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NATIONAL EMPLOY THE HANDICAPPED WEEK KICK-OFF
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I'd like to thank everyone for all you're doing to promote the objectives which form our common agenda during this, National Employ the Handicapped Week. The agenda may be common to us all. But the men and women charged with its attainment are a decidedly uncommon lot. There are few occasions on which the innate pride I feel in the DOT family is any greater than it is this morning. Coming from North Carolina, I hope you'll forgive me for quoting my home state's most famous man of letters. To most of us, Thomas Wolfe is known as the author of "Look Homeward, Angel" and the man who warned that "you can't go home again." But there's another line attributed to Wolfe, one which to me sums up the essence of what you and I are here for, not just today, but every day we report to work.

"If a man has a talent," he wrote, "and learns somehow to use the whole of it, he has gloriously succeeded, and won a satisfaction and a triumph that few men ever know."

Change that to read "a man or woman" and you have the heart of what it is that sets this country apart. Whatever else may divide us, we Americans believe in talent as the yardstick by which one should be judged. That talent has nothing to do with the color of one's skin, or the color of one's collar. It is irrelevant to the blood in our veins, or the sum in our bank

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account. More recently, we have learned that it is also irrelevant to one's physical mobility, body structure, accident of birth or accident of later life.

In short, in a republic without walls, there should be no barriers placed in the way of those with physical handicaps. This is something which we in government must enforce, not only in the laws we write or the regulations we promulgate, but in the ideas we hatch and the daily actions we take toward one another.

If we believe in anything, we believe in our mission to make life a little nobler, a little more reflective of what Lincoln liked to call the better angels of our nature. We hold to the conviction that we can make a positive difference in the lives of others. We can set an example. And we can set a standard. We can raise the sights of millions otherwise blind to the needs of the disabled. And we can lift the once oppressive sense of limitation which forms by far the greatest impediment to self-realization at any level.

Handicaps come in many forms. To my way of thinking, the worst handicap of all is the inability to put yourself in someone else's shoes -- to see the world through his eyes -- to share his suffering and rejoice in his triumph. The worst handicaps are spiritual and not physical -- a hard heart, a callous mind, a short memory and a narrow field of vision. By challenging these handicaps wherever they exist, we can do much to further the cause of those whose campaign for dignity and usefulness must be our own.

As employees of this department, each one of us has a special interest in transportation and mobility in all its many forms. We are here to help people get where they want to go. That means much more than building safe highways or patrolling the seas or insuring the security of passengers in jumbo jets and compact cars. It means that we are committed as well to helping people realize their aspirations, to locate the talent Thomas Wolfe spoke of, to learn to use the whole of it, and thereby to know for themselves a rare and sublime satisfaction.

That is what this morning and this week are all about. I hope you will join with me in using them to educate ourselves, to heighten our awareness, deepen our sensitivity, and redouble our commitment to rolling away whatever barriers still remain to block the way for millions of our fellow citizens.

This week marks the one hundred and first anniversary of the birth of a great American woman, a woman in many ways handicapped by the circumstances of her early years. She was thought awkward as a girl, ungainly as an adolescent. Her home life was filled with tragedy, and her subsequent career had more than its share of controversy. But along the way, she learned to remake herself in the crucible of public service. And her example continues to inspire millions of others to surmount their own handicaps, whatever they may be.

"Perhaps the most important thing that has come out of my life," wrote Eleanor Roosevelt, "is the discovery that if you prepare yourself at every point as well as you can, with whatever means you may have, however meager they may seem, you will be able to grasp opportunity for broader experience when it appears. Life was meant to be lived, and curiosity must be kept alive. One must never, for whatever reason, turn his back on life."

This morning, and all this week, we tell ourselves that life is meant to be lived --to the fullest. Talent is to be used, to the greatest possible extent. And barriers are to be shredded, wherever they appear. That is the message of this ceremony. That is the essence of our mission, day in and day out. Together, I am convinced that we can carry our message and realize our mission. In doing so, we can become more than ever a reflection of all that is good in America.

Thank you very much.

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