

Township Address

Dr. Glenn Poshard, 2016

President Kennedy spoke these words in his only inauguration address. He said “We observe today not a victory of party but a celebration of freedom. Symbolizing an end as well as a beginning, signifying renewal as well as change. For I have sworn before you and almighty God the same solemn oath our forebears prescribed nearly a century and three quarters ago. The world is very different now for man holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish all forms of human poverty and all forms of human life. And yet, the same revolutionary beliefs for which our forefathers fought are still at issue around the globe today. The belief that the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state, but from the hand of God. We dare not forget today that we are the heirs of that first revolution.

Here was the problem. They had lived in this country for nearly 200 years. And yet they had no rights. The king controlled their lives. They weren’t free to assemble, to speak freely, to worship where they pleased. There was no freedom of the press. No right to bear their own arms. They were being taxed without representation in the Parliament. Britain was quartering troops in their homes without their permission. They were suffering as people all over the world suffered under the edicts of kings and dictators and caesars and their armies.

What were they to do? They faced a question from which they could not run. Did the rights of people come from the generosity of the state or from the hand of God? Were they man-given or God-given?

They met in a little hall, Carpenter’s Hall in Philadelphia, Pa. to debate this question. Some said we are not free, but if we rebel we’ll be crushed by the power of England.

Others said, “There is nothing worse than our not being free.” We should risk it all for future generations. For freedom is what matters!”

The debate was long and difficult. Tempers flared. Friendships were strained. And in the midst of this chaos, old Ben Franklin spoke words that America would be best to hear again today. He said, “Gentlemen, as to whether one course is best over the other, I don’t know. But I do know this, if we don’t all hang together, we most assuredly will all hang separately.”

A young man, 26-year-old Thomas Paine, had written a small pamphlet called Common Sense only a short while before in which he said these words. He said, “We have the opportunity to make the world over again. We have the opportunity to make the world over again.” But how were they to do this? How were they to make the world over again? And another young man, Thomas Jefferson, a member of this august assembly, had these words. He said, “Here’s how we do it! We the people! We the people will make the world over again.”

And they finally agreed. And they commissioned him to write their Declaration of Independence from the most powerful nation on the face of the earth. And he answered the question for them.

He said, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal and are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these rights are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The die had been cast. The state as the author of our freedom or the Creator? They said the Creator! And they signed this Declaration of Independence, pledging their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor toward their belief in this principle.

They went out and under the leadership of General Washington, they won their Revolutionary War against all the odds. And they gathered again in a Continental Congress to write a Constitution for this new government, this new country "of the people." And they divided this new constitution into a legislative branch which would be elected by the people to make the laws, an executive branch which would be elected to execute the laws, and a judicial branch which would interpret and judge the law. And they said to themselves, this is great. The people will love this and they sent it out to be ratified. And the people rejected it entirely. They said, this may be good as a form, a structure of government, but we just fought a war against the strongest army and navy on earth about our rights and this says nothing about those rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness on which we declared our independence. Go back and get it right. And so they gathered again and they added ten amendments to that Constitution which are the guaranteed Bill of Rights for which American blood has been spilled all over this world for nearly 240 years in defense, not just of our own freedom, but of people everywhere who yearn to be free.

Freedom of speech. Freedom of the press. The right to bear arms. Freedom of religion. The right to a fair and speedy trial. The right to a jury of our peers. The right to assemble freely. The right to bring grievances against our government. The right not to be forced to testify against ourselves. Freedoms for which oppressed people all over the world sought to enjoy.

But these freedoms were not free. The graves of young American warriors surround the globe in testimony to our commitment to defend freedom anywhere it is threatened in the world.

Our warriors stood on the greens of Lexington and Concord, in the Wilderness and at Valley Forge and Yorktown to win those freedoms in the Revolutionary War. They fought and died in the War of 1812 and the Spanish American War. They sacrificed themselves on the shores of Tripoli in Northern Africa. Their blood was spilled by the hundreds of thousands on the fields of Bull Run and Chickamauga and Vicksburg and Gettysburg in the Civil War. They charged up San Juan Hill with Teddy Roosevelt, they fought overwhelming odds in the Black Forest of Germany, in the Meuse Argonne, on Anzio and Omaha Beach, at Bataan and Corridor in WWI and World War II and at Pusan and Pleiku and Danang and Munsani and Yongigo and at Camn Ran Bay and the Mekong Delta in Korea and Vietnam, they laid down their lives in Baharain and Bagdag in the desert of Iraq, and the far off mountains in the country of Afghanistan. They did not know the people they were defending against dictatorial and oppressive governments, they only knew they went there so their mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, their children, their wives and husbands, their neighbors would be safe and free in a nation whose proudest heritage has been freedom and whose proudest export has been freedom to oppressed people all over the world.

Now, he is an old man and he is looking back over his life, having the benefit of this most

intimate knowledge of government and his new nation. He had penned the Declaration of Independence, helped write the Constitution, had served in the Congress, had been President of the United States, had founded the University of Virginia, and now he is looking back over his life and articulating the fundamental beliefs on which he established the principle of “We the people” as the foundation of government which protects the God-given rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Listen to Jefferson’s words in his autobiography in 1821:

“It is not by the consolidation or concentration of powers, but by their distribution that good government is effected. Were not this great country already divided into States, that division must be made that each might do for itself what concerns itself directly and what it can so much better do than a distant authority. Every state again is divided into counties, each to take care of what lies within its local bounds; each county again into townships to manage minuter details; it is by partition of cares descending in gradation from general to particular that the mass of human affairs may be best managed for the good and prosperity of all.

