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Robert F. Kennedy

"Address to faculty and students, discussing current political and social issues"

March 26, 1968

Portland State College

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Transcribed by Julian Santizo, August 7, 2020

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BRANFORD MILLAR: Well, let me say, Senator Kennedy, as you begin the arduous campaign trail: judging from the audience here, you have every reason to take heart. We have never had a bigger crowd in this room since we had a crucial wrestling match with Oregon State University. And as you know, the mere presence of crowds alone won't do it; we lost.

[applause, laughter]

...Every four years, this country enters into a great national debate, sometimes keener than others. This one promises to be a crucial one, where all of us feel that real issues which engage our hearts and minds are vitally involved. Between now and November, we will have numerous opportunities to hear candidates on many issues, state and national. On the Presidential level, we have already heard one Democratic candidate with great interest, Senator McCarthy; we are...[pauses for applause] we are privileged today to hear another Democratic candidate whose entry into the race is generally considered to have added a whole new dimension to the national debate. As yet, we have not had a Republican candidate speak at the college. Mr. Nixon spoke at a quiet university town somewhat to the south in Eugene; this may suggest that the Republicans don't know where the action is in Oregon.

[applause and cheers]

...As to Governor Wallace, we seem so far as to be out of touch. Before introducing the Senator, I want to introduce some members of his party who are with him. I believe that I have them

straight, although people are coming and going; I want to introduce Mrs. Peter Lawford, sister of the Senator... [applause] Mrs. Stephen Smith, also sister of the Senator... [applause] Mr. John Beatty, attorney who is co-chairman of Mr. Kennedy's Oregon campaign... [applause] and Senator... Representative?

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Senator.

MILLAR: Senator Fadeley, from Eugene... [applause] And, last but not least, Congresswoman Edith Green. [applause, cheers, and whistles] She is also a co-chairman for Senator Kennedy's campaign, and by your applause, you know that she is a long-time friend and supporter not only of this college to whom we owe a great deal, but for her national leadership in the field of education.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Hooray!

[applause]

MILLAR: And finally, the speaker; customarily in introducing speakers to academic audiences, one recites degrees, positions held, books and articles written. As a non-academic, however, Senator Kennedy confounds the rules; he has eleven degrees, and so much for the customary credentials. [laughter] And though he has held many posts in government, what interests us most now is the office he aspires to and the attendant concerns which he expresses about the issues of our times. Ladies and gentlemen, it is my privilege to introduce the Senator from New York, the honorable Robert F. Kennedy...

[cheers and applause]

MILLAR: Mr. Kennedy.

SEN. ROBERT F. KENNEDY: Thank you very much. [applause quiets down] Thank you, thank you very much. Dr. Millar, Mrs. Green, ladies and gentlemen. I am very pleased to be here at Portland University.

[laughter]

AUDIENCE: Portland State... College!

KENNEDY: No. [laughter] No no, I'm changing the name. [laughter; applause] That's what I'm going to do as the first act after I'm elected as President of the United States. [cheers and laughter, gradually tapering off] So, I'm very pleased to be here; I'm very grateful for the very warm reception from all of you. I've been traveling around the country. I've had some

encouraging developments, some warm responses; I went to Atlanta, Georgia... [chuckles] And then Governor Maddox said that he'd rather have Fidel Castro as President. [laughter] I said that I thought he was entitled to whoever he wanted and whoever he wanted to... and then... but then California was rather encouraging, because while I was there, George Hamilton called me up... [laughter] and asked me for my daughter's telephone number.

