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REMARKS OF TRANSPORTATION SECRETARY JOHN A. VOLPE BEFORE
THE CABINET, CABINET ROOM, WHITE HOUSE, APRIL 15, 1969,
10:30 A. M.

I have been concerned -- as you have, Mr. President -- and as have all my colleagues in the Cabinet -- with reports that have appeared in the press attacking our administration's efforts in civil rights and equal opportunity programs.

Several erroneous accounts in the papers and on radio and TV have -- in past weeks -- given the impression that our administration is not doing our job in equal opportunity in accordance with the laws under which we operate; that we have not done this with great dedication.

While nothing could be further from the truth, I submit that we must not only perform in the area of equal opportunity -- we must make it clear and evident to the Nation that we are so performing.

We have had civil rights legislation and executive orders on the books since the 1860's. We have made a special effort since 1957. It is a bipartisan effort. Yet more needs to be done.

As you have said, Mr. President, "what remains is to give life to what is in the law." You and I know that we are giving life to this commitment. We have the determination, we have the leadership, and we will provide the actions to demonstrate that our administration can and will meet this challenge.

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Not only must we take continued effective executive leadership, but if we are to make equal opportunity a fact as well as an inspiring phrase, the general public, the Negro community, and the mass communications media must be made aware of our intentions and our actions.

To this end, Doctor Moynihan is preparing a special civil rights message for the President. I am hopeful that our discussion this morning will contribute to this effort.

Mr. President, it is a fact that for almost the past thirty years each President has promulgated at least one executive order on this subject. The equal opportunity programs of the Federal Government have been gradually -- very gradually -- strengthened as a result, yet today we are criticized by civil rights leaders and the news media for alleged confusion, divided counsel and shifting zones of responsibility.

Mr. President, I respectfully recommend that you consider issuance of a comprehensive executive order encompassing all Federal equal opportunity programs clearly assigning responsibility and authority.

Let's take a look at some current programs of the Executive Branch. Equal opportunity in Federal Government employment is covered by Executive Orders 11246 and 11375 with leadership responsibilities vested in the Civil Service Commission.

The same executive orders cover the employment practices of direct Federal contractors and Federally-assisted construction contractors and provide for overall coordination by the Secretary of Labor.

Nondiscrimination in Federally-assisted activities is covered by Title 6 of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 with Executive Order 11247 charging the Attorney General with Government-wide coordination.

Fair housing is one of the primary goals of the Civil Rights Act of 1968. Here the Department of Housing and Urban Development is the focal point.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 provided for the establishment of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission to assure nondiscrimination in private employment.

Our general clearing-house responsibilities and powers of review and overview are performed by the Commission on Civil Rights established by the Civil Rights Act of 1957, under our late and beloved President Eisenhower.

It seems we have a great deal of diffused authority but the exercise of this authority is scattered among commissions, divisions, and offices.

Again, we must "give life to what is the law." But who has the final authority? Where can we go for guidance? Are all these resources of talent and time being spent effectively? Perhaps they are. I merely raise the question.

We know we have a strong commitment to the spirit as well as the letter of the law of the land. What we must also have is a clear policy and clear lines of authority to implement that commitment.

Too often we have thought that we could just pass laws and guarantee justice, assure an even break. This is not so -- civil rights alone are not enough. We need civil opportunity, a recognition that man and work are inseparable in our society. A man without a job, without an even chance to make it on his own ability, is not a man in this country. The American ethic is that a man is what he does. It is his success on the job that provides his identity, his dignity, and the respect of society at large.

This administration must and will prove by clear and convincing action, using all of its just powers, that it means business. By continuing our strong actions in the area of equal opportunity -- and by making that commitment understood by the American people -- we in the Federal Government will, as you have stated, Mr. President, take the lead and set the example for private industry to follow. We have both the social necessity and the legal authority to act.

There are those, of course, who say that getting this job done will require millions, yes billions, of Federal dollars.

Recently, I was privileged to visit a training site in Connecticut for 50 hard-core unemployed and underemployed young men. This project had been set up through the efforts of the Connecticut Department of Community Affairs, the International Union of Operating Engineers, with the support of contractors who loaned equipment for the project of rebuilding a small airstrip.

These fifty young men who had very dim prospects in life, were given a chance to learn about operating graders, bulldozers, cranes and other heavy equipment in twelve short weeks. I marvelled at their demonstration of their skills. I have used such machines myself -- and I can tell you, I was impressed.

The instructors were members of the union. Approximately one-half of these young men will receive their full journeymen's card as Operating Engineers, and have already had employment offered to them at from five to six dollars an hour. The other half will be rated as apprentices at slightly lower wages. More than 40 of these young men are Negroes.

The best part of this program was that there was not one single Federal dollar involved -- it is a project combining the resources of labor, management and state government.

(I might point out that at the same time another fifty men -- employed in low-level jobs -- were benefitting from a skill-upgrading program underwritten with M-D-T-A funds.)

Training is clearly the key to equal opportunity and much more needs to be done in this area.

People after all are the fundamental resource, both morally and materially. The cost of wasting human resources is enormous. It cuts our productivity. It has never been clear to me why we permit the unemployment rate of non-whites to persist at a level of about 100 percent higher than whites.

This is an unconscionable injustice and it hurts everybody when we need manpower with the potential for a real contribution to the economy.

In construction, the field I know best, we must expand the work-force by 500,000 people over the next ten years to meet the demand for skills and to replace those who retire. Only massive training programs can hope to provide such a reservoir of skill and talent. And I am confident that our administration will see to it that this talent gets a chance to show its mettle.

Gentlemen, I don't think our nation has much time left to meet this challenge.

I raise the question as to whether the previous administration should have abolished the President's Council and the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity without substituting an equivalent focal point for leadership and direction in equal opportunity in the Executive Branch.

I recognize the enormity of this problem, and respectfully suggest, Mr. President, that either a subcommittee of the Urban Affairs Council or a special task force be appointed by you -- that it be charged with the responsibility of reviewing all our equal opportunity programs and make recommendations for the coordinating force which appears to be lacking today.

The recommendations of either of these bodies might include the promulgation of an executive order which would establish clear lines of responsibility in this area. I would hope that either group would consider the views of all the Federal agencies involved as well as the responsible views of interested minority groups.

Gentlemen, I know -- as you do -- that our administration recognizes fully the problems we face in securing equal opportunities for all our people. On too many occasions our top associates in each of our departments may have found it difficult, or may have felt that the task of providing equal opportunity was burdensome and required extra effort.

I am hopeful that all our people will follow the President's directives and our own commitment so that equal opportunity will become a goal at all levels and not just a fine-sounding phrase.

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