“We should thus marshal our government into 1. the general federal republic, for all concerns foreign and federal 2. that of the State, for what relates to our own citizens exclusively 3. the county republics, for the duties and concerns of the county, and 4. the townships, for the small and yet numerous and interesting concerns of the neighborhood, and in government, as well as in every other business of life, it is by division and subdivision of duties alone, that all matters, great and small, can be managed to perfection.

“These townships in New England, are the vital principle of their governments and have proved themselves the wisest invention ever devised by the wit of man for the perfect exercise of self-government and for its preservation.”

“The article nearest my heart is the division of counties into townships. These will be pure and elementary republics, the sum of which taken together composes the State, and will make of the whole a true democracy as to the business of the townships, which is that of nearest and daily concern.

“Divide the counties into townships of such size as that every citizen can attend, when called on, and act in person. Ascribe to them the government of their townships in all things relating to themselves exclusively.

“These little republics, the townships, would be the main strength of the great Republic. We owe to them the vigor given to our revolution in its commencement in the eastern States.”

“No, my friend, the way to have good and safe government is not to trust it all to one, but to divide it among the many, distributing to every one exactly the functions of which he is most competent.”

“There are two subjects, indeed, which I shall claim a right to further as long as I breathe; the public education, and the sub-division of our counties into townships. I consider the

continuance of republican government as absolutely hanging on these two hooks.”

Now, I view with considerable apprehension what I see coming out of the Legislature and the Governor’s office of this state. Bills capping property taxes, even including home rule units, and changing the Consumer Price Index growth adjustments to zero per cent. Allowing the abolition of local governments through weakened referendums with no thought given to the consequences. Freezing property tax extensions for three years. Freezing township property tax assessments. The abolition of the office of township assessors. That’s the legislature.

Let me share with you some considerations coming from the governor’s office on local government consolidation.

1. Enact a 4-year moratorium on creating new local governments.

Rationale: The state of Illinois should be consolidating, streamlining and eliminating unnecessary units of local government instead of creating new ones. Public corruption is aided when there are too many units of local government for state and federal authorities to adequately police.

Jefferson said just the opposite. He said the potential for public corruption is greater the farther the office is removed from the people.

Here are the major units of local government:

- Public library districts
- Drainage Districts
- Fire prevention districts
- Water service districts
- Mass transit districts
- Museum districts
- Port districts
- Mosquito Abatement districts
- Planning agencies
- Public health districts
- River conservancy districts
- Water reclamation districts
- Forest preserve districts
- Townships
- Sanitary districts
- Road and bridge districts
- Soil and water conservation districts

Now let me ask you, have you heard much about corruption in these local government districts compared to what you hear about corruption at the state and federal levels of government? Three of our last six governors have gone to prison, scores of legislators have been indicted and convicted. The same for many municipal leaders.

2. Empower Illinois citizens to consolidate or dissolve local governments via referendum.

Rationale: The citizens of Illinois deserve a fair process to determine the form and function of their local governments, including consolidating or dissolving units of local govt. The layering of local government creates inefficiencies and duplications and the citizens of Illinois should be empowered to consolidate or dissolve local government in an effort to control costs, improve service delivery and reduce corruption. They deserve a fair process to determine the form and function of local govt.

Now I ask again. What at the state or federal level can you point to that controls costs, improves service delivery, and reduces corruption more effectively and efficiently than the townships, the closest government to the people?

Can you point to a nearly 20-trillion-dollar indebtedness at the federal level or a 110-billion-dollar underfunding of the Illinois pension system and 7 billion in unpaid bills as the fault of the townships. Whose failing in the effort to control costs and deliver effective services? It's certainly not the townships!

3. Repeal the prevailing wage.

Now you may be for the prevailing wage, you may be against it. You may want it reformed, restructured, or whatever. But if the argument is that pay to public workers is breaking the state, it sure isn't coming from the township workers. Township workers are some of the lowest paid workers in the state of Illinois.

4. Township government maintains 53% of all the roads in this state. Not the state and the federal govt. Townships. No unit of government is more capable of determining the true value of property and levying the fairest tax for the services received than is township government. And yet they want to take property assessment away from the township assessors, who are the only elected government officials that are required to take and pass instruction courses before they can be elected.

Finally, I want to leave you with two illustrations of what I consider to be your most important mission.

Mother Teresa-God comes to us in his most distressing disguises

Pres. Lincoln-2nd Inaugural Address:

“With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who has borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.” He wasn't talking about just healing the union, he was talking about healing the enemies of the union too. President Lincoln, the greatest statesman and servant in the history of the world understood the heart of “We the people” and he embraced servanthood as his highest priority.

General assistance to the underprivileged citizens which you serve goes to the heart of who we are as a people. The necessities of food, shelter, and emergency relief to the needy until they are

able to support themselves, the senior citizen programs, youth programs, assistance to the disabled, all these things make the townships the best servants of our neediest people.

No one would dare suggest today that we diminish Jefferson and Lincoln's "We the people." No one would dare suggest that the Bill of Rights, our basic freedoms, was a bad idea. But many are suggesting that the foundation on which these great principles were built, that of township government being closest to the people and therefore being the most effective and efficient, are trying to take that away from us.

Now, you may not see the connection between Jefferson's embodiment of "We the people" in the form of township government and the work that you do, but I do, and you should. You may not see the connection between Lincoln's compassion and mercy and the work that you do, but I do, and you should.

And we should fight for the purest form of "We the people government" that America still has. You stand in the breach and you must never allow anyone to diminish or take away the rights of the people at the most fundamental level of government we have in our state and our nation, the townships.

Thank you for having me.