[laughter and applause]

And then I was going to have buttons that I could distribute to all of you with my picture on 'em, that I could—so that you could walk around with them—and I asked my younger brother if he'd get the buttons printed up and put them on the plane. He got ten thousand buttons, and they all had *his* picture on them. [laughter] And I told him it was too late to get in the race. I ah... frankly, I told him people would consider he was ruthless, so... [laughter and applause]

But I'm pleased to be here, I'm pleased to see all of you, and I'm going to talk for a few moments today about the struggle in Southeast Asia; and then I would be glad to answer questions from you on any matters that are of interest to you, either about that struggle—about that war—or about the great domestic problems that are affecting us. Before I do, I just want to express my appreciation to Jack Beatty and to Mrs. Green for their help in my efforts. I've served with Mrs. Green for a long period of time, and as you've demonstrated by your applause, the high affection that she's held in... and high esteem that she's held in, here in Portland and in the state of Oregon... [loud clanging sound in background, KENNEDY and the audience chuckle] They're coming to get me. [laughter] ...The same feeling of affection and admiration exists for her in Washington and, I think, in the Congress of the United States, so I am very pleased and honored to be associated with her. [applause]

Lord Chesterfield once said, that the young leading the young is like the blind leading the blind: that they both will fall into a ditch. Fortunately for Lord Chesterfield, he has never visited New Hampshire in March. And we are fortunate, I think, that he is not alive today, for he would see young people leading rebellions and upheavals which strike at the core of authority; students at universities demand the right to full freedom of speech and the right to assembly. They demand a voice in the course of their own education, and the government responds by urging order. It appeals to their patriotism, and it points to the threat of foreign enemies, then calls for national unity; but the students do not listen, and they boycott classes and they stage sit-ins. They demonstrate, and then they riot. I want to make it clear that I support these brave students, the students of Warsaw, and Krakow, and Prague... [applause] ...in their fight against Communist tyranny in Eastern Europe, and I support you too.

[after a pause] You going to clap? [laughter] It said "applause" here, so... [laughter; applause]

What the students in Poland now fight for, what the students of Czechoslovakia appear to have won, is not a victory of ideology, it is a victory of the spirit. This spirit has been heard in the defiant courtrooms of Moscow, in the streets of Spain, and in schools all over the United States. It is a spirit of youth, not a time of life, but a state of mind. A temper of the will, a quality of the imagination, a preference for courage over timidity, of the appetite for adventure over the love of ease. It is the spirit which knows the difference between force and reason. It does not accept the failures of today as the excuse for the cruelties of tomorrow. It knows the wisdom of Archimedes, that "give me a place to stand and I can move the world"; and youth is finding its place to stand. That is the spirit I want to see return to the United States of America, and that is why I'm running for President of the United States. [applause]

For that spirit, the spirit of our own revolutionary inheritance, is the surest guarantee of liberty at home and our security and leadership abroad. This is the example that leads a Russian poet on trial for demanding the right of free speech to cite in his defense the words and principles of the United States Constitution; and it is the same example that led Ho Chi Minh beginning the Vietnamese War against the French by quoting not Marx nor Mao, but the American Declaration of Independence. [applause]

This example has now struck harder and most effectively at tyranny in Eastern Europe. How ironic it is, then, that at this very moment of triumph abroad and here at home, that there are those who would have us depart from the course which has been our historic strength; they decry the growth of dissent; they urge that the... and I quote, "The time has come to unite, to support our leaders, to support our government"; and they ask, "Which side are *you* on?" I think that we can answer that question. I stand with those who want a new effort to end the war in Vietnam and begin the long journey towards peace.

[cheers and applause; chanting "We want Bobby!" begins in background; KENNEDY chuckles]

Thank you. Four very loyal supporters... [laughter] ...brought right from New York City, thank you. It is long... it is long since past... the time is long since past to recognize that a military victory is not within sight and is not around the corner, that in fact it is almost certainly beyond our grasp, and that the effort to win such a victory will only result in the further slaughter of thousands upon thousands of innocent and helpless people; a slaughter which will forever rest on the American national conscience, on your conscience, and on mine. [applause]

The Viet Cong are a brutal adversary. Time and time again, they have shown their willingness to sacrifice innocent civilians, to engage in torture and murder and terror in order to achieve their ends; but they still, despite this... but they, still, despite this, have been able to obtain the support of much of the people of South Vietnam. And despite this, the government of South Vietnam has not been successful in identifying itself with the national feelings of the people of South Vietnam. The Viet Cong have the great asset of fighting against the foreigner, just as the

