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REMARKS BY MRS. LYNDON B. JOHNSON
VISTA GRADUATION
ST. PETERSBURG, FLORIDA

I am delighted to be in St. Petersburg today to join in a program which is surely an exciting landmark in the history of our nation.

One of the most interesting things about the program to me is the name itself -- Volunteers in Service to America -- VISTA which says in one word what the program is.

You know, at our particular point of history, as we look back, this is a natural follow up to successive periods when our country confronted great human problems. In the early and middle nineteenth century we proved that, whatever diversities existed among us, we could function as one nation. In the later nineteenth century, we forged ahead an economic system strong and flexible enough to support an ever rising standard of living. In the twentieth century we recognized that we are, ineluctably, part of a complex and churning world, and swung our energies toward making that role a force for freedom.

Now we are boldly taking hold of an aspiration which men have known as long as there have been human beings -- the eradication of the bleak winter of poverty from the climate of a whole society.

Of all the economic opportunity programs being launched, none better expresses the spirit of the entire war against poverty than the VISTA operation.

I am pleased to meet you VISTA graduates in person and to see you at work -- as I will later in the day. You have already made your mark here in St. Petersburg. The petition of the people of Ridgcrest and Old Baskin's Crossing asking for you to stay is evidence of your success.

That -- in this brief time -- must be a special source of satisfaction. You men and women of all ages, from all parts of the country, from a variety of occupations, have chosen to interrupt your careers and sacrifice economic gain or give up the well-earned leisure of later years in order to help others.

America is many things. But above all -- more than any nation in the history of man -- ever since the first frontiersman picked up his musket to help protect a neighbor -- we have been a nation of volunteers. We have been a land in which the individual says -- My neighbor needs me. I will do something.

You are graduating today into a stirring tradition. You are making glow again the words of that most American of poets, Walt Whitman, who wrote for us:

"Behold, I do not give lectures or a little charity
When I give myself"

And I cannot think of a more appropriate place for this first VISTA graduation than here in the prosperous city of St. Petersburg.

The poor are not an island. Their needs toll out to the whole community.

The very fact that a man is poor means that he needs the help of others -- that he probably lacks the education and often the hopefulness to lift himself unaided. Changing his lot is a decidedly practical matter for everyone. Millions of the impoverished place a heavy drag on the whole society, cutting down the ability to purchase what we produce, diminishing tax revenues -- easy prey to delinquency and crime.

The intense interest of thriving St. Petersburg in the VISTA program is a heartening symbol of what is happening across the nation, where all of us are realizing that all the poor are the responsibility of all America.

I am struck, too, by the way the VISTA program has been working out in this community. Too often well-meaning people have approached a social problem with the assumption -- Let Washington draw up the perfect blueprint, complete down to the last comma.

But if the American experience has taught us any one fundamental lesson, it is this: There is no such thing as instant Utopia -- especially when the better world is conceived miles away from where it must take practical form.

Here in the St. Petersburg area, for some seven years -- long before we in Washington talked about a war on poverty -- you have been at work to broaden economic opportunity.

Your many progressive educational institutions have been deeply involved. At Ridgecrest you have created a laboratory for healthy social change. You have proceeded on the only sensible assumption -- that the national war against poverty must be fought in a thousand local battles -- in the slums of individual cities, on worn-out farms, in the hollows of Appalachia, in isolated Indian reservations-- wherever human beings stand with their noses pressed against the windows of our general affluence.

The result of your local progress is that VISTA has been able to function here as it should function everywhere in America. It has learned as much as it has taught. Its role has been not to bring full-blown answers but to join with others, tentatively, questingly, on the road to a workable solution.

So we begin here, begin superbly, I believe, with this VISTA graduating class. I am proud to have been asked to give out your diplomas. I am privileged to share the rush of feelings that must be going through you.

Much has been said about the difficulties you will encounter. But you and I know that you also have before you the richest experience of your lives. To be at the forefront of a great national effort is an opportunity which comes to few in a generation, and the personal satisfaction it brings is deep and lasting.

For many of you this experience will be transforming. You will be confirming, in the most personal way, the wondrous truth which too often is a mere phrase. You will know, as nothing else could make you know, that we are all of us brothers, every one of us to every one of us.

You and the thousands who will follow you will have another privilege. In some countries, and in our own too, voices have been raised to say that a land as rich as ours can only produce a mink-lined civilization, marked by a moral deadening and the frenetic pursuit of push-button luxuries, a split-level, and a sports car. By what you are doing, you make those voices just so many hollow noises.

You are reliving the fundamentals on which the nation was founded and by which it has grown great --

-- that success is an imperative to service, not an invitation to apathy --

-- that democracy means a human spirit which sweeps beyond mere laws --

-- that the United States is blessed not so much by its roaring furnaces, not so much by its abundant fields of grain, not even by space ships aloft, but by the national vision which calls upon us to use our resources so that every American can walk with head high in the tonic air of self-respect.

To all of you VISTA graduates, pioneers in a long and proud line to come, may I express my congratulations, my warmest best wishes, and -- let me add -- more than a bit of envy.

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