



## RFK AT BYU

*This speech by the late Senator Robert F. Kennedy was delivered at the Smith Fieldhouse at Brigham Young University, March 27, 1968, at a noon rally. Mr. Robert K. Reeve, the B.Y.U. student who transcribed the speech from a tape, reports that approximately 15,000 people were present, the "largest crowd ever to witness an event of any kind in the fieldhouse."*

Thank you very much. Thank you. I appreciate very much being here . . . I understand that this is a campus made up of all political persuasions. I had a very nice conversation with Dr. Wilkinson [laughter] . . . and I promised him that all Democrats would be off the campus by sundown [applause]. But I feel very close to this state. Not only did part of my wife's family live in the state of Utah for a long period of time, I traveled down your Green River . . . spent part of the time in the water . . . [laughter] and then I spent

part of my honeymoon here and I've had ten children since then, so I have learned something from the Mormons [*laughter*]. I think that we still have a great deal in common, and [in common] with the man this university honors. For I too have a large family [*laughter*], I too have settled in many states [*laughter*]. And now I too know how it is to take on Johnson's army [*laughter and applause*]. So I am delighted to be with you. I am going to speak relatively briefly, but then I'd be glad to answer any questions you might have about any of the matters I do not cover. I am not going to speak in any detail today . . . about Vietnam. But I would be glad to answer any questions about my position on that subject, or really any other subject, at the question period.

Many people have asked me — and again I apologize for my voice (I lost it somewhere between Portland and Seattle), but I'll do the best that I can — many people have asked me why I entered the race for the presidency. This is what Parley Pratt, one of Utah's great pioneers, wrote describing the winter of 1848:

My family and myself in common with many of the camp suffered much from lack of food. Myself and some of them were compelled to go with bare feet for several months. We toiled hard and lived on a few greens and on thistle and other roots.

For myself, I have been eating regularly. I wear shoes. I haven't had a meal of thistles lately. But running for the presidency, I know exactly how Parley Pratt felt. But he won his fight to found a great state, and I hope that I am as fortunate in this struggle. Parley Pratt also wrote that year of the mood of the new settlement: "All is quiet. All is stillness," he said. "No elections, no police reports, no murders, no wars in our little world. It is a dream of the poets actually fulfilled."

Utah is very different today and so is the United States. There is a war, there are murders, there are police reports, and there is an election. It is an election which will tell us what kind of country we will have and what kind of a country we will make for our children, and really, what kind of men we will be. It is of this election and, more importantly, what lies beyond it that I wish to speak with you today. In the last week I have met with your colleagues across the United States — in Kansas, in Tennessee, in Alabama, in Watts, in Oregon, and New York. I've asked of them what I now ask of all of you — your help in the struggle for new leadership here in the United States of America, a new leadership around the rest of the world. I found in this past



week a new sense of possibility. Not so much for my candidacy but for the principle that we remain the masters, not servants, of our own political life. And I think that's what's at stake in this election year [*applause*].

I think that there is a stirring abroad in this land. I think we have come to realize not simply that our course must be changed, but that this course can be changed, and that it can be changed this year [*applause*]. And I believe we can and that we will win the nomination in Chicago in August and that we can win the election in November. But I ask for your help in making that possible. And you who will give your help, I believe, will offer it not merely to win an electoral victory. I think that we have to seek a victory of purpose. It's more than just an election of an individual; it's more than just a change in leadership. It's the direction in which we want the United States — our own country — to proceed. Our country needs what our own conscience demands — a new dedication, a new commitment to its service, the realization that all across the country we must have a special mission and a special calling.

For there should be no mistake: I think the next President of the United States must offer the people of this country not comfort, but challenge. He must respond to your concerns and he must demand in return that you fulfill your own spirit of concern with action for the betterment of our fellow citizens and for the betterment of our country. And that is what I intend to do.

What are the tasks that we can do? What is this special mission of this generation of Americans? We've heard much debate in the past few years over the question of national service, but much of this debate in my judgment misses the point. We are a great and a generous nation and we are a great and generous people, but much still needs to be done within our own country. What we require is the commitment of this American generation to accept the burden of change across the whole range of conditions which are this nation's failures. I think you are willing to make that commitment. It can and it must be made, it seems to me, in some of the following ways:

First, your help is needed in a forgotten place in this nation where there is committed every day the most terrible, terrible of crimes — the breaking of a child's spirit. I have seen these children starving in the state of Mississippi, in the Delta of Mississippi. Here we are in the United States with the gross national product of \$800,000,000,000 and we have little children who are slowly starving to death, whose minds will never be the same because we haven't provided them even enough to eat. I have seen others surrendering their lives to despair in the ghettos of our great cities, watching their proud





fathers reduced to the idle indignity of welfare. And I've seen this happen also in the ravished lands of eastern Kentucky. These and many more are the scars of the body of this nation, and they must be changed. And we must change them. And they can be changed. And they will be if our generation is willing to make that commitment to America, and if America will help you make it. There is much we can do together. [America needs] your commitment, your talent, your energy, your compassion, and your feeling, put together with the great need of those who are less well off.

Second, you must look beyond the problems of material poverty to the many kinds of poverty which afflict us all. All over this nation there are places where the air is polluted and the rivers are dying. Everywhere parks and open lands which afford us our essential cleansing contact with nature are being eroded by neglect, trampled by growth, and ripped and scarred by careless and selfish use. All this is something that you — all of you — can help to change. And it is something that we can commit ourselves to change.

Third, you must take the lead in the creation and the organization of new organizations, new groups of concern and of action, to deal with the many problems of the day. Financial resources are only a part of what we need. We also need new kinds of organizations, small in size and scale, working in neighborhoods, able to establish the sense of personal contact and cooperation that we have lost all too often with the growth of our federal government. Kinds of organizations are diverse: they may be neighborhood help centers; they may be community job centers; they may be neighborhood assemblies where members of a real community meet formally and informally to debate issues of common concern and to develop a sense of identity in that neighborhood, one person with the other. In short, they are as varied and as different as the needs of the society. And I think all of us need to be a part of that venture.

Fourth, your work is needed in the renewal of political institutions, broadening their base to engage a far greater proportion of the American people in the debate and the decision and the issues which finally affect their lives. Above all, I want us in government to understand that this kind of commitment is the greatest contribution that your generation of Americans can render to this country. And I believe we could recognize this contribution by altering the laws of military service accordingly [*applause*]. I believe that if the difficulties could be resolved, this government ought to discharge young men from their military obligations if they have given a different but equally valuable kind of service to their country [*applause*].

Let me be clear: I do not come here promising to develop a system of alternative service to the draft. There are serious difficulties involved in such an attempt. First, it could only work in peacetime, for nothing is comparable to the risks of combat, and those burdens must be met by all of our citizens [*applause*]. Second, it could not be allowed to reinforce the already rampant social and economic disparities in our system of [selective] service. Third, we should not assume that we could overcome the unattractive aspect of military life by giving higher benefits to those in the military [by] imposing

greater burdens on those in the alternate service. So I do not come before you with a complete program of alternative service. But I do say that America should be a nation where a man can serve his country without a uniform and without a gun [*applause*]. And I do say that America should honor those who improve the quality of our national life as much as those who fight to defend it. I do say that by working together we can design the kind of program that will fairly and equitably begin the process of alternative service. Obviously this is not an easy task. But it is not given to us to lead an easy life.

It was once said of Utah (of the hard soil and the tribulation of your pioneers) that life does not come easy. Perhaps some of the special flavor of Utah comes from this quality that things come hard. That will be true too of our efforts, yours and mine, to match the generosity of our impulses with a determination to act. It will not be easy. But it will be a special task, one which will ennoble those who are willing to participate even as it wins for us a better country. And I ask you to join with me in that task. Thank you very much [*extended applause*]. Now, Doctor, that wasn't so bad was it? [*laughter and more applause*].



*The First Presidency wish to bring to the attention of the members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints their obligations as members of the communities in which they live and as citizens of the nation.*

*The historic position of the Church has been one which is concerned with the quality of man's contemporary environment as well as preparing him for eternity. In fact, as social and political conditions affect man's behavior now, they obviously affect eternity.*

*The revelations in this dispensation place a sobering responsibility on us as individuals in seeking out and supporting political candidates who are "wise," "good," and "honest." Likewise, the health of our cities and communities is as genuine a concern now as it was in the planning and establishment of Nauvoo or Salt Lake City.*

*The growing world-wide responsibilities of the Church make it inadvisable for the Church to seek to respond to all the various and complex issues involved in the mounting problems of the many cities and communities in which members live. But this complexity does not absolve members as individuals from filling their responsibilities as citizens in their own communities.*

*We urge our members to do their civic duty and to assume their responsibilities as individual citizens in seeking solutions to the problems which beset our cities and communities.*

*With our wide ranging mission, so far as mankind is concerned, Church members cannot ignore the many practical problems that require solution if our families are to live in an environment conducive to spirituality.*

*Where solutions to these practical problems require cooperative action with those not of our faith, members should not be reticent in doing their part in joining and leading in those efforts where they can make an individual contribution to those causes which are consistent with the standards of the church.*

*Individual Church members cannot, of course, represent or commit the Church, but should, nevertheless, be "anxiously engaged" in good causes, using the principles of the Gospel of Jesus Christ as their constant guide.*

**THE FIRST PRESIDENCY**  
Church of Jesus Christ  
of Latter-day Saints.  
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