State Department told us back in 1964 that the worst mistake we could make in Vietnam was to make this America's war. Therefore, the more forces we put into Vietnam, the more the Viet Cong's strength has grown. Three years ago, when we had less than one-tenth of our present strength in Vietnam, the Viet Cong were clearly incapable of mounting the kinds of attacks that they did this winter when their force numbered only 115,000; and now the CIA tells us through newspaper reports that there are about 600,000 Viet Cong and Viet Cong supporters, thus confirming the testimony of our director of AID in Saigon, and I quote: that "We are creating more Viet Cong than we are destroying."

Meanwhile, we have consistently ignored the need of our allies to capture the national feeling of their own people. We have supported governments one after another riddled with corruption, inefficiency, and sloth, run by generals who fought with the French against the independence of their own country, with little to recommend them even to our own policy makers but a willingness to continue the war and to refuse to negotiate, no matter what the damage was to their own country or the damage and the death and destruction to their own people. I think this course of action is unsatisfactory for the United States of America. [applause] They still refuse to take meaningful and serious action against corruption; they still refuse to undertake major land reform; they still arrest non-Communist leaders who disagree with them. More and more, they leave the fighting to American troops, so that while our deaths doubled from 1966 to 1967, those of the ARVN¹ actually declined—and I don't think that's satisfactory. [applause]

We, for our part, have remained steadfast in the naïve belief that more is always better; and the resulting policy of even more troops, even more bombings, even more devastation has all but crushed the non-Communist nationalism beneath the overwhelming presence of the United States. The result is the great irony of our victory claimed after the Tet Offensive, our proud boast that a people for whose defense we have spent 20,000 lives and fifty billion dollars in ten years of effort—that these people, that was our boast—that *these* people did not rise up against us. That was the great victory that we achieved after, or during, the Tet Offensive; *those* were the public statements that were made by our government officials. Isn't it marvelous? Doesn't it show that our policy has been a success, because these people—after all of this sacrifice and all of this effort on behalf of the United States—they didn't rise up *against* the United States, and therefore it shows that we're doing well. I can't believe it, and I can't accept it. [applause]

It is now far too late to correct all of the errors of the past, and as I have said many times before, when fault is found and responsibility assessed, I am willing to share and take my share of responsibility. I was involved in the early decisions during the period of 1961, 1962, and 1963, and when the responsibility and blame is found for the struggle in Vietnam, I have to

¹ The Army of the Republic of Vietnam, the South Vietnamese ground forces.

share that responsibility; I accept that, but I also say that I learned something, and when I was wrong, I am willing to admit it and try to make it good. [applause] And past error is no excuse for its own perpetration. The point now is not to repeat our past mistakes, but to learn from them, and thus reach a settlement to this terrible war while something remains to be saved for the people who have been its greatest victims. The truth is that in Vietnam, our greatest error is our possible key to peace. It is to, at last, to recognize the powerful force of Vietnamese nationalism, and to build on that recognition a settlement which preserves our essential interests, fulfills our real commitment to the Vietnamese people, and advances the peace of the world.

That settlement must be based on a recognition of the following elements: first, it must admit what our own rhetoric has always denied: that though the efforts of Hanoi are vital to the cause, the forces of the Viet Cong and the National Liberation Front are our principal adversaries in the field, as they showed in the Tet Offensive; that any settlement must be achieved through direct negotiations with them as well as with Hanoi, and I think we should move in that direction. [applause]

And I think we also have to recognize that not only that we are willing to negotiate with the National Liberation Front, but that we also expect that the National Liberation Front and those who have supported its cause will play a role in the future political process of South Vietnam. [applause] Our advisories, as I have said, committed acts of brutal terrorism, and that is a fact; but they are a part of South Vietnam and cannot be eliminated or excluded from its political life, and that is also a fact. Our refusal to acknowledge this has helped to prevent a peaceful settlement many times in the past, and I believe that barrier must be removed now. [applause]

