For if ever there was a difference of opinion -- a firm disagreement on every score -- it is the difference between my version of the future -- and that publicized by some of our young people today. For my part, I see the future as one continuing chain reaction of tremendous opportunities in every field of human endeavor. There will be shortages -- but, then, as now, they will be shortages of skills, not shortages of jobs. It will be a question of opportunities in search of talent.

Many of us are disappointed and angry with the attitudes of our college young people -- as they appear in the columns of the newspaper or on the screens of our television sets. For my part, I have no patience with these college students who seize university buildings. They seek to destroy the college. They want to put an end to institutions which -- throughout the history of civilized man -- have been the source of all that is worthwhile. They are, furthermore, so self righteous that they consider it proper and just that a handful of students can deny the right to get an education to thousands of others. I say "Shame on them, and shame on their parents for tolerating such behaviour!"

But on reflection we need not despair. Somewhere in some run down neighborhood -- or in a not very fancy boarding house at the edge of the campus is a youngster hard at work. He comes from a minority group -- perhaps he's Black -- or perhaps he's from Dublin, or from Firenze, Roma, Napoli, or even Abruzzi. Wherever he's from, he's full of determination and courage. We don't hear much about him. He never shows up in the protest meetings -- or carries a sign -- or seizes a college building. He's just as idealistic as his fellow students -- and probably just as misguided -- but he's too busy working and studying. He's preparing himself to serve. Fifteen years from now he'll be a leader. He'll be producing and he'll be contributing. For him, the American dream is just as real and just as fresh today as it was fifty years ago.

This is the source of my confidence in the future. For there is just not one of these youngsters. There are millions of them. And they are coming along and they are going to shape the future. It will be the best ever.

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