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"The Politics in 1972"

Eugene J. McCarthy

Portland State University

November 5, 1971

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[cheering and applause]

GREGORY WOLFE: Mark Peterson and I, on behalf of the speakers' committee and of the University, take a lot of pleasure in welcoming this great audience to hear a very great American. Professor McCarthy is now giving a course at the University of Maryland called "Poetics"—or otherwise pronounced, I guess, "Poetics"—and so I thought maybe the best thing we could do was to welcome him with a small poem by a poet from Southern California, Richard Armour, 'cause I went to the trouble of cleaning for Gene a fairly substantial growth of six months. [audience laughter]

But "The Barefoot Boy Updated" is what I felt would be appropriate to read to our visiting professor and distinguished statesman. "Barefoot boy with cheek of tan, are you a boy, my little man? Or are you with your hair aswirl, no boy at all? Are you a girl? And in those faded jeans with patches and shirt so tattered, nothing matches, are you a starveling lacking care or offspring of a millionaire?" Senator, there are many people speculating in our local press and across the land—especially in the political parties—how candidates can get out the young vote. I wonder, in your current position as professor of "Poetics," you might be employed by both of them as a consultant. The last time you were here I said, and I say again: giants need no introduction. I give you now Senator Eugene McCarthy.

[applause]

EUGENE McCARTHY: Present friends at Portland, I should say it's good to be back again, but particularly good to have this reception from you. I hope that my political position isn't prejudiced by the repeated reference to poetry. I've found that my poet friends generally are encouraging me to be active in politics, and I think they do it with the good of the republic at heart. And more and more of the presidential candidates are referring to me as a good poet. I think I'll try to stay about where President Wolfe put me, somewhere between poetry and politics, at least for the next year and a half.

I feel a certain sympathy with the college students since many of your—not necessarily critics—but the people who spend their time making judgments about young people are saying that you've been somewhat passive about politics, and some even say you've even copped out. And they've been saying the same thing about me, but I think we ought to tell them we've just been resting, and at the right time, why, they'll probably wish we'd copped out or that we'd been... [applause].

There was some reason to rest, I think, and even some reason for disappointment after 1968. First, because many of us were tired. It was a long season. In fact, it was about three seasons of campaigning. And I did protest a little bit at some who came into politics that year in the summertime, but who hadn't been in it in January and February, or even in the spring. There was also, I think, a measure of disappointment because we came so close. If it had been a situation in which we'd really been defeated from the first moment, the disappointment would not have been so great, and particularly since it took some rather friendly referees—not friendly to our side, but to the other side—at Chicago to bring about the results that did occur. And I think also we felt some disappointment as we've gone along because so much of what we advocated which was denounced and opposed at that time not only proved to be right, but has been accepted by most of the politicians—to say nothing of the country— but particularly the politicians who opposed us along the way in 1968, and I more or less resolve not to really say "I told you so," or, speaking for all of us, to say "we told you so," because much of what I said was said by students and by some adults in this country.

But I think that, at this stage, it might be good for us just to have a quick run over what we did advocate and to note that there has been some change since that time. The obvious position with reference to the war has changed since 1968. That doesn't mean that the war has ended, but at least the moral judgment on the war today is different from what it was in 1967 and 1968 and we can take, I think, some consolation from that, in particular the students, for they were among the first to raise the issue of the morality—or the immorality—of the war. While some of us were dealing with the question of whether it was legal or not, some of them dealing

with the question of whether it would succeed or not, you went to the heart of the matter in saying, "Leave out those considerations and make the necessary moral judgment about it, and then proceed to bring it to an end."

In that same year, especially in Chicago, we advocated party reform, and since that time party reform has become the watchword of democratic politics. We dared in the course of that campaign to advocate the recognition of China at a time when Dean Rusk was saying, "If you're not worried enough now, remember that by the year 1900—or the year 2000—there'll be a billion Chinese. Only 800,000 million now and he wanted us to worry... project our worries to the year 2000. Or Robert McNamara saying, "We're going to point the ABM missiles in the direction of China." Now even President Nixon has moved to the point of saying that China is—and he may even go there to be sure. [applause and audience laughter] A little like a moonshot, Republicans have been saying—and others—for so long that it's not there, that it's kind of a test run to bring back a handful of rocks and say, "I've been there and here's the evidence." [laughter]