Second, we must recognize that if non-Communist Vietnamese are to play an effective role in post-war Vietnam, as they must do and which is their right to do, then we must allow their nationalism room to breathe. We must insist that the Saigon government that we have erected and that we have preserved now become a true government of national union, including those political, religious, and labor leaders who are now ignored, excluded from government, or put in jail. Thus, there could be formed a government that was capable of negotiating a Vietnamese settlement with their fellow Vietnamese citizens, and are protecting such a settlement after the American troops are withdrawn. Unless we broaden the base and bring in other elements in South Vietnam who are anti-Communist, who are anti-Viet Cong or anti-National Liberation Front, there will not be any political base in which a settlement can be built or preserved after the American troops leave. We have to have a force within South Vietnam that's going to be able to protect the independence or protect the people themselves. And unless there is such a base established—and that doesn't mean that everybody in South Vietnam has to agree—and it's what I have grave reservations about, that only people that can serve in government, or be active in the political life of South Vietnam are those who would agree with the government in Saigon, agree with General Kỳ or General Thiệu, or agree with the United States. I think we have

to bring in the other elements; it doesn't necessarily mean because they oppose General Kỳ or General Thiệu that they are Communist, and I think that they have to be brought in to the political structure of South Vietnam if we ever expect to make a peace and continue the peace once the peace is made. [applause]

Third, we must abandon the illusion that the North... that Vietnamese nationalism can be broken by the bombing of the North. And taking those strategic and tactical precautions which are necessary to protect the lives of our troops, we should halt the unproductive bombing of North Vietnam, and move to the conference table... [applause] ...there to seek the honorable negotiated settlement that is the deepest desire of the American people, and the most essential requirement in the war for our own standing, security, and leadership in the world.

Just let me spend just a few more seconds on that. The fact is that Secretary McNamara has said that the bombing of the North does not stop the North from sending whatever men and materials they need into the South. That they can supply whatever men and materials they need in the South; that the bombing doesn't stop that. That perhaps it makes it more difficult for them, but it doesn't stop them. And I think we've seen from the Tet Offensive, we've seen what has happened over the period of the last six months, to understand that quite clearly; they can send the men and the materials that they need in the South from the North into the South, the bombing doesn't stop that. It makes it more difficult for them, it makes it more costly for them, but does not prevent them. So therefore, when we say, "Stop the bombing and go to the negotiating table," we can stop the bombing and go to the negotiating table and then see if we can negotiate a settlement. If we can't negotiate a settlement, or they will not negotiate in good faith, then we can take whatever military action we feel is necessary, but we are not going to go to the negotiating table unless we stop the bombing. It seems to me that it's elementary to stop the bombing to begin the negotiation and see if we can settle the conflict. I think that's elementary. [applause]

Let me just add, what is the alternative to that? The alternative is to unilaterally withdraw. I happen to be opposed to that. The other alternative is to continue the escalation, to do the same thing that we have been doing in the past. I don't think that makes any sense, and we've seen again and again that that doesn't make any sense. One thing we have proved is that what we have been doing in the past is not successful. And what I am suggesting is we try a new course of action, because I think that is possible to be successful, and we've never tried it. And that's what I think we should do in the future, and if I'm elected President of the United States that's what I shall do. [applause]

Fourth, in Vietnam and elsewhere, we must turn from the failed policy of seeking military solutions to the political and diplomatic problems. We must learn to turn to our own benefit that force which has stalemated our efforts in Vietnam: the force of national independence and resistance to a foreigner. Our officials tell us that we must contain the expansion of the hostile

power of China, yet this war only weakens a nation whose greatest heroes and greatest history were forged in a thousand-year struggle with China. Reaching a peaceful settlement with the North, by contrast, might be the surest guarantee against aggressive Chinese expansion. [applause] Just let me, again, make the point: when Secretary Rusk appeared before the Foreign Relations Committee, he was asked about the fact that the Chinese might come into North Vietnam. His answer was that the North Vietnamese hate the Chinese, and they wouldn't permit the Chinese to come into North Vietnam.

