

## President Reagan's Remarks to NCCJ

"Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, Reverent Clergy, Mr. Mayor, the Board Members and Officers of NCCJ and distinguished guests here at the head table.

Henry, I thank you very much for such an eloquent presentation of this cherished award. It is a deep personal honor to be the fourth President and the thirtieth American to receive the Charles Evans Hughes Gold Medal of the National Conference of Christians and Jews.

I notice from the program so far that Presidents outnumber Secretaries of State by 2 to 1 on the honor roll. (Laughter.) You received the Medal in 1973 and Al Haig was similarly honored in 1980. And by the way, Al asked me to pass along a short message. He said that he wanted you to know that yours has been a big hat to fill.

Now, I know what he meant by that. And I assure you, its a compliment.

And I also want to thank you for coming all the way from California to pinch hit for Walter Cronkite here tonight. I know from personal experience what it's like to tear oneself away from retirement on the West Coast. (Laughter.) One of these days we must get together at the ranch. Do you -- what's your preference, flat saddle or Western? (Laughter.)

The purpose of the Hughes Medal is to provide recognition for courageous leadership in governmental, civic and human affairs as you've been told tonight. So I can tell you that one can only accept it with a heartfelt sense of humility. And I do so in that spirit.

One thing is certain, for more than half a century now the Conference itself has lived up to that ideal, striving with courage, dedication and humanity to promote the ideals of brotherhood and tolerance that our nation was founded upon.

Last month, we all joined together to commemorate this spirit in observing Brotherhood Week. But for Brotherhood Week to take on its fullest meaning, it must live the year round in the heart of every citizen. This has always been the American ideal. And if it is one we've not always lived up to, the fact that generation after generation, century after century Americans have sacrificed to bring the ideal closer to reality says something good about that national spirit.

Hatred, envy and bigotry are as old as the human race itself, as too many tragic passages in the history of the world bear witness. What is new and daring and encouraging about the American experiment is that from the beginning men and women strove mightily to undo these evils and to overcome the prejudice and injustice of the old world in the virgin soil of the new.

Roger Williams struggled for freedom of conscience in New England more than a century before the Declaration of Independence. He likened a free society to a ship in which Catholics and Protestants, Jews and Moslems all sailed together subject to the same tides, winds, dangers and responsibilities, but each free to worship God in his own way. For as the Bible teaches, "Have we not all one father? Hath not

one God created us?"

George Washington, our first President, in a letter to the Jewish congregation of Newport, committed our newborn nation to a road that gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance.

The way has never been easy, and even our best efforts have left us far short of utopia. But generation by generation, year by year, we've come a long way down the road to a just society. It took a bloody tragic civil war to end the abomination of slavery. Thousands had to lay down their lives before that great evil could be undone, but it was undone and the descendants of slave owners and slaves alike today enjoy the same standing under law as free citizens of a free Republic.

The battle against discrimination still goes on and much remains to be done, but in a single generation, an entire nation recommitted itself to the cause of equal rights and used the full force of the law to ban once and for all racial bias in public education, in hiring and in the voting booth.

Nowhere does history offer a parallel to this vast undertaking. With all its flaws America remains a unique achievement for human dignity on a scale unequalled anywhere in the world.

I recall tonight another important chapter in the advance of brotherhood that took place during my lifetime. It began earlier in this century, in 1928. This conference was born out of it. Maybe I shouldn't admit it, but I was already a teenager at the time: that was the year of my high school graduation. We've come so far since then. Its hard to remember the wave of hatred and bigotry that swept the country, when for the first time, a Catholic won the Presidential nomination of one of our great national parties. But I remember and we all should remember the gallant fight that Al Smith waged against prejudice. Even in defeat, he struck a blow for tolerance and shamed the force of bigotry. It took another 32 years before a Catholic would be nominated again, but in 1960 John Kennedy proved that the American people had overcome the last vestiges of anti-Catholicism. It took time -- too much time -- but at

last the spirit of brotherhood prevailed.

Year by year, in spite of all the setbacks, America has been a place where an ever-growing variety of races and creeds has learned to live together. I remember being told, a few years ago, the story of a nationality day parade in one of our major cities. The Mayor of the city happened to be Jewish, his parents had come from Eastern Europe where, for centuries, Christian had persecuted Jew in a seemingly hopeless cycle of hatred and injustice. But on that day, in that American city, "His Honor" was leading the parade; and reaching the end of the march, he turned to one of the parade marshals and said: "Just think, in the old country, your grandfather might have been chasing my grandfather down the street with a gun." He says, "Here, we're leading the same parade together. Ain't America grand." (Applause.)

And you know -- it really is. We in America have been blessed with a sacred opportunity and a sacred quest. At times it may only seem like the imperfect reflection of a perfect dream, but to all whose ancestors came here as immigrants -- whether they were non-conformist Protestants fleeing persecution in the 17th century, Jews fleeing pogroms at the turn of the century, or the Asian boat people and Soviet dissidents of today -- all came to seek a higher goal than just mere physical survival. There was, and is, an element of moral principle in our national fiber that makes a difference. Americans are brothers not because we share the same past and the same ancestry, but because we share the same ideals and the same hopes for the future...

But there's more to brotherhood than government - inspired and administered charity. In recent years, too many of us have tended to forget that government can't properly substitute for the helping hand of neighbor to neighbor. And is trying to do so, government has, to a great extent, brought on the economic distress that mires us down in recession.

Out of this economic distress, however, can come opportunity, the opportunity to remember

(Continued on Page 29)

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