We talked in that campaign about the need to do something about poverty in this country, even to the point of advocating something very close to a family assistance program with a level of income guaranteed, or at least assured, for every family in this country. It was considered a very radical proposition by some in the Democratic Party in 1968. Now, the Democrats and the president are contending with each other in bidding to establish what the base should be. President Nixon started at \$1600 in 1970 and by the end of that year he was up to \$2400. One Democrat, I think, is advocating \$3,000 now, but he says that's the base from which to negotiate upward. There's one who's advocating \$6500 which he says is the base to negotiate down from, so somewhere between the two, we can be hopeful that a family assistance program may be established for this country.

In New Hampshire, I suggested amnesty for young men who had left the country because they would not participate in the war in Vietnam. [applause] And the Democratic senator in that state said that I was trying to protect draft dodgers and, as I remember, would "give joy to Hanoi," a phrase that they picked up from Dean Rusk. It was one of his more memorable comments; and so today we find amnesty a rather popular position, but one to which we've come very late.

We could go on down the list. I suppose that what was considered the most dangerous thing that I proposed was that J. Edgar Hoover should be removed, and that was—[applause] I noticed the other day that Gerry Ford, who's a Republican leader in the House of Representatives, said he thought Hoover should retire. I was a little bit distressed, because if

you're only three years ahead of Gerry Ford, you're not really showing any great insight or foresight. It's a kind of modest hindsight. You ought to have at least a five-year lead on Gerry Ford, no matter what you propose. [laughter]

Well, in all of this effort, not just the political things I've talked about, but things outside of politics, the effort to do something about corporate responsibility, the students were involved; the effort to do something about ecology in this country, all of you were involved; and in each of these areas there's been a change, at least a change of direction and a change of emphasis. It's gone so far that if you look at the television advertisements of the oil refineries now, you think that they refine oil just to provide bird sanctuaries. [laughter] It's a little bit like the Weyerhaeuser ads, just a place for the foxes and the squirrels, that's why we cut down... [applause] ...provide for browsing for the deer, which they don't get in an ordinary pine forest. [laugher] There's all of these rather constructive views that have begun to show up in the corporate enterprises of this country.

But what you gain by way of change of direction and some positive things, I think we should also note, particularly with reference to students—I can't claim any one of these particular things myself. I was at a testimonial dinner at the Union Theological Seminary in New York a short time ago, honoring John Bennett who is the head of that seminary, and I looked down the head table and it had people like Eugene Carson Blake of the Federal Council of Churches, and John Bennett of Union Theological Seminary, and Robert McAfee Brown who was, I think, head of religion at Stanford, and David Hawk, and a nun, and one or two others, and finally when I got up to speak I said, "Well, I want to apologize, I'm the only person at the head table who hasn't been arrested, to say nothing of being convicted." My defense, then, was that it was awfully hard to get arrested in the United States Senate. The rules... [applause] But among the students, the experience of tear gas and the experience of mace and the experience of being beaten and facing armed National Guardsman and in some cases even of being killed, is an experience and a memory which we should not put aside. [applause]

And the fact that we have not succeeded in all that we've thought and that we've had limited success—neither of these considerations is enough to justify a continuing "dropout," if that's what it's to be called, but on the contrary, it calls for a continuing commitment. In the face of this need, I speak to you a little bit about the politics as I see it shaping up, principally within the Democratic Party. At this stage, they're calling for unity. They don't quite specify what we should be united about, but a kind of unity for the sake of unity. And I think we should acknowledge that, in view of the problems that face the country and the uncertainty as to how we should deal with it, to call for unity at this point is to call for a retreat from commitment, really, and almost a retreat from intelligent inquiry. [applause] Their positive proposition is that

we have to defeat Richard Nixon. That's not a very positive proposition—not very challenging in terms of... [applause] We ought to be concerned with doing much more for the country. [laughter] I'd say that I've moved you with a kind of negative proposition here. Having accepted that, the Democrats were inclined to say, if we're just careful and don't really stand for anything and criticize as he makes mistakes or as he fails to act, that somehow by default we can get into power; and the assumption was that once in power, that they might do something. This is, I think, a wholly unacceptable proposition. That, on the contrary, if he is vulnerable, we ought to take some chances on proposing significant advances in American policies and in programs to deal with the problems of this country. Right? I think we should. [applause]