Just in analyzing and examining that answer I think is another strong... the strongest kind of argument to reach a negotiated settlement of the struggle of North Vietnam, the struggle in the North, the bombing of North Vietnam and the struggle in South Vietnam. I think it's the strongest *possible* argument that you could make that we should reach a settlement in that part of the world, and that's what I hope to do. [applause]

Now, I say to you that no one can guarantee—and I don't come here and promise or guarantee—that this course would bring peace, but we do know that these steps have not been tried, and we do know that until we do try them, there cannot be negotiations and therefore there cannot be peace in that part of the world. It is not a course without risk, but it is a course which follows more hopeful possibilities of success for a nation and a people than the course of fruitless military action that we are following at the present time. So, these are the kinds of efforts that I think must be made in that part of the world. I think we can change the course of action in South Vietnam; I think we can change many of the things that are happening here within the United States.

I think that we can change the face of this country, but in order to do that, I need your support. I think this is an important campaign, because it's going to determine the direction that the United States is going to move in over the period of the next decade. This is a significant and critical election. I think we have to do more in South Vietnam, I think we have to do more in connection with our relationship with the undeveloped nations of the world. I think that we have to end the deep divisions that exist within our own country: divisions that exist because of the color of people's skin, their age, or their beliefs on Vietnam, or their beliefs on what we should do about our domestic problems. We're not going to eliminate the problems; we're not going to eliminate the difficulties that are facing the United States, but I say that we can do better. I say that we don't have to accept the course of action that we've followed over the period over the last several years, and I say that the United States of America can do far better in the future, and that's why I run for president. [applause]

I think that people of the United States—this group here, its younger people, but its older people as well—should remember the words of a poet of 2,000 ago and apply ourselves, have that as our ideal to “feel the giant agony of the world; and more, like slaves to poor humanity,

labor for mortal good.”² I think that’s what you are interested in doing, and that’s what I want to do as President of the United States. Thank you. [applause]

I will be glad to answer... if I haven’t lost something, my... all right, I’ll come back, I’ll come back. Go ahead.

[AUDIENCE MEMBER speaks in background, off microphone and inaudible]

KENNEDY: Can you ask me *one*? Just ask one if you would, ‘cause then I’ll...

[AUDIENCE MEMBER rephrases their question]

KENNEDY: Well, I’m opposed to... for that... one of those... for that reason. For those who have committed themselves to us and who we said that we... we told them that we were going to remain there: it’s one of the major reasons that I would be opposed to unilaterally withdrawing from South Vietnam; so that that would not be a problem for them. What I would do is de-escalate the conflict. I’d go into the areas where there is the greatest population which want to be protected, I’d stop our search and destroy missions, and I would have great hesitation, reservations about putting American troops up along the demilitarized zone. But I wouldn’t... I don’t think it’s in the interests of the United States to abandon—just walk out—of South Vietnam, and for that reason I don’t think it’s the kind of problem that you’ve outlined.

Oh, I’ll repeat the question. The question was, what would happen to the South Vietnamese troops who have been involved with us, and the other people of South Vietnam, if we just pulled out of South Vietnam. And I explained it was the reason... it would be one of the major reasons I would be opposed to unilaterally withdrawing. Go ahead.

[question asked in background]

KENNEDY: The question was: would I explain my policies on racism in the United States, and what I would intend to do about it. I think that one of the great problems that we have is the problem of jobs: why there have been the outbursts within our cities, basically, is the fact that people can’t find jobs. They can’t support their families, they can’t bring their children up in any kind of proper home setting, they can’t afford adequate housing, they can’t send their children to satisfactory schools and have a satisfactory educational system. I think that we have to move away from the welfare system, as much as possible; we have to move away from the welfare system and establish jobs. I would do that... [applause]

² Kennedy is quoting from John Keats’ poem *The Fall of Hyperion*, which the poet left unfinished at his death in 1821. His reference to a “2,000-year-old” poet may be to Virgil, whose epic *Aeneid* (circa 29-19 BCE) was an influence on Keats.

