

Remarks of former Governor of Mississippi William F. Winter

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As Prepared for Delivery

I cannot possibly express to you what this award means to me. Even as I acknowledge my difficulty in trying to justify it, I must tell you how grateful I am to receive it. Let me thank the members of the Selection Committee — especially Caroline Kennedy, Senator Ted Kennedy, Senator Thad Cochran and so many others —for this incredibly cherished honor. I am grateful to my family and friends so many of whom are here today for their loyal support in so many ways. I am especially honored by being placed in the company of these two distinguished state officials and the illustrious previous recipients of this award.

I take particular satisfaction in receiving an award that bears the name of one of my heroes, President John F. Kennedy.

In the 1950's as a struggling young politician in Mississippi I was looking for someone who could provide me with the inspiration to lift me above the bitter racist rhetoric that drove the politics of the Deep South at that time. I found that leader in John Kennedy, who helped free me and my fellow Southerners —black and white — from a racially segregated system that imprisoned all of us.

Just as John Kennedy inspired many of us young politicians in the 1950's and 60's, I believe that now a half-century later the measure of our future progress will be determined by our ability to inspire a new generation of young leaders.

But before we can appeal to the idealism of a young generation, we must do more to restore some of the idealism that went into the founding of our country in the first place and which we are in danger of losing. We must remind ourselves, even as we appeal to these young leaders, that we still live under a social contract that was written into the Declaration of Independence wherein we pledged to each other “our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor.” We must embrace that contract if we expect to inspire another generation to accept it.

We must see to it that these young leaders have a clear understanding of where we have come from and who we are as a people and how we got to where we are. There is not enough of this kind of teaching and learning going on. Too many of our most able and promising young men and women have only a passing acquaintance with the events and heroes who shaped our history.

This lack of emphasis on civic learning and historical background can be a fatal flaw in the capacity of these future leaders to lead. Without a knowledge of what has transpired before, they may well fall into the trap of repeating the old mistakes and ignoring the lessons that earlier generations paid so dearly to learn.

They must clearly understand that public and civic leadership is never an easy road to travel. There are a lot of stresses and strains these days. It is easy for us to get split up over issues about which many people feel deeply. There are full-time practitioners in politics and in the media and even in some church groups who fan the flames of emotion and discord. We must not let ourselves succumb to the tendency to demonize those who see things through different eyes, based usually on different life experiences. Sometime we have to walk in someone else's shoes for a while to understand where they are coming from.

My perspective is that the best way to overcome these stresses is through sharing experiences – through working with others – through recognizing that we are all in this together and that the elements that we have in common are so much greater than the things that divide us. By working with other people who may be different from us, the old barriers and the old stereotypes begin to fade away.

The greatest threat to our future as a nation does not lie so much in the streets of Baghdad as it does in the streets of our own small towns and great cities. If we become a country divided by race and class and where the gap between the rich and the poor continues to widen, we shall in the future pay a huge penalty in the quality of our lives and the stability of our economic and political system.

A democratic society cannot leave these problems to be solved by blind chance or individual impulse. We must develop and support leaders who can provide that vision.

All of us must be willing to speak out against bigotry and intolerance and injustice. We must seek to find worth in every person. That is how we pay our dues for the privilege of living in a free society. That is how we can pass on to the next generation a better country than the one we inherited.

I accept with humility and gratitude this award. I shall strive to be worthy of it.