

Age - National conference on aging

ADDRESS*

By

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U.S. Federal Security Agency National Conference on Aging

On behalf of the Federal Security Agency, and of the staff and planning committees which have worked so hard to prepare for these meetings, I am glad to greet you to the Conference on Aging.

The Federal Government has undertaken merely to provide the services and machinery for this Conference. The thinking, the discussions, and the conclusions of the next three days will be the product, not of government, but of private citizens who have gathered here as experts and authorities in their personal and professional capacities. We do not see in this Conference a vehicle for the promulgation of anybody's preconceived ideas. We see in it rather a forum for exploration of a significant new chapter in our country's life -- an opportunity to pool the ideas and opinions of men and women who have been concerned with our aging population.

That is the spirit in which you have come here -- the spirit of exploration, the spirit of cool and deliberate exchange of views and information. That is the spirit in which I am sure our sessions will be held. It is the spirit in which I welcome you today.

I do not need to remind you of the nature of the situation. People live longer now than they did in past generations. This means that we have a larger proportion of persons 65 and over than ever in our history. And this proportion is going to increase from here on out.

*Before the Conference on Aging, Shorcham Hotel, Washington, D. C., Sunday, August 13, 1950, 12:00 Noon EDT.

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NOV 20 1950

This is not a theory. It is a fact, a fact bound to affect the course of our Nation's destiny, today and through the decades to come, in time of peril and in time of safety.

We are not conferring today about this essential fact itself. We are conferring, rather, about the implications of this fact. In your meetings, you will go deeply into the substance of these implications. Before you begin, it may be helpful to recall some of the basic premises which set the tone of this Conference.

As I see it, there are two such premises. One has to do with the state of the Union. The other has to do with the state of the individual--- the person who blows out the birthday candles and then, in a moment of silence, faces up to the realization that other people consider him old.

Ever since we became a Nation, we have tended to think of America as a young Nation. Our emphasis has been placed on youth, on the drive and energy and adventurousness and impetuosity and verve of the young. We have concentrated on the children. We have concerned ourselves with the adolescent. We have thought of the typical true American as a dynamic, fast-moving young man or woman, forging ahead without fear or hesitation.

It has been a good stereotype, on the whole. Our continent was the young continent -- by contrast with tired old Europe, or the ancient East. We were the people who slogged through the wilderness, opened up the great natural resources, built the cities, thought big and talked big and acted big. Nothing could stop us, because we were young in years and young in heart.

Sometimes we have tended to key our whole society -- our very culture -- to this concept of youth. We have put a premium on youth in many of the jobs we have had to do. We have too often aimed our entertainment -- in movies, in radio, in television, in much of our writing -- at the young and even the immature.

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Today we have reached the point where we must ask ourselves whether this emphasis is not just a little bit overdrawn. America as a world power has come of age. It is confronted with huge responsibilities at home and throughout the world. The free peoples of this earth look to our country for wise, firm and mature leadership in the struggle for the very preservation of freedom. We are fortunate that our population structure offers us the reservoir of maturity, experience and wisdom from which we can draw the strength to accept this challenge, and to go forward into the future with even greater strength.

In Korea, at this moment, young men are risking their lives in the proudest tradition of the young and free. At the same time, older men are risking their lives, too, men of mature wisdom and experience, men equipped to assume responsibility for leadership of these young men. We are sending the flower of our youth to the shores of that distant Republic, but let us not forget that we are at the same time throwing the full fruits of our maturity into the battle for freedom today.

Part of the process of growing up is the recognition of adulthood. It has happened to each of us, at some point in our own lives. We have discovered, in a moment of revelation, that quite suddenly we no longer had to (or were able to) lean on some older person for advice, support, or guidance. We were on our own. We were grown up. That is what has happened to the people of this country, and it is this very recognition of maturity that has been the real, the basic motive for our Conference today.

But this new recognition of maturity must inevitably have a deep influence on our thinking, and on our behavior as well. This is a country where it's wonderful to be young. It must become a country where it is also wonderful to be old. There is no reason, in all logic, why we must necessarily choose to favor the youngsters over the oldsters, any more

then we need favor the oldsters over the youngsters. Into the bread of America we put the leavening, which is youth, and the flour, which is maturity. And we know that there would be no bread at all without either of these two substances.

But these are abstractions. We must, in the work sessions of this Conference, bear in mind the concrete human problems which face us. Let us think of our older people -- the one American in every thirteen -- not as material for statistical charts but as human beings.

I do not believe any scientific study has been made of the way in which people in their early and middle years look upon the prospect of their later years. I would be inclined to guess that most of us do not particularly relish this prospect. The reasons are important; and they go to the heart of what you will be considering at this Conference.

There is, first of all, the too-frequent and too-overwhelming sense of impatience and anxiety. As the birthdays pass, there is the expanding memory of opportunities missed, of mistakes made and allowed to go uncorrected, of sensations and experiences no longer able to be recaptured. There is the sense of time passing too rapidly, of ambitions not yet achieved, of curiosity not yet sated. The psychologists, perhaps, can tell us what if anything can be done to check or at least control the impatience of old age, which runs so much deeper than the impatience of the young -- and perhaps longer life itself gives us part of the solution.

The doctors tell us that they do not have a scientific definition of old age, so far as the human body is concerned. They have, at most, a series of observations. They know that a man of seventy can probably not run up a flight of stairs with the agility of a boy of fifteen -- and, if

he can, they know his breath is likely to be heavier and his heart is likely to pound harder. But our research scientists have not yet found out why this is so. Nor can they do more than tell us that it is less likely to be so in one person than in another -- and that therefore it is not the calendar alone which determines age in the physical sense.

Gerontologists have analyzed mental abilities, vocabulary aptitudes, memory performances, reasoning power, speed of reaction, personal adjustments, and many other factors which can to some degree be measured on a basis of comparative age. What has struck me most forcibly about these indications is that they reveal a remarkable lack of uniformity. They add up to the rather obvious fact that some old people retain their mental abilities throughout their lives, while others do not; that memory, reasoning power, speed of reaction, and the other tests of mental abilities show a range of aptitude which varies almost as much as do people themselves. What we are dealing with, then, is not a group of people who are "old" -- but a group of people who are merely labeled "old" by others even though their capabilities vary widely.

Of course there are certain declines in the mental capacities of old people. But, in the case of any single individual these declines need not be considered inevitable. And there is always the question as to whether the mental declines observed in some old people do not really indicate the level at which they operated throughout their lives.

On the other hand, the personal potentials of the individual older person are vastly -- almost terrifyingly -- influenced by the way America lives. Too often we have no jobs for older people. Too often we retire people who are willing and able to continue working. Too often we have no room for older people; in our apartment civilization, the old person finds himself crowded into the corner, or out of the home altogether. Too often we have no

facilities where older people can enjoy the leisure-time activities, the creative skills, the cultural enjoyments, which are theirs by as much right as anyone else's. Too often we have forgotten that older people deserve the respect which their maturity calls for: not simply the respect of the Boy Scout leading the old lady across the avenue, but the deep respect of society for the human being who wishes to preserve his dignity, his self-confidence, his independence, and his capacity to enjoy life -- and, beyond all this, the respect for his capacity to contribute to the total life of the community.

In this Conference, therefore, let us never forget the fact that we are dealing with human beings, not with a "problem." Let us, indeed, be selfish about it. Let us think in terms of what we ourselves -- each individual one of us -- wants out of the closing years of our own lives. Let us remember that we are talking, not about the social worker's casebook, but about people like us -- or, more accurately, that, whatever our age today, we are really talking about ourselves.