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Speeches

Edmund S. Muskie Papers

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**Remarks by Senator Edmund S. Muskie at Rivier College
Commencement**

Edmund S. Muskie

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RIVIER COLLEGE COMMENCEMENT

LAST TUESDAY NIGHT, MORE THAN A THOUSAND MILES AWAY FROM RIVIER COLLEGE, THERE WAS ANOTHER COMMENCEMENT AT A SMALL HIGH SCHOOL IN DREW, MISSISSIPPI. AT THE END OF THE CEREMONY, WHERE THE GRADUATES WERE TOLD TO "MAKE AMERICA A BETTER PLACE," EIGHTEEN YEAR OLD JOETHA COLLIER WAS KILLED BY A SNIPER IN A PASSING CAR.

NO ONE KNOWS WHY MISS COLLIER WAS SINGLED OUT TO DIE.

THERE WERE ONLY TWO THINGS ABOUT HER THAT MOST PEOPLE NOTICED AFTER SHE WAS MURDERED ON TUESDAY NIGHT. SHE WAS CLUTCHING HER DIPLOMA IN HER LEFT HAND--AND SHE WAS BLACK. WHEN HER MOTHER HEARD THE NEWS, SHE RECALLED HER DAUGHTER'S DETERMINATION TO FINISH HIGH SCHOOL AND HER OWN EFFORTS TO HELP. SHE TOLD A NEWSMAN, "IT'S BEEN SO HARD."

BUT JOETHA COLLIER MADE IT--ALL THE WAY TO GRADUATION DAY. AND NEXT FALL, SHE WAS SUPPOSED TO GO TO MISSISSIPPI VALLEY STATE COLLEGE. NOW SHE IS DEAD--AND SO IS THE ONCE DISTANT DREAM WHICH WOULD HAVE BECOME A REALITY FOR HER ONLY FOUR YEARS AFTER YOUR COMMENCEMENT.

HERE IN THE SUNSHINE AND THE GREEN HILLS OF NEW HAMPSHIRE--
HERE, WHERE THE SIDEWALK BLOODSTAIN THAT MARKS HER KILLING SEEMS
SO FAR AWAY--HERE, AND ON THIS HAPPY DAY, WE MUST ASK SOME SAD
QUESTIONS ABOUT JOETHA COLLIER---AND ABOUT OUR OWN COUNTRY.

WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO AMERICA--WHEN SOME MEN DECIDE TO TAKE
OUT THEIR HATE ON TEENAGERS AND CHILDREN?

WHAT IS WRONG IN AMERICA--WHEN DR. MILTON EISENHOWER WARNS
A SENATE COMMITTEE THAT THE RADICAL LEFT AND THE RADICAL RIGHT
ARE ARMING THEMSELVES WITH GUNS AND BOMBS?

WHAT WILL BE LEFT OF THE AMERICAN FUTURE--IF WE MUST CONTINUE
TO ENDURE THE RANDOM AND WANTON KILLING OF INNOCENTS?

IN A VERY REAL SENSE, IT IS EASY TO IGNORE THOSE QUESTIONS
BECAUSE THEY SHOULD BE ASKED SO OFTEN. IT IS ALMOST LIKE SEEING
THE VIET NAM WAR ON THE TELEVISION NEWS--AFTER A WHILE, THE NUMBERS
OF THE BODY COUNT BEGIN TO SOUND LIKE ^{THE} ~~TO~~ NUMBERS OF THE WEATHER
REPORT. THERE HAVE BEEN SO MANY JOETHA COLLIER AND SO MUCH VIOLENCE
IN AMERICA, THAT THERE IS NOW A RITUAL OF REACTION FOR EACH NEW ATROCITY.

PUBLIC FIGURES EXPRESS THEIR CONDOLENCES AND THEIR OUTRAGE.

THE LOCAL POLICE AND THE FBI INVESTIGATE.

SOMEONE IS USUALLY CAUGHT--AND SOMETIMES EVEN CONVICTED.

THE STORY IS ON PAGE 1, THEN PAGE 9, AND FINALLY IT IS NOT MENTIONED AT ALL. BURIED IN A PAST WE CANNOT CHANGE AND WANT TO IGNORE, THE LAST TRAGEDY IS FORGOTTEN UNTIL THE NEXT TRAGEDY SHOCKS US AGAIN.