The extreme of it, I suppose, is the Wattenberg-Scammon approach. You may not know about the book, but they had an idea, and then they wrote a book to prove the idea, and then they went out and found a candidate to prove the book. It's a kind of a... it's not... I shouldn't say it's a precedent. This has been done before, but the proposition there is that the votes that should determine the course of this country, beyond 1972, are those that are closest to the center of whatever the distribution of people in this country is. And they had made a study saying that there is a majority at the center. Well, anyone could prove that; if you start at the center and move out until you have 51 percent, you say, "Well, that's the majority, and it is the center." That would not be so bad, but they say, in effect, that these are the votes that you have to get in order to win. And, for the most part, the people who are caught in that position are those who are most fearful, most afraid of change, and most opposed to change, so the proposition is essentially that both parties should undertake to win the election in 1972 by getting the vote of the people who we can assume are least responsive and least likely to be concerned about the difficulties that face this country. A prescription, really, for... well, it's almost better to say you're representing the silent majority, as Mr. Agnew says. Because then you don't know which majority it is. It might be one that stood for something and was concerned with committing itself to some kind of program of action. But this proposition is not very different from one which was made back in the early days of the Eisenhower administration, when an analyst said that the Republicans were standing firmly astride the authentic American center; that that was their firm position and rather, I thought, a questionable sort of position to present as a political one.

But suggesting now and, as we approach 1972, that a kind of "stand-by politics," or a politics which is directed at those who in our political spectrum represent inertia, really, or a failure to respond is, I hope, a prescription for political failure. Certainly, if it is followed it would mean that the nation will not be well served by either political party, and I think that both parties are under rather severe challenge now. In 1964, they really didn't give the country the kind of choice it deserved—the Republicans offering Senator Goldwater, whose position at that time

we thought was so different from President Johnson's there was no need to think about which one you'd be for. It was an easy choice, it seemed. And then in 1968, on the crucial issue of the war, the parties offered essentially the same position, so that no real chance for choice was given in that year. And so to come along in '72 and suggest that the parties really ought to simply try to get the dead center to support them is, in my judgment, to suggest a continuation of the same kind of politics that gave us no choice and set no new direction for the country in 1968. [applause]

I suggest that the politics of '72 be conducted somewhat in this context. The issue of the war is, in a way, the one that's easiest to handle. It's a problem that's the easiest to deal with because you can end the war if you decide to do it, and this we should insist upon as the position of every candidate or prospective candidate who comes by. [applause] Beyond that, a continuing challenge to the militarism of American government and of American politics, [applause] remembering that Vietnam did not occur in a vacuum. It wasn't that President Johnson got up one night or early in the morning after he had his usual four hours' sleep and said, "I think we ought to have a war in Vietnam." It didn't happen that way. It came out of a whole series of decisions and commitments, some of them quite conscious and some of them, I suppose—not on his part, but on the part of others—almost without reflection. The idea that we had to have the strongest military establishment that the world had ever known, and that took some twenty years to build. We had it so strong that whatever diplomatic problem arose the disposition was to say to the Pentagon, "Do you have a contingency plan for dealing with this problem?" And they said, "We just happen to have one." [laughter] And they said, "Well, how will it work?" And they said, "Well, it'll work. I mean, what do you want?" And you say, "Well, victory." And they say, "Well, that's what it's... that's what it's designed for." And they say, "Where do you want victory? And when do you want it?" And they say, "Well, here it is." And oftentimes the contingency plan looks so good, that they seem to think they ought to just try it and see whether it wouldn't work. But in any case, a tendency to say in any difficulty the United States has so much military power that all it has to do is to say, "Here we come," and the opposition, the challenger, will at that point fail and fade.

Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, I suppose, expressed this approach most clearly—at least comprehensively. He said early, we were going to have enough power not only to meet what our intelligence told us our enemies had, but to meet their potential, and then he expanded that to say, it was not just their potential but the momentum of their potential. Well, it's very difficult to set any limit on what that means. If you begin to deal with the momentum of a potential which is not real, it takes a computer, I think, or a mathematician to project it almost to the point of a kind of infinity. And along with that, an ideological position and an arrogance of righteousness, I suppose, would be the best description of it—the idea that we had a mission

in the world which was to contain Communism and really more or less police the world. This expressed principally in the language and the actions of John Foster Dulles, applied first in the containment of Russia and Europe, which was a quite proper containment, and then gradually expanded until it became a theory for American policy throughout the world. It found us in organizations like SEATO and CENTO and almost every other organization that a group of nations would sign up with us.

