

Statement by Daniel J. Boorstin, American Historian
to the Republican Platform Committee
at Miami Beach, Florida
on
August 16, 1972

It is a great privilege to appear before this Committee. I appear as a citizen and as an American Historian. You have asked me to try to put the present state of the nation into historical perspective.

If there is a crisis in our nation today, it is a crisis of memory and of understanding, an unwillingness to have the courage of our history. This morning I will try to make one point and I will use a single illustration.

The notion seems to have got around that an impartial study of our national past will somehow stand in the way of our future, that the past is the enemy of progress. But by ignoring the path that we have followed, we will be condemned to retrace our steps, and so reenact our struggles. The reactionary, though he may call himself a radical, is the man who refuses to acknowledge history.

An example of our national temptation to become reactionary is the current American attitude toward "minorities" and toward "race." Let me briefly put this in the framework of our history.

In the first place, we must acknowledge that while the record of American struggle for the equality of peoples has been impressive and has cheered peoples everywhere, it has also been tragically blotched. While we have been innocent of the worst excesses of overseas colonialism that

have been committed by every other modern nation, we were the last modern nation to abolish slavery.

Nearly every group in our country has suffered in its way. Not only the Negroes. "No Irish Need Apply" had its variant somewhere or other for nearly every immigrant. Mexican-Americans were condemned to be peons, Jews suffered from quotas, Japanese, Chinese, Poles, Czechs and Italians, and of course American Indians and all the rest have had their travail. From time to time, national political parties, the Anti-Masons, the Know-Nothings and even sometimes the Democratic and the Republican Parties have exploited these prejudices.

But this has not been the mainstream of our history. The great movement of our history has been to bring peoples together -- peoples from all social classes, from all continents and all nations. Never before has there been such an international nation. And our history has proved that this was not to be a Diaspora Nation, of peoples in unhappy exile from their homeland, but a nation of peoples reborn. Here Americans found an opportunity to discover themselves as they never could have on the Irish tenant farm, in the Russian ghetto or in the African village. If this is a textbook cliché, it is none the less true.

And if we look for a single word to summarize the special historical relations that came to Old World peoples in this New World, that word is "Flow." The United States has been a place of flow -- where the peoples and ideas and customs and even the languages of the Older World have been allowed to flow together. Peoples in more settled continents, rooted in helpless hopeless serfdom or tenancy, hounded by persecution, confined by ghettos, imprisoned in class and race and national quotas, these peoples came across the ocean in the greatest migration of modern history -- fifty million in less than a century. Then millions of those who felt limited

and confined on the early-settled Eastern seaboard flowed west across the continent, to unknown and unknowable opportunities. They became the fluid societies of wagon-trains, of mining-camps, of homestead-stakers and city-builders -- the most fluid societies of modern history.

Flow meant allowing people to discover themselves so, if they could, they would rise above those who called themselves their "betters." It meant a wholesome disrespect for the frozen categories of birth and inherited wealth, and hollow titles and stuffy academies, disrespect for the congenital and the ineradicable, for the honors and the dishonors rooted in ancestry.

While the American Revolution and our colonial experience gave us a political federalism, these Great Migrations to our country and across our country in the 19th and 20th centuries brought us a cultural federalism. We could never have become a single nation unless we had recognized the right of Americans to be equal though they be different from one another -- in race, in religion, in sex, in wealth, and even in language. Building our nation has meant breaking down barriers -- the barriers of older worlds. This is the too-easily-forgotten meaning of E Pluribus Unum. This is what the Civil War was fought about. It is what generations of Americans -- from Dorothea Dix in the early 19th century, who struggled to bring the mentally ill into the respectable world, through those who fought for a Federal income tax to lower the barriers between rich and poor, through the reformers of our prisons -- what all these struggled for.

We must try to keep this story in focus. In our own time, and especially in the last two decades, we have got it out of focus. The new power of minorities, which comes from a hundred potent new forces -- from the rise of sociology and the social sciences, to the rise of an assembly-line technology which enables anyone to throw a monkey wrench into the machinery, to the sixty-mile-an-hour superhighway which gives lethal power to anyone

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who suddenly stops -- all this has distorted our view. For the direction of our history was never to give power to minorities. The aim, rather, was to break down barriers, and so to allow each of these groups -- Negroes, women, young persons, aged persons, or any others -- to take their rightful place in the ranks of all Americans. In our tradition, then, despite what some would have us believe, the only truly open Convention of a National Party must be one which knows no quotas, which confines nobody in the numerical boundaries of his race or sex or age. The enemy has not been powerlessness but discrimination. Our historic aim is not to create a nation of "minorities" but a nation of Americans.

Recently we seem to have forgotten this historic purpose. For the first time in our history we seem almost to be making an effort to Balkanize this great nation. From the effort to admit more and more Americans to the fellowship of full citizenship and equal opportunity, we seem to have begun to accept as insuperable the barriers which separate our citizens, and even somehow we begin to celebrate them as desirable. The great American institutions, our churches and our factories and our businesses, our schools and universities, our armed forces, our State legislatures and our national Congress, these at their best have been places for breaking barriers, for allowing each to learn more about all, for each to discover his own limitations, and the unsuspected strengths of others.

But movements which began in just demands for rights have ended in hollow demands for power. Have we somehow forgotten that our democratic society, as Jefferson and Lincoln preached, was built on the notion that the power of any man over another was itself an evil? Or, in the words of an old common-law maxim, "An equal has no power over an equal." Yet today we risk making power itself into a virtue.

We have forgotten another fact of our history, which should remain a source of pride and should be a guide to our future. The struggle for the equality of Americans has been, in large part, the struggle of some Americans for the rights of other Americans. This has been one of the great unifiers of our nation. A half-million Americans (most of them not Negroes) died in a Civil War to abolish the slavery of Negroes. Of course we have also known the politics of interest-groups and of regions. Our legislatures act with the aid and guidance (and sometimes the misguidance) of lobbyists; political causes thrive from those whom they will profit. But the great chapters in our history have been written by those who tried to improve the lot of other and all Americans. The wealthy Theodore Roosevelt wielded a big stick to protect the little American against the excesses of large corporations; the wealthy Franklin Roosevelt espoused the cause of the poor and the unemployed; a General of the Army, Dwight D. Eisenhower, championed civilian control of the Armed Forces. The struggle for the civil rights of Negroes was long financed and encouraged mainly by Jews and Catholics and Protestants, by Americans of all other races. And, of course, we must remember that the Constitutional Amendment which gave the vote to women was enacted by a nation of non-female voters.

There is something noble about struggling for the rights of others, but it is merely human to fight in self-defense. A dangerous clue to our loss of historical bearings is our willingness not only to tolerate but even to admire self-defense groups which confuse their own power with the public welfare. The politics of narrow self-seeking groups is only a little removed from the morality of every-man-for-himself. When before has it been respectable for American politicians to declare themselves the candidates for their race, for Americans to accept uncritically a racial caucus in the Congress of the nation? Is a Black Caucus any more respectable than a White

Caucus? In the past, with few exceptions, American politicians have been ashamed to call themselves the candidate of only one group of citizens. They have found it necessary at least to pretend to represent all their constituents equally.

We need a new direction in our public consciousness to help us move further toward fulfilling the American mission for man. We can rediscover that direction in our history. We must return to the ideal of equality. We must recognize that many of the acts committed in the name of equal opportunity are in fact acts of discrimination. We must reject reactionary programs, though they masquerade under slogans of progress, which would carry us back to Old World prejudices, primitive hatreds and discriminatory quotas. Our cultural federalism, another name for the fellowship of man in America, must once again emphasize what each can give to all. We must reject the clenched fist for the open hand. We must aim, more than ever before, to become color-blind. We must aim to create conditions of equal opportunity -- by improving American schools and beginning at the very bottom, by ruthlessly applying the same standards of achievement to all Americans regardless of race, sex, religion, or national origin -- the same standards for admission to institutions of higher learning, for graduation, for the Civil Service, for elected office and for all other American opportunities. We weaken our nation and show disrespect for all our fellow-Americans when we make race or sex or poverty a disqualification -- and equally so when we make them a qualification.

A more open America is a nation with fewer barriers. It is not a nation of proud, chauvinistic, self-seeking "minorities." We must not allow ourselves to become the Quota States of America. By reminding us of our common hopes and common destiny, your Republican Platform Committee can help redeem us from our crisis of memory, can help give us the courage of our

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history. This Committee of the Party of Lincoln must seek and find ways not to divide but to unite, and so to build the community of all Americans.

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