SURELY, WE CAN MUSTER A BETTER RESPONSE TO RECURRING TRAGEDY THAN RECURRING NUMBNESS.

SURELY, WE CAN FIND A LARGER CONSOLATION THAN THE NARCOTIC THOUGHT THAT IT WILL ALL BE OVER WHEN THE LATEST VICTIM IS BURIED.

OUR DUTY--AS AMERICANS AND AS HUMAN BEINGS--IS TO MAKE SURE THAT IT IS NEVER ALL OVER--UNTIL WE CAN BE SURE THAT IT WILL NEVER HAPPEN AGAIN.

OBVIOUSLY, WE CANNOT EXPECT TO ERASE ALTOGETHER THE STAIN OF VIOLENCE. BUT WE CAN AT LEAST, BY OUR WORDS AND OUR DEEDS, BEGIN TO REBUILD PEACE IN THIS NATION.

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IN RECENT DAYS, THERE HAS BEEN A STRIKING AND ENCOURAGING SIGN OF HOPE. SOME LITTLE NOTED AMERICANS--SOME OF THE ORDINARY PEOPLE WHO REALLY COUNT--HAVE SERVED CLEAR NOTICE THAT THEY WILL NOT ACCEPT OR PERMIT THE SUBVERSION OF AMERICA'S SOUL BY VIOLENCE. LAST WEEK IN HARLEM, THEY SHOWED US THE SIMPLE DECENCY OF CARING ABOUT HUMAN LIFE.

TWO POLICEMEN--ONE BLACK AND ONE WHITE--HAD BEEN BRUTALLY GUNNED TO DEATH ON A PUBLIC STREET. THE NEWS OF THIS UNPROVOKED ATTACK STIRRED SPECULATION ABOUT THE REACTION OF THE HARLEM COMMUNITY. SOME COMMENTATORS HINTED THAT THE MURDERS REFLECTED THE NEIGHBORHOOD'S REAL ATTITUDE. BUT THE MEN AND WOMEN OF HARLEM HAD NOT READ THE COMMENTATORS. THEY LOOKED INTO THEIR CONSCIENCES AND MADE THE GRIEF OF THE PATROLMEN'S FAMILIES THEIR OWN.

MINISTERS PREACHED FROM THEIR PULPITS ABOUT THEIR CONGREGATION'S RESPONSIBILITY TO STAND AGAINST TERROR AND VIOLENCE.

CITIZENS CO-OPERATED WITH THE POLICE IN THE SEARCH FOR THE KILLERS. THEY ARE WATCHING THEIR STREETS AND THEIR PLAYGROUNDS AND THEIR APARTMENT BUILDINGS FOR A TRACE OR A CLUE.

HARLEM HAS TOLD ITSELF, ITS CITY, AND THE WORLD WHAT EVEN THE MOST NEGLECTED AMERICANS ARE REALLY LIKE. THEIR SOCIETY HAS DONE FAR LESS THAN IT SHOULD FOR THEM--BUT THEY ARE READY TO DO AS MUCH AS THEY CAN FOR THEIR SOCIETY.

THAT ALONE SHOULD OFFER US MORE HOPE FOR AMERICA'S SURVIVAL. BEYOND ALL THE PROGRAMMATIC SPECIFICS AND ALL THE COST ANALYSES, BEHIND THE SENATE BILLS AND THE DEBATE OVER DEFENSE SPENDING, WHAT WILL FINALLY MAKE THE CRUCIAL DIFFERENCE IS OUR FEELING FOR EACH OTHER. WE CALL OURSELVES AMERICANS. ARE WE READY TO GIVE THAT NAME AND GRANT ITS MEANING TO EVERY ONE OF THE TWO HUNDRED MILLION CITIZENS WHO SHARE THIS COUNTRY WITH US? ARE WE READY TO RESPECT THEIR DIGNITY THOUGH WE DISAGREE WITH THEIR VIEWS OR THEIR CONDUCT? ARE WE READY TO CARE ABOUT ANOTHER MAN'S LIFE AND ANOTHER MAN'S RIGHTS AS THOUGH THEY WERE OURS INSTEAD OF HIS?