...I would do that in two ways: number one, I would do it with the federal government providing funds to local communities, where they could carry on public works that are so desperately needed in some of these cities, and second, I would give tax incentives and tax credits to private industry, to go in and erect... construct plants and factories in areas of great unemployment, hire those who are now on welfare or are presently unemployed. I would do that in the ghetto areas of the United States, and I would also do it in rural areas. I don't think just focusing attention on the ghettos or the core cities is sufficient, because people from the rural areas are going to continue to pour in there, so I think that we have to... at the same time that we have to take steps to find jobs and adequate housing and decent education for those who come from the rural areas of the United States. And I think that while we do that, we have to remember the people—it's not just the Negroes—it's the white people of Eastern Kentucky; it's the Indians on our Indian reservations where the unemployment rate is up to eighty percent in some of those areas, where the dropout rate for children in school is sixty-five percent. So I think that there is a lot that needs to be done for those who have been ignored in our society, and I'd like to try to do something about it. [applause]

I have a note that somebody is trying to go to their eleven o' clock class and they can't get out... [laughter] ...and I'm supposed to tell them to stay, but what if they don't want to stay? They can't leave. What'll I do? [laughter while KENNEDY confers with folks onstage] "Nobody else has to go to school for the rest of the week," he says.

[laughter, cheering, applause]

MILLAR: All these interesting educational problems escalate to me... let's say that if you have an eleven o' clock class, we'll square it. Escalate it to me and I'll somehow or other fix it up; go ahead...

[applause]

KENNEDY: And just remember, when you go into the... when you're deciding who you are going to vote for and who you are going to support, that it was a Kennedy who got you out of class.

[laughter and applause]

AUDIENCE MEMBER [in background]: What do you propose to do about freeing the prisoners of war?

KENNEDY: "What do I propose to do about freeing the prisoners of war?" ...By negotiating the peaceful settlement in South Vietnam and bringing them home.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: But will they let 'em go? They're so... [inaudible]

KENNEDY: Well obviously, there is that, there... obviously, the only way that you're going to get them released is through negotiated settlement. We obtained their release after Korea. The only way that you're going to obtain their release, those prisoners and the fliers in North Vietnam, is going to be after a peace. You're not going to be able to obtain their release in any other way, and I would expect that that was going to be a precondition for a settlement; that we obtain the release of the American prisoners as they're presently in the hands of our adversary. Go ahead.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: With Ho Chi Minh's history of fighting, do you think that... [inaudible] halting the bombings will bring him to the negotiating table?

KENNEDY: The question was, "With Ho Chi Minh's history of fighting, will a simple halt of the bombing bring him to the negotiating table?" My point is that they have said that they will come to the negotiating table if we stop the bombing. They said it back in 1966. Ho Chi Minh said it, [Soviet premier] Kosygin said it, the foreign minister Pham Van Dong said it. They've all said that they would come to the negotiating table if we stop the bombing. Then what are going to find out? We stop the bombing—and [...] has said they were going to, they'd come to the negotiating table— we stop the bombing and we expect, we say we are going to show up to the negotiating table. They are going... and if they *don't* come to the negotiating table, all of this criticism of the United States that exists within our own country and around the rest of the world will be suddenly disproved. I don't see that we lose anything, particularly with the testimony of Secretary McNamara. Secondly, I think that they will come to the negotiating table, but the only way that we are ever going to find out if they are going to come to the negotiating table is take the step! We can say, "Well, we can't trust Ho Chi Minh, he won't do it," but how are we ever going to find out, how are we ever going to settle the conflict unless we try? That's my point.

[applause]

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Do you feel that if Johnson headed the Democratic ticket, and if "tricky Dick" were head of the Republican party, that Nixon would win the election next year?