And so, when Vietnam arose, instead of making a kind of detached and independent judgment of whether we should be involved or not, it was this military power which said, in effect, "We can win in Vietnam in six weeks, or nine weeks, or three months or... it's just a question of how much of our power you want us to use right away." And the ideological justification was there because supposedly we were going to contain Communism. So with these forces running and presidents coming on who said that they were concerned about what history would say about them—President Johnson saying he would not be the first president to preside over a military defeat, and President Nixon saying he would not be the first to preside over one, and President Johnson saying he was only doing what three presidents before him had done, and President Nixon saying he was only doing what four presidents before him had done—[applause] No one was responsible. It became a running sort of commitment which has to be stopped and which I hope will be stopped.

In addition to that, of course, there is a concern with conditions at home. Principally, I suppose, the administration of justice, because it has become clear to us that there's not one system of justice in this nation, but at least three: the one we like to talk about—the ideal one, the Constitutional one—another one which applies to the poor, to the minorities, and to the young people of this country and to those who dissent and disagree with established position; and another for those who execute justice against the minorities and the poor and the young. The whole system must be re-examined, then. The Bill of Rights—the old Bill of Rights, the traditional one—must be redefined so that freedom of assembly has application in contemporary society, not just the right of several people together, but the right of people to organize and the right of people to protest.

The right of... [applause] the right of freedom of speech has to be redefined under conditions now in which most communications are controlled—newspapers, radio, and television, and publication—and redefined not so much in terms of the right of those who control who say what they want to say, but in terms of the right of the people to the truth. And this has always been the philosophical justification for the right of freedom of speech, namely the right of people to the truth. The right of privacy redefined: one which was developed simply because we were concerned as to whether or not troops were going to be quartered in houses, but now

redefined as we have to deal with electronic devices, bugging and wiretaps, and new equipment which permits people to see through walls, and telephones that are live microphones reporting, or at least available for reports, to whoever may want to take those reports. A new definition of all of these rights, and then we must move on to the acceptance that there are another set of civil rights in this country which we must recognize as within our potential to realize.

I would say the first among these is the right of every person to a decent job. [applause] One which will provide him with sufficient income to support himself and those who are dependent upon him, one which he could hold with some measure of security, and one which gives him, insofar as possible, some satisfaction in its execution. Along with that, [applause] the right of every American to health. The right of every American to decent housing, not in isolation and not in a ghetto, but in a community. [applause] And the right of every American to an education which is becoming to his talents and to his capacities. [applause]

If we are to accomplish these things, it means we have to be prepared to challenge every major institution in American life. [applause] To challenge our economic system—and that means principally to challenge the corporate control of our economy. [applause] This is not particularly radical because we've given to the corporations—by law and by social action—special privileges and special rights. They're not simple free enterprisers. They're not pioneers who went over the mountains. But by social action—by law—they were given exemptions and privileges, and the understanding was that they would prove—that they would, in that organization, be best able to meet the economic needs of the country. So, when you find twenty million poor and five million out of work and twelve million people on relief, you say, "What is the reason for the failure? Is our economy—is our material resources not sufficient to meet the needs of this nation?" And the answer to that is that they *are* sufficient. It is a difficulty in the form of corporate organization which we have and we say, "Well, that's an open question." Or is the trouble principally because of interference from outside, because of governmental policies which are inadequate? We say, well, the answer to that is yes and no.

The point is that the challenge must go to each of these points. Government policy—to call upon the government to stop wasteful expenditures in the military obviously, in space, the space program. What fallout from it, you know. President Nixon said that the three great thrills of his life were first his election to the president and then two moonshots. Well—[laughter] That's almost—I mean, it's nice to have him made happy and thrilled, but... [laughter and applause] When you consider that each shot cost roughly half a billion dollars, and when you consider some of the problems that we have on Earth, the price of a happy and thrilled

president runs too high. [laughter and applause] And even the entertainment of Walter Cronkite for those [laughter] five or six days, I think, we could do without.