I DO NOT KNOW HOW EVERY PUBLIC OFFICIAL WOULD ANSWER EACH OF THOSE QUESTIONS. I THINK I KNOW THE ANSWER OF AMERICA'S PEOPLE. I THINK PEOPLE ARE TIRED OF THE HATREDS AND THE PREJUDICES AND THE ASSORTED STUPIDITIES THAT HAVE DRIVEN US FURTHER AND FURTHER APART.

I THINK PEOPLE ARE ANGRY ABOUT THE ANGER WHICH INFLECTS SO MUCH PAIN
AND SUFFERING. I THINK PEOPLE--YOUR PARENTS AND MY FAMILY AND OUR
FRIENDS--WANT TO BELIEVE AGAIN IN THE COMMON ENTERPRISE WE CALL
AMERICA.

IN HARLEM AND NASHUA, IN SEATTLE AND LOS ANGELES, EVERY
INDIVIDUAL, EACH IN HIS OWN LIFE, CAN START TO MOVE IN A NEW DIRECTION.
UNDERSTANDING AND COMPASSION TOWARD OTHERS CAN TOUCH AND RESHAPE OUR
COUNTRY'S FUTURE. WE HAVE ALL HEARD THAT IN THE PAST--BUT WE HAVE
NOT DONE ENOUGH ABOUT IT IN THE PAST. BUT IN 1971, WE MUST NOT ONLY
HEAR BUT ALSO HEED THE VOICE OF OUR SHARED HUMANITY. THE PEOPLE OF
HARLEM LISTENED AND RESPONDED. NOW, FOR EVERY AMERICAN IN EVERY
SECTION, IT IS TIME TO USE THE THINGS THAT UNITE US TO OVERCOME THE
THINGS THAT DIVIDE US.

EVERY INDIVIDUAL MUST TRY--BUT INDIVIDUALS CANNOT SUCCEED ALONE.
GOVERNMENT, TOO, HAS A CRITICAL ROLE TO PLAY. AND IT CANNOT BRING US
TOGETHER MERELY BY ADOPTING THOSE WORDS AS ITS SLOGAN. WHAT NATIONAL
LEADERS SAY TO THE PUBLIC AND WHAT THEY DO WITH THEIR POWER CAN TIP
THE BALANCE FOR OR AGAINST THE STRENGTH OF OUR COMMON BOND.

① OUR LEADERS MUST STOP THE WAR IN VIET NAM--A WAR NO GENERAL CAN WIN AND FEW CITIZENS STILL SUPPORT. ONLY IN PEACE, CAN WE RESTORE THE FAITH OF ALL AMERICANS IN THE VITALITY OF THE AMERICAN SYSTEM.

② OUR LEADERS MUST INSURE A JOB FOR EVERY WORKER--TO END THE HUMILIATION OF RELIEF AND THE TRAGEDY OF UNEMPLOYMENT. ONLY IN A GROWING AMERICA, CAN WE MAKE WHITES AND BLACKS AND EVERY RACE PARTNERS IN ECONOMIC PROGRESS INSTEAD OF RIVALS FOR ECONOMIC SCARCITY.

③ OUR LEADERS MUST SPEND ~~OUR~~ OUR RESOURCES TO SAVE CITIES IN CRISIS FROM THE THREAT OF FINANCIAL AND SOCIAL COLLAPSE. ONLY IN CITIES WHICH ARE LIVEABLE AND SAFE, CAN WE LIVE WITHOUT FRUSTRATION, FEAR AND SUSPICION.

④ AND FINALLY, OUR LEADERS MUST WORK TO MAKE THE PROMISE OF RACIAL EQUALITY A REALITY FOR EVERY CITIZEN. ONLY IN JUSTICE, CAN WE SECURE A LASTING DOMESTIC TRANQUILLITY, FREE FROM THE TENSIONS WHICH HAVE WRACKED US IN RECENT YEARS.