KENNEDY: Well, if... the question was that if Johnson headed the Democratic ticket and... [laughter] ...Richard Nixon headed the Republican ticket, do I think President Johnson will win? Well, that's such an iffy question, because I don't... [laughter] I don't want to be... I have some plans to try to change that. [laughter, applause]

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [...] negotiating settlements with Korea? There have been more deaths in Korea since negotiations have been done than there were before; what do you propose to do about Korea?

KENNEDY: Well, let me just say that I don't think, really, that that's correct, there haven't been more deaths since the negotiated...

AUDIENCE MEMBER: This is according to *U.S. News and World Report*...

KENNEDY: No, well...

[laughter]

KENNEDY: Could I suggest that perhaps what you have in mind is that there were more deaths during the period of time of negotiations, but not since the negotiated...

AUDIENCE MEMBER: You can't.

KENNEDY: Well I'm terribly sorry, that's not... [laughter and scattered applause] ...You know, we leave each other, because that... I don't know what to do about it, but I'm afraid that "fact" is inaccurate. In any case, let me just say that what... I think that we eventually have to settle this, and we have to talk to somebody to settle it. [laughter] Go ahead.

[question asked in background]

KENNEDY: I think that what they want is up to them; what kind of government they want and what their relationship with North Vietnam... [applause]

AUDIENCE MEMBER: When you're elected president and peace isn't reached right away...

KENNEDY: And "peace is..." what?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: ...And peace might not be reached...

KENNEDY: Yes...

AUDIENCE MEMBER: ...right away, what will you do about the draft status?

KENNEDY: The question is, "*When* I am elected president," which I thought was marvelous... [applause] "...and peace is not reached immediately, what will I do with the draft status?" What I would like to do eventually in the United States is have a professional army, so that we did not have to depend on the draft. [applause and cheers] But, so that you understand my position clearly—unfortunately I have a "but" in there—I don't think that while the conflict is going on in South Vietnam that we can end the draft, and I think that that burden of that

conflict has to be shared equally by all of our citizens, and therefore I would also be in favor of ending the deferment for students and making the draft on a “rotary system,” on a lottery system, so that everybody takes their chance equally. [applause]

Let me just say about that: the heaviest burden that we have to face, the heaviest burden of this conflict in South Vietnam—you might be opposed to it—but the heaviest burden of the conflict of South Vietnam up to the present time has been borne by the poor, by those who have not for one reason or another been able to go on to a college or a university. For instance, ten percent of our population is Negro, and yet twenty percent of the casualties in South Vietnam up until recently have been Negroes. Twenty percent. Now, the...

AUDIENCE MEMBER: It’s not fair!

KENNEDY: Excuse me?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: That’s not fair!

ONSTAGE: He said it wasn’t fair.

KENNEDY: Yes, well, that’s what I’m trying to... the point I’m trying to make! [applause] The Puerto Ricans, the Mexican Americans, the Indians. I visited an Indian tribe in Idaho. Five sons; three of them in Vietnam, one son had been killed and one had just been drafted again. It was almost impossible for the Indians to go on to a college or to a university. So I think that everybody has to share this burden equally. I think that a man might finish high school and want to run a filling station, or he might want to run some kind of a shop or a store, whatever he might want to do, and somebody else wants to go to a college. I sympathize with both of them. But I think that all of us, with this burden and this conflict that is going on, I think that that burden and that effort must be borne equally by all of our citizens. [applause]

AUDIENCE MEMBER: How do you feel about the way we handled the *Pueblo* incident [...]

SENATOR KENNEDY: The question was, “How do I feel about the way we handled the *Pueblo* incident?”³ Number one, I think that the mistake was made that where this was a ship that was obviously involved in very important work, that it was involved in intelligence work, that there have been statements that have been made by the North Vietnamese prior to the time the *Pueblo* began its mission, that they... that the North Vietnamese were very concerned about the naval activities of our naval vessels off the coast of North Vietnam. I think if... once we decided

³ The U.S.S. *Pueblo*, a naval intelligence ship, was captured by North Korea in January 1968 after North Korean accusations that the ship had trespassed across national borders. At the time of Kennedy’s speech, the crew of the *Pueblo* was still imprisoned in North Korea; they were not released until December 1968.

to send that ship into that area, that it should've been provided with air cover, or with some other kind of security. I think that's where the mistake was made. Secondly...