To move not only in the government sector but also to move in private areas of expenditure. And, in my judgment, the most wasteful industry we have, and one which should be examined because of its bearing upon the general good of this country, is the automobile industry. [applause] They make cars that are bigger than we want them to be. They use more fuel, they pollute more, they take up more space. A friend of mine said that if Marx had known about the automobile, he would have written another chapter. [laughter and applause] What you need to stimulate capitalism is either war or the automobile, and it does essentially the same things, including—President Johnson used to say, "Okay, more people were killed on the highways this week than in Vietnam." It wasn't a good argument either for highways or for Vietnam [laughter and applause] but it was a realistic presentation of it.

So to challenge the corporation, to challenge our educational institutions, to challenge the medical profession and the medical institutions of this country, [applause] to challenge government and, as the basis for all of these challenges, to raise a continuing challenge in the politics of America. And it's to this that my immediate appeal to you is directed, asking you to make a very firm commitment, not in terms of persons and not necessarily in terms of parties, because I'm not sure that all the persons are yet in the race and I'm not even sure that all the parties are in. [applause] But, in any case, to say that you will do what you can to vindicate the ideals and the beliefs upon which this nation was founded, but beyond that to prove also that Americans can respond by commitment and by practical action to demonstrate that this government is not only one which can be made effective, but one which can be genuinely representative. We could be truly a self-governed and a properly governed community. Thank you.

[applause]

HOST: Senator McCarthy will be happy to answer your questions at this time.

[tape is interrupted and resumes recording in the middle of McCARTHY's response to a question]

McCARTHY: That's one of those mixed cases. The record shows very clearly that every time we had a straight and effective run against the oil depletion that I voted against the oil companies. Yeah, we had some procedural votes which were taken out of context and misrepresented, but the only, I think, two times that we've done anything to the oil companies, the action came out

of committees of which I was a member, and the record of building the case against them and of the vote is a clear one. So I'm not particularly worried about that. There are worse things, I'd say, than the oil depletion allowance that's going on but, the record on that case is clear anyway.

SPEAKER [unidentified]: Senator McCarthy, I was wondering—if you were elected to Chief Executive, what would you do to reform the Army so that the persecution which is against Colonel Anthony Herbert because he had the guts to stand up and say, "Something is wrong, we need an honest and honorable army?" Well, he's being harrassed now. What would you do to reform the Army so that we have an honest and honorable army that those that want an army can be proud of?

McCARTHY: This is a question about what do you do to reform the Army and see to it that men in the military receive proper treatment and I suppose we'd say justice. When I talked about three systems of justice, I was talking only about those that affect civilians. It is a fact that we have a fourth system which has it in almost the same inequities and inconsistencies that we find in the civilian system of justice, and the first order of action, I think, should be—with reference to the military—is to review and revise the whole system of military justice, and also to break through the traditional privacy of records with reference to the military. And there has never been a time in which the likelihood of that taking place that seems to me as promising as what we have now, because of what has been revealed about the manner in which the military operates. And the Herbert case is, I think, the outstanding example of that.

SPEAKER [unidentified]: Are there any plans for the upcoming primaries, at all? Have you at least thought about entering them?

McCARTHY: Well, this question is about the upcoming primaries. I haven't thought about them. I don't think the point has reached yet as to which I should be making any decision about them. I would rather wait and look for a while.

SPEAKER [unidentified]: Could you explain your position on the use of the military?

McCARTHY: On the use of the military? Would you be a little more specific? I mean...

SPEAKER [unidentified]: What do you feel is the military's role [...] [off microphone, unintelligible]

McCARTHY: Well, this is a complicated question about what do I think is the role of the military in the country. Let me just make one or two points about it. What we have been concerned about is the military—without in a formal way being invited in to make policy—have, by their very presence and strength, been a policy-making force in this country, and that in some cases, in Vietnam for example, you get the impression that—this was true under President Johnson, but I think almost more in evidence under President Nixon—that somehow they hoped that out of military operations a policy will emerge, and that the program and the tactics then become strategy and become policy. I don't fault the military too much, because I think they've been asked to operate without any political directives in Vietnam. No end set for them, no point designated in which the civilian government would say, "If this doesn't work, you can get out. We'll take responsibility." The military ought to be—it seems to me—trained to accept that if they're told not to fight anymore, they won't be disgraced, because there are circumstances under which they should not continue to fight, and the political leader should take responsibility for it.

So what we need is a wholly new thinking, I think, and conception of the role of the military as a continuing force in American life, instead of allowing it to develop, as it has, into an almost separate center of political power and of economic power and of educational power. [applause] I've been concerned about this for a long time. I recall a speech I gave in 1960—President Kennedy was running. I was asked whether he'd send an ambassador to the Vatican. And I said I didn't know, but I thought that if he asked me, I would say that there were ten or fifteen places that he ought to look to before he looked to the Vatican, and I said if I were president I'd like to have an ambassador to the Pentagon. I think that would be a good opener. [laughter and applause] In any case, I have a whole speech on what to do with the military. I won't give it to you now. Yes?

SPEAKER [unidentified]: [off microphone, inaudible]

EUGENE MCCARTHY: This question is about equal rights for women. I don't want to sound like a candidate yet and say, "I'm right on that issue," but I am. [laughter] I've been a sponsor of the Equal Rights Amendment for many years, and was in the last Senate session that I was a member of. I don't have any problems with that at all.

SPEAKER [unidentified]: [partially inaudible] What is your feeling about a planned economy, here in the United States? [...]

EUGENE MCCARTHY: The question is whether I'm for a planned economy. Well, I'd like to see one that's more planned than this is. [laughter] But as an absolutely planned one—I don't think

we've reached that point. I think what we've got to do is to try to make the institutions we have work more effectively, and then to establish a national backup program like national unemployment and national health insurance programs and supplements to take care of. But I'm not yet at all satisfied that a totally planned economy is the way for us to meet the needs of this nation. Yes, sir?

SPEAKER [unidentified]: Senator, for several years now you've been talking to us about some of the changes that you hope we can enact. Some of them are very profound changes, such as reevaluating the role of the United States as the police force of the world, or reevaluating the role of the corporations. What I'd like to know is, where in your personal experience or your personal roles, or where in your observation of historical experience, do you personally have the faith to expect these changes to be enacted? Or is there another alternative? Are you a person who feels it is your duty to articulate the need for these changes since it's your Christian duty to do so, or something of the matter, and that you, as a person, don't expect to see the enactment of the profound changes that you are calling for?

McCARTHY: I'll repeat that for you. I think I can summarize. He said: do I really think that the reforms or the changes that I'm talking about can be achieved, or do I look upon my mission as that of a kind of John the Baptist, a kind of preaching the word ahead of the change. I think there are very many hopeful signs that we can bring about significant change. I would say within a period of five or ten years, if we commit ourselves to it. The trouble is, we haven't even... we should have begun to raise questions about institutional operations right after World War II, because the signs of failure were present. But at least we've now moved on to the point of severe criticism, and I'm hopeful that in the course of the '72 campaign that we can move beyond criticism to talk about very specific programs that would at least set things moving in the right direction. And I don't look upon myself as a precursor for anyone at this time. I hope we can kind of put it together.

SPEAKER [unidentified]: [inaudible]

EUGENE MCCARTHY: Well, that's right. It isn't equitable. It's got a long way to go. We have to do some things with that. This is the kind of general backup program that I... one more question.

SPEAKER [unidentified]: How do you feel about the legalization of marijuana?

EUGENE MCCARTHY: Well, I can give you a quick answer. This is the... legal case for marijuana. These questions come up. I think the laws with reference to marijuana are ridiculous in this country. [cheering and applause]

[several voices speaking over one another]

SPEAKER [unidentified]: [...] I think it's time for Eugene McCarthy to make a firm commitment.

McCARTHY: We'll get some to you later on.

SPEAKER [unidentified]: Would you consider a Black [person] for a running mate?

McCARTHY: Oh, I'd... this is the last question. This is the vice-presidential question you get everywhere. I feel that asking someone whether you'd run someone with you for vice president, in view of what we've been running lately, is a minimal request. I would even consider running, if you really want to lay it down, positions in the Cabinet or running with a member of a minority—Black or a woman. I think the two countries that are best run today, in terms of their problems, are India and Israel, and both of them have women at the head, so there's no problem there. It's a question of the person, and we'll see along the way. All right. [applause]

[program ends at 00:45:32; recording ends at 00:49:36]