ALMOST TEN GENERATIONS AGO, THE FIRST AMERICANS HAD THE COURAGE TO LAUNCH THE FIRST MODERN EXPERIMENT IN GOVERNMENT FOUNDED ON LIBERTY. THEIRS WAS A DIFFICULT AND HOSTILE TIME, ALL THEY HAD WAS A LITTLE COMMUNITY OF COLONIES OUT ON THE EDGE OF THE WORLD.

THEY WERE LOCKED IN STRUGGLE WITH A GREAT EMPIRE AND THEIR GREAT
IDEA WAS HANGING IN THE BALANCE. BUT THEY BELIEVED IN ONE ANOTHER,
WITH DANGER ON EVERY SIDE, THEY WROTE ABOUT THE INALIENABLE RIGHTS OF
MAN. THEN THEY TOOK THEIR DECLARATION AND PUT IT INTO PRACTICE EVEN
BEFORE THEIR INDEPENDENCE WAS FULLY WON.

OUR CHALLENGE AND OUR CHANCE IS TO MAKE AMERICA EQUAL TO THOSE
BEGINNINGS. FROM THE TIME WHEN WE WERE THE NEWEST NATION IN THE WORLD,
WE MUST RECLAIM THE FAITH THAT CAN KEEP US THE GREATEST NATION IN THE
WORLD. IT IS NOTHING MORE--AND IT IS NOTHING LESS--THAN A FAITH IN THE
CAPACITY AND FREEDOM OF THE INDIVIDUAL HUMAN BEING. GOVERNMENT MUST
GUARANTEE THE EXERCISE OF THAT FREEDOM AND THE OPPORTUNITY TO REALIZE
THAT CAPACITY. UNLESS OUR COUNTRY LIVES UP TO SUCH PRINCIPLES, WE WILL
NEVER BE ABLE TO LIVE TOGETHER.

I CANNOT HELP THINKING AS I SPEAK WITH YOU NOW OF THE
FUNDAMENTAL CHOICES YOU MUST SOON MAKE FOR ALL OF US. YOU WILL DECIDE,
AS MUCH OR MORE THAN ANYONE, WHAT SHAPE AMERICAN SOCIETY WILL TAKE.
YOU CAN CHOOSE, TO CARE, AS THE PEOPLE IN HARLEM HAVE.

OR YOU CAN SUCCUMB TO THE PRESSURES OF THIS TERRIBLY TROUBLED TIME
AND CHOOSE TO GIVE IN, DROP OUT, OR TURN ~~OFF.~~

TOO MANY IN YOUR GENERATION HAVE ALREADY TRADED AWAY THEIR
RESPONSIBILITY IN RETURN FOR THE BITTER PROMISE OF A HYPODERMIC NEEDLE,
OR A HALLUCENOGENIC PILL.

YOU CANNOT LET THAT HAPPEN TO YOU.

WE NEED YOU TOO MUCH--JUST AS WE HAVE ALWAYS NEED^{ED} THE YOUNG.

WHERE WOULD WE BE IN THE FIGHT FOR PEACE AND CIVIL RIGHTS AND PERSONAL
LIBERTY IF THE YOUNG HAD NOT PUSHED AND PRODDED US TOWARD A MORE DECENT
SOCIETY?

YOUR TASK NOW--IN OUR COMMUNITIES AND IN OUR NATION--IS TO MAKE
THE AMERICAN DREAM WORK. AND NO AMERICAN CAN DO THAT BY PURSUING THE
FALSE DREAMS HELD OUT BY DRUGS.

I AM CONVINCED THAT MOST OF YOUR GENERATION UNDERSTANDS THAT.

I AM CONVINCED THAT THE BEST YOUNG GENERATION WE HAVE EVER HAD
IS KEEPING ITS COMMITMENT TO OUR BEST CHANCE FOR CHANGE--FROM VIOLENCE
TO REASON--FROM DESPAIR TO HOPE--FROM WAR ABROAD TO PEACE AT HOME.

I AM CONVINCED THAT YOU WILL PERSEVERE, AS JOETHA COLLIER DID.

AND SO I WOULD LIKE TO END THIS COMMENCEMENT SPEECH WITH THE WORDS
SHE HEARD ON HER LAST DAY, HER COMMENCEMENT DAY: