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2-11-1972

Remarks by Senator Edmund S. Muskie at Memorial High School, Manchester, New Hampshire

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Recommended Citation

Muskie, Edmund S., "Remarks by Senator Edmund S. Muskie at Memorial High School, Manchester, New Hampshire" (1972). *Speeches*. 219.

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REMARKS BY SENATOR EDMUND S. MUSKIE
MEMORIAL HIGH SCHOOL, MANCHESTER N.H.
FEBRUARY 11, 1972

I want to speak to you about an issue that's related to today's news because I know you're interested. You've made that clear, you and high school seniors of the last six or seven years, as well as college students. And so I'd like to talk to you about it and something that happened yesterday and relate it, if I can, to you.

Within the past few days, indeed last week, Secretary of State Rogers accused me of undermining the national interest. A few days later, Mr. Haldeman, who is one of the President's chief aides in the White House, said that those of us who were critical of the war were guilty of "consciously aiding and abetting the enemy." And then yesterday Herbert G. Klein, who is President Nixon's communications director, said that I am—referring to me by name—am toying with the lives of both Americans and Asians by criticizing Nixon's Vietnam peace proposal. And these are just three of several attacks that have been launched by the Attorney General yesterday, by the chairman of the Republican National Committee, by the Republican leader in the Senate, the Republican leader in the House of Representatives, and other Republican Senators and Congressmen all across the board. And tomorrow, Lincoln's Day, I understand, is going to be used by Republican orators across the country for the same purpose. Why?

Well, because I made a speech, less than two weeks ago—early last week—in which I said our policy in Vietnam ought to be aimed at two objectives, two simple objectives. First, that we should set a definite date for the withdrawal of all our forces—Army, Navy, and Air—and that we should end all our bombing activity and other military activity in Indochina, dependent only upon the return of our prisoners of war and the safety of our troops as they pulled out. Secondly, that we should urge the government in Saigon to make a political accommodation with all of the elements of their society; because I did not believe the war could end until that kind of a political accommodation is made. And I did not believe that the American people would continue to support the war, either by our presence there or by our proxy after we leave.

Those two points of view, which I stated early last week, have provoked this onslaught of criticism and attack. Is it right to criticize government policy on the war? Does it contribute to sound public policy? Is it responsible for the President's opposition to raise questions about his policy? Well, I suggest that one answer to that question lies in Mr. Nixon's own attitude about the war and his right to criticize it before he became President. So I'd like to read to you some things he said about our policy in Southeast Asia before he became President, while he was a candidate.

He said, for example, in 1965, in January of 1965—and the situation of the government in Saigon was very precarious, the question of greater American involvement was just beginning to be discussed, and the question of whether or not we ought to send combat forces for the first time was being asked—so, it was very precarious, and this is what candidate Nixon had to say: "We are losing the war in Vietnam. If our strategy is not changed, we'll be thrown out in a matter of months, certainly within the year."

Well, then a year and a half later, in the midst of the Congressional elections of 1966, he made two other statements just a month apart. The first one was this: "I am convinced that the war effort will be served by a substantial increase in the Americans available on the ground, and by a substantial increase in the air capability." In other words, he was urging upon President Johnson an increase in American involvement. Within the next month, it was apparent that that increase was coming, I gather, but a month later, this was what candidate Nixon had to say: "There is a grave danger at the present time that the administration will go overboard in increasing American forces in Vietnam." Now those two conflicting statements, at a time when our government was considering changes in policy, surely were not regarded by President Johnson as helpful statements in the conduct of war.

Then there was something that candidate Nixon said here in New Hampshire four years ago, in the course of the Presidential primary four years ago. He said, "I pledge to you the new leadership will end the war and win the peace in the Pacific." When he was asked the details on how the new leadership would do that, first he held out the promise that he would discuss his ideas in the course of the campaign, later said it wouldn't be appropriate until after the election, holding out the hope to the government in Saigon, to the government

in North Vietnam, that if they didn't like our policies, all they had to do was wait until he was elected, until he became President.

Now, if I was guilty of undermining the national interest by offering my own ideas about how to conduct our peace negotiations, then surely he was undermining the national interest in offering his suggestions as to how to conduct the war. If I was guilty of consciously aiding and abetting the enemy by criticizing our policies last week, then surely he was guilty of consciously aiding and abetting the enemy when he criticized our policies for conducting the war. If I am guilty of toying with the lives of Americans and Asians by offering my own ideas, surely, then, he must have been toying with the lives of Americans and Asians by offering his ideas.

Really, what is the difference? Let me refer to something I've already read. Between saying that if we continued our strategy for conducting the war that we would be thrown out of Southeast Asia, and my saying that if we continue our present strategy for negotiations in Paris, that our involvement in the war would be prolonged indefinitely. It's the same basic point.

But now, let me make myself clear. I am not saying that in 1965 and 1966 and 1968 that the President was undermining our national interest, nor did I say so at the time. I am not saying that he was toying with the lives of Americans and Asians and I did not say so at the time. And I'm not saying that he was consciously aiding and abetting the enemy nor am I...not did I say so at the time. I think what is clear as this tragic war has unfolded, that dissent has been useful in turning our policy around, away from the direction of escalation, at least in the direction of withdrawal. If dissent had not started here in New Hampshire four years ago and grown, the possibilities are, among other things, that Mr. Nixon would never have been elected President on his promise to end the war. If dissent had not started here in New Hampshire, we might well be still involved in Vietnam to the same extent as we were four years ago. If dissent had not reacted against our involvement in Cambodia, we might still be there with our own troops fighting and dying. If dissent had not reacted against the incursion in Laos last winter, we might well be there with our own troops fighting and dying in that war as well.

So dissent has been a healthy influence upon our policy. Now, why did I criticize the President a week ago? For the sake of criticism? No. Because I thought it was important to focus public attention on some aspects of his latest peace proposal. First he told us, in that speech two weeks ago, that he had been undertaking private negotiations with the other side in Paris for 30 months. And did he tell us that they had succeeded as he had promised here in New Hampshire in '68? No, he told us they had failed. He told us his negotiations had failed. Secondly, did he offer us a new proposal for peace two weeks ago as he implied? No, he told us that that proposal had been offered three months earlier and had been ignored—in other words, rejected—by the North Vietnamese. And yet, he was asking us to treat this proposal as though it were new, thus giving many Americans the hope that maybe with a new initiative, there was some hope of ending the war. But the fact is that, by his own words, it wasn't new. It was a three month old proposal that had already been rejected because it was ignored privately, and which has since been rejected publicly. And I say to you that I read the mood of our American people across this country. They want this war ended, and a proposal that is already failed simply isn't good enough. And that the American people expect those of us who have a voice and a responsibility in connection with our policies, to contribute to the making of a new policy which has some chance of ending the war. That's why I spoke out last week. If I had been convinced that it was a new policy representing a significant new direction or new steps forward, I would have been perfectly willing to give it a chance before criticizing. But it's clear that it wasn't new, that it was all that had been rejected and yet, it was being held out by the President as a new proposal to buy him time to avoid offering a really new proposal for ending the war.

You're seniors in high school. You're shaping your attitudes, not only about the war as an issue and other issues, but you're shaping your attitudes about what role citizens, Senators, Presidents, Congressmen have, what responsibility they have with respect to public policy. Now through most of our years as a republic in a free society, we've enlarged public debate and discussion. But often we slip back and in times of national crisis, always there's a tendency to try to restrain dissent and disagreement in the interest of somebody's view of what the public interest requires. So there's always the danger, ever present in our society, that dissent can be stamped out, and stamped

out at the wrong time. What good does it do us to be free to speak, if there are no critical issues to speak to? Freedom of speech has been, you know, something we enjoy but it doesn't relate in such times to the critical policies that shape our country's future. The...If we are to be free to speak only when it's meaningless, and if our freedom to speak is to be stamped out only when there is something to talk about, then free speech is meaningless. So we've got to be free to speak to these critical issues that bear upon peace and war, life and death, what happens to the ideals and the hopes and the lives of our young people. That's when we really need to be free to speak out, and that's when we must have the courage to speak out.

Of course, there's a price that we pay for this privilege of free speech. Other nations without the same privilege observe what we're saying, hear it, are exposed to our disagreements and our differences. And that's not comfortable. But that price is more than off-set by what we gain in the long run. To speak out, of course, one must have an understanding of the issues that are involved and the values; have some vision of what we think our future as a country ought to be; what ought to be informed and enlightened, because much of the disagreement can be emotional and uninformed. So there's a heavy responsibility that goes with freedom to speak. We all ought to be conscious of that; and Senators ought to be; and candidates for President ought to be. But being conscious of the responsibility to speak in an informed and understanding way is not the same as stamping out the right of other people to speak out.

And if presidential primaries like this one, which has such a great tradition, in New Hampshire are to mean anything, anything more than a popularity contest, that meaning must be to provide a forum for the discussion of these issues.

And as you listen to the Republican oratory on Lincoln Day tomorrow, attacking me and other candidates for president for criticizing the war policies, bear that in mind. I'll say this: I doubt that Abraham Lincoln would appreciate that kind of an attack being made in his name, if I understand him at all. He spoke out. He spoke out with courage and his leadership became a

beacon to our country in a troubled time. And his critics spoke out. They made life miserable for him from time to time. And he lived with that because he believed that the underlying vitality of this country could take that kind of debate and public discussion. And so I suggest that the Republican orators tomorrow give a little thought to the tradition of this great Republican president who, in my judgment, was more Democrat than Republican anyway, and reconsider the full understanding of what the political process in our country is all about.

You know, there's the story in Maine folklore about the out-of-stater who was traveling in Maine on a rainy day. He went down a side road which was very muddy and came to a car with its wheels spinning in the mud and he stopped and asked the driver, "Are you stuck?" And the driver said, "Well, I would be if I was going anywhere." Well, I think we might say that about Mr. Nixon.

(SUSTAINED APPLAUSE)

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