

Speech of
Senator Lyndon B. Johnson (D-Tex.)
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GENERAL

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W.B. Johnson
Senate
LBJA

Mr. President:

We are on the threshold of a New Year and a new Congress. We have a new Commander-in-Chief and soon a new administration will arrive to take over the leadership of our Government.

It is customary at such times for men to pause and reflect -- to weigh the past and take stock of the present -- to count the assets and debits of life -- and to plan for the future. As men act, so do political parties.

I do not believe that any man here will claim the wisdom to see into the future. We are meeting in all due humility to grapple with tremendous problems. We will -- almost surely -- strike out on new courses; step forth on untried paths. Where they will lead, we do not as yet know.

There is only one certainty. It is that the American people have sent us here to solve problems -- not to invent problems. They are looking to us for service to our country -- not just service to a partisan ideal.

We will, of course, face the issues of this Congress in the traditional American way -- as a majority and a minority. There will be divisions and they will be deep -- sometimes heated and possibly even bitter. That is part of our system of Government and it is a system that has worked well.

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As long as there are differences of opinion, there will be political parties. That is as it should be. Without political parties, there is no expression for the voices of dissent. And unless we hear the voices of dissent, we have no standard for determining what is true and what is just.

My Democratic colleagues have selected me as their representative in the Senate during this 83rd Congress. As a very junior member, I accepted that great honor in a spirit of prayer that I can merit their confidence. With their help and wise counsel, I will seek to discharge my duties to the limits of my ability.

My adherence to the Democratic Party is based upon deep and abiding conviction. It represents my lasting belief in the principles of the Democratic Party and in the men who have built it into one of America's greatest political organizations.

That conviction does not lead me to challenge the integrity or the good will of those who disagree with me. I have engaged in many a legislative battle and I have yet to question the good faith of any of my colleagues -- either in public debate or in my heart.

I believe that we disagree because we are honest men striving to advance the principles which we advocate. Men who seek only some personal advantage can usually find some way to stifle disagreement.

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In the 83rd Congress, my party will be in the minority. My Republican friends will learn from firsthand experience in the trials and tribulations that accompany power. We Democrats will experience the difficulties of living in the minority.

I am keenly aware of the temptations that beset a political party in the minority role. There is a tendency to obstruct -- to oppose merely for the sake of opposition -- to fight battles that have been settled. There is a desire to look to the past -- and not to the future.

I believe I can speak for every member of my party when I say that we will firmly reject such a course.

The Democratic Party did not grow to greatness merely because it set its face "against" the other political parties of America. It has flourished because through the years it has represented -- and still represents -- the hopes, the dreams, the aspirations of millions of Americans.

They have seen in it the voice of the people -- the average man whether he be from the North, the East, the South or the West. And, in their wisdom, they have seen fit to punish as well as reward that which is theirs.

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The initiative has now passed to the Republican Party. I hope they use it wisely and well. We do not live in an age where we can afford to fight merely for partisan advantage. I will not begrudge them the credit for anything they can do to serve our country and our people.

But we Democrats will continue to fight for the principles in which we believe. We will state our position as a united party when we can and as individuals on those occasions when we disagree among ourselves. I believe that as the days go by, we will find ourselves united on many more issues than will divide us.

Regardless of our position, however, it will not be based solely upon the label. We will examine not only the package but the contents of the package. And we will take our stand upon the basis of our convictions as to what is right for America.

This is not the time to discuss specific legislative proposals. But I think we all know the basic issues which trouble the hearts and minds of the American people.

They are interested in the questions of war and peace -- of life and death. They are seeking the course that will keep America strong and great; that will guide us safely through the perils of world dictatorship and tyranny.

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They want some assurances of the future for themselves and their children. They seek some stability in an age of unreason and fear. They yearn for peace and security which they are willing to purchase at the price of sweat and sacrifice though not at the cost of their liberties.

Upon these issues, the Democrats will seek to state their program in the days ahead. We will neither oppose merely for the sake of opposition, nor will we cooperate merely for the sake of cooperation.

We will examine the proposals of the incoming administration in the light of two standards -- Do they serve the interests of our country? Are there alternatives which would better serve those interests?

I have heard it said that the majority party exists to govern and the minority party to state the alternatives. I do not know whether that is an accurate statement of the situation.

But I do know that none of us in this chamber can go wrong by speaking out our honest feelings on the issues that arise. I do know that our guiding star must be the interests of our nation -- the needs of our people.

Partisanship is in the mainstream of American life. It affords that vital spark without which the machinery of democratic government would soon grind to a halt, to be replaced by other machinery which we have seen and which we do not want.

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But it must be partisanship based upon patriotic principles -- based upon a deep desire to serve and not just to rule. As Americans, as Senators, I believe that is the kind of partisanship which dominates this body. With it, we can achieve those goals the American people desire.

With it, our Democratic Party can serve the American people in the minority as it has served them in the majority. That is our aim; that is our pledge.

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