

FOR RELEASE AFTER 5:00 P. M.
MONDAY, OCTOBER 9, 1967

Office of the Press Secretary
to Mrs. Johnson

THE WHITE HOUSE

ADDRESS OF MRS. LYNDON B. JOHNSON
AT YALE POLITICAL UNION, NEW HAVEN,
CONNECTICUT, OCTOBER 9, 1967

When I received the invitation from John J. O'Leary -- a name no Democrat can resist -- to come and talk to the Yale Political Union about beautification, I was delighted to accept.

Delighted, and a bit apprehensive -- lest you expect me to be both oracle and orator. Unlike some of your other speakers, I have no Hollywood experience.

Apprehensive, too, about speaking to you across the generation gap. For I belong to the generation which thinks that when you "take a trip," you go on a barge down the Mississippi River.

Beautification is scarcely new here at Yale. The Nation's first Forestry School was founded here in 1900. And I must say, I'm a little surprised that more of you have not made use of that room with the intriguing name -- the Wildlife Library. Maybe its use will increase with the coming of Vassar.

Certainly beauty in America qualifies as a political issue. But I hasten to add that it is not a partisan issue. Our interest in protecting and restoring the Nation's beauty transcends party -- as witness my daily mail at the White House.

Not a week passes that I don't hear from hundreds of citizens seriously seeking answers and telling me about their own projects. Certainly, it is not the exclusive concern of old ladies in tennis shoes or puttering gentlemen in tweeds with a rose-cutting in their hands.

The word "beautification" doesn't really convey the full sweep of the concept. It embraces all these questions:

-- How can we rebuild the core of our cities?

-- How can we create new towns, pleasant and functional?

-- How can we bring order rather than chaos out of our highways and transit systems?

-- How can we provide parks and open space to let our cities breathe and our people relax?

-- How can we control the waste we pour into our air and water?

To me, in sum, "beautification" means our total concern for the physical and human quality of the world we pass on to our children.

The career and civic responsibility of every man in this room will be touched by this issue. Each of you -- and every "doctor, lawyer, merchant and chief" in America -- faces decisions about zoning, property taxes, and pollution control.

These are the questions which will determine the shape of our environment.

So we are really talking about a vital public issue which already concerns millions of citizens.

It involves engineers who have a social concern beyond mere technical skill.

It affects makers of throw-away cans and paper cups who look beyond a quick profit to the blight their products cause.

It inspires editors who know a crusade against ugliness is worthy of page one attention.

It arouses city planners and activists; poets and artists of the landscape.

It troubles office-holders and attorneys who are coping with it.

Even the Supreme Court has dealt with the issue in a unanimous decision in the case of Berman vs. Parker:

"It is within the power of the legislature," the Court decreed, "to determine that the country should be beautiful as well as healthy; spacious as well as clean; well balanced as well as carefully patrolled. The concept of the public welfare is broad and inclusive. . . . The values it represents are spiritual as well as physical, aesthetic as well as monetary."

All that is why the President in 1965 called the first White House Conference on Natural Beauty -- why he has put natural beauty high on the national agenda.

My own time and energy and thought on this matter have been largely devoted to the city where I live. 815,000 of us call Washington home -- but it is also a city that uniquely belongs to every American.

Since 1964, our small Committee for a More Beautiful Capital has been working throughout the city to demonstrate what concerned citizens can do.

We have boarded buses in front of the White House and set out to open our eyes to the city's needs. (That is something I hope you'll do when you go home -- look at your city with new eyes.)

I remember coming upon a ravine in the Northeast part of Washington. It was filled with rotting tires, junked refrigerators, discarded bricks -- all the debris of a careless civilization.

In a year's time that scene changed. Laurance Rockefeller provided the money to haul away forty truckloads of junk; to landscape and plant. Today, that gully is a park -- an outdoor living room where old people sit and young people play.

We began beautification with flowers, because somehow a splash of color is quickly seen and contagious. More than eighty small parks and triangles -- a legacy of L'Enfant -- formerly the habitat of litter and wild onions -- now bloom for three seasons each year. Next spring a million new daffodils will grace the Virginia entrance to the city.

We have learned that beautification requires both good landscaping and major surgery to cure social ills.

Today, the median age in America is 27; by 1975, in Washington, the median age will drop to 17.

I daresay this young urban generation now growing up is the first in America to be raised in a concrete culture -- a world of high-rise buildings, asphalt playgrounds, spreading freeways.

Who can determine the effect this concrete environment can have on a young mind?

In Washington, the public schools have long been the stepchildren of the city budget; they have had little, if any, money for landscaping and pleasant architecture. I remember standing in front of a school one day and counting 26 broken windows!

Our Committee in Washington was able to get private money for school landscaping projects -- to provide stark concrete structures with some relief -- a green space, a place to play.

Interestingly, the janitors tell me, vandalism has been sharply reduced.

In my generation, chances are, most Americans have a touchstone of natural beauty which they cherish in memory: a lake, a picnic spot, a summer retreat.