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Korea!

KENNEDY: Korea, yeah, excuse me. Up off the coast of North Korea, and where the Koreans had made it quite clear that they were opposed to what we were doing, and that they were concerned about the activities of our ship. I think that it should have been provided... the *Pueblo* should have been provided with air cover and with other security. Secondly, as far as what can be done now, I think that there is, other than the diplomatic efforts that we are going to make with the North Koreans and with others, that that's the step that we have to take. I think that we're in a difficult position, but that's what we have to do.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [...] we shouldn't have been there in the first place?

MILLAR [quietly, in foreground]: Mrs. Green suggests two more questions.

KENNEDY [replying to audience comment]: Yeah... That wasn't the answer, but it was... [laughter, applause] I think that is a difficult question for me to answer based on the limited security information I might have about that kind of a situation. I would just say that those ships have provided very useful information to the national security of the United States in the past; whether it was necessary for that particular vessel to be in that particular spot at that particular time, I just am not able to answer.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Bob! When you are president, would you mobilize America, or only the eighteen year olds?

KENNEDY: The question was, if I'm elected President, "Will I mobilize America, or only the eighteen-year-olds?" Well, I tell you... I'm going to concentrate on those who can vote, like you... [laughter] No. I'm going to... I think that this is a national problem... I think that... what has been one of the great problems is the fact that there have been divisions, and divisions between race, and divisions between age groups, and divisions over the war in Vietnam and what our national purpose is, where we're going, what are we trying to accomplish. With the tremendous amount of wealth that we have here in the United States and the tremendous amount of military power, I would hope that we could all work together, in all parts of the United States no matter what their age groups, and that's what I intend to try to do.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Senator Kennedy. Over here.

KENNEDY: I can take one more. Yeah. In the back.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [inaudible] [mention of "income tax"]

KENNEDY: I shouldn't have taken one more question. [laughter] Ah, well. On the first, it's obvious that the war in Vietnam has had a major effect on the balance of payments and the gold crisis. It's a lack of confidence at the moment, and the policies of the United States, with the feeling that the struggle in Vietnam is going to go on continuously, and therefore there is going to be this outflow of gold. And until that conflict is settled, I think we're still going to have difficulty. I think some of the steps that were taken over the period of the last month will have some effects, but they won't slow it down completely. Secondly, on the question of taxes, I am in favor of—because of the kind of programs that I think are necessary for the country—I'm in favor of some tax increase. I am also in favor of tax reform, which I don't think has taken place. I think the highest income brackets, those who make 200,000 dollars a year: dozens of them pay no taxes at all; I think *they* should pay taxes. [applause] One of the wealthiest men in the United States who's got an interest of over a billion, 500 million dollars, in a recent year, paid \$660 in taxes. The next year, he went up to \$685 in taxes. I think that's unsatisfactory. The person in the United States who makes \$200,000 on the average pays the same percentage of income tax as the person in the United States who makes \$11,000 or \$12,000. I think that's unsatisfactory for our middle-income people who are carrying the major burden of our taxes, and I'd like to see that change.

[applause]

Ladies and gentlemen, I ask for your help. I just want to take just thirty seconds more; I *need* your help. I need your help over the period of the next two months. I hope that you'll work in this campaign and make an effort in this campaign. I think it's a question of the direction the state's going to go in, what the direction the United States is going to take, and what we're going to be like in the 1970s, what our relationship is going to be to other nations of the globe. I don't say that the problems will disappear, but I say that we could do much, much better than we've done in the past, and I want your help to change the course of action of the United States of America. Thank you very much.

[applause]

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER [in foreground]: Senator, can I have your autograph? Senator?

[some static for about fifteen seconds; program ends]