Such memories, with their power to restore, are essential. They are too valuable to be reserved only for vacations -- or only for the wealthy few.

This Nation is giving unprecedented attention to education -- to classrooms, and teacher training, and textbooks. And that's great! Yet the child spends only a third of his day in the classrooms. What is he learning from the other environments that touch him? What outlets does he have for his skills and energies?

Does it matter that the air around him is hazy and the water he sees says, "No Swimming." Does it matter if he has no place in which to be alone, to meditate?

Can this most abundant society not afford peace of mind and dignity for its inhabitants?

It was a Yale man -- the great scholar of the Dust Bowl era, Paul Sears who said,

"Why dream of escape to another planet, when our own would respond generously to kinder treatment?"

In my travels the past couple of years, I have seen examples of that "kinder treatment." They demonstrate that the arts and the sciences, civic conviction and old-fashioned pride, can overcome blight, decay -- and even traffic jams.

Let me tell you the tale of two cities in Minnesota. Both illustrate the beautification is good business.

In Minneapolis, a city of half a million people, businessmen have created a ten-block mall where the pedestrian is king -- with ample parking, trees, sculpture, fountains and benches for the weary shopper.

The project will bring new profits to the downtown rivals of suburban shopping centers.

Across the State, Montevideo, a town of 6000, faced the same old story: payrolls and entertainment were luring young folks to the city. But an energetic mayor inspired the town to paint, clean and plant Main Street. The new downtown atmosphere attracts customers from a three-county farm area.

The idea is working. When I asked a teenage girl if she wanted to stay in the little town, she quickly said, "Sure, Monty's gonna be cool!"

And what of the land beyond the city limits?

In California, along the wild and sweeping coast of the Big Sur, there is a scenic highway which, instead of ruining the landscape, enhances it. A few years ago, that road was doomed to become a freeway, roaring with trucks. Doomed, that is, until citizens who loved the scene went to their State legislature and secured legal status for their idea: the idea that improving highways need not mean destroying beauty.

They made the Big Sur route the first officially designated scenic highway in the nation. And today, this place where the hills tumble down to the Pacific, and the surf pounds the shore is a monument -- not only to nature's magic, but to man's intelligence and restraint.

Evidence if this widespread concern with our environment is all around us. In fact, coming to this town to talk about beautification is literally carrying coals to New Haven.

Here at Yale, some of the most advanced architecture in America is appearing. As a matter of fact, when I started working on a project very close to my heart, my husband's library, I came to New Haven, to study your Beinecke Library.

In an age that puts a premium in involvement, Yale students are deeply, creatively involved.

Just this past summer, Yale architecture students took their drafting pens down to a community that needed help: New Zion, Kentucky. There they designed a community center -- and they stayed to work with the townspeople to shape new patterns of hope for the town.

I read, not long ago, this judgment of a cynic:

"The National purpose of the United States, from the very beginning, has been to let everyone make as much money as he possibly can. If they found oil under St. Patrick's Cathedral, they would put a derrick smack in the center of the nave -- and nobody would give the matter a second thought."

I wish that cynic could meet Mr. Irwin Miller of Columbus, Indiana: Yale graduate, Yale trustee, capitalist -- and beautifier! He has taken the profits from his company and paid the fees of eminent architects -- to design the most breathtaking schools and churches and public buildings in this town of 25,000. That catalyst has created a contagion of local pride and citizen action.

And the most important thing is that he began right at home -- where the action should be. As he told me, "We felt if we couldn't lick the problems in a town of 25,000 -- they couldn't be solved anywhere."

Solving those problems across this land will require more than the efforts of businessmen and architects.

It is not enough, either, that a few "good souls" go to work.

The job calls for a rather dramatic commitment from every citizen -- particularly the well-educated and politically aware.

(It seems redundant to remind you that the concept of "country" is bracketed on this campus with God and Yale.)

Our challenge is not whetherto build, for no nation in history has had greater technical resources at its command. Nor is the question entirely one of money -- for our Nation's \$790 billion GNP gives us the means.

The challenge to America is how to grow -- with beauty and compassion for every life and its fulfillment.

If you are in the sciences, I hope you will apply their order to the environment. If you are in business or economics, I hope you will include beauty as part of the cost of doing business. If you are in the arts, I hope you will express their insight in the environment around you.

For the environment, after all, is where we all meet; where we all have a mutual interest; it is one thing that all of us share. It is not only a mirror of ourselves, but a focusing lens on what we can become.

We face an urgent and arresting question, a question which goes right to theheart of our aims as a Nation:

Can a great democratic society generate the energy to plan and build projects of order and beauty? Or does democracy, after all, mean the lowest common denominator?

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Most of the great cities in history; most, the great works of beauty, were the creations of autocratic societies. The Caesars built Rome. Paris was shaped by the kings of France and the Empire. Vienna is the handiwork of the Hapsburgs -- and Florence of the Medici.

Our wealth surpasses theirs -- combined. Will our taste and intelligence be as great?

The answer we give will reveal our quality as a civilization. That answer will unfold, I think, in the next two decades -- which are yours.

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