

*Core Idea: THINK
Engage in thoughtful dialogue.*

Speech of Acceptance

July 26, 1952

Adlai Stevenson II's Address to the Democratic National Convention, at the Coliseum, Chicago, Illinois

Excerpt:

“Let’s talk sense to the American people. Let’s tell them the truth, that there are no gains without pains, that there—that we are now on the eve of great decisions, not easy decisions, like resistance when you’re attacked, but a long, patient, costly struggle which alone can assure triumph over the great enemies of man—war, poverty, and tyranny—and the assaults upon human dignity which are the most grievous consequences of each.”

Background:

The 1952 presidential contest offered a daunting array of seemingly intractable problems, the greatest of which was the very real risk of global thermonuclear war with the Soviet Union. Stateside, the anti-communist investigations of U.S. Senator Joseph McCarthy threatened to destabilize the federal government, and in the Deep South, African Americans were beginning their long struggle for civil and political equality. In the wider world, the stalemated Korean War remained unresolved, both militarily or diplomatically.

In his acceptance speech, Stevenson called the burdens of the presidency enough to “stagger the imagination.” The office’s “potential for good or evil,” he added, “smothers exultation and converts vanity to prayer.”

In late July 1952, delegates to the Democratic National Convention gathered in Chicago to pick their presidential candidate. Several weeks earlier in the same city, Republicans nominated Gen. Republican Dwight D. Eisenhower. The moderate, popular, and, most importantly, electable Eisenhower was the choice of the Republican Party’s moderate wing interested in breaking the Democrats twenty-year stranglehold on the White House.

On the Democratic side, President Harry S. Truman, saddled with the Korean War and charges of endemic corruption within the executive branch, decided against running for reelection. In early 1952, Truman asked Stevenson, then governor of Illinois, to seek the nomination. Stevenson demurred, telling Truman he had unfinished work in Springfield. In the months leading up to the national convention, though, a cagey Stevenson refused to disqualify himself from the consideration.

It wasn't until the convention was underway that Stevenson finally agreed to enter his name into nomination. Although faced with a challenge from the early favorite, Tennessee Sen. Estes Kefauver, he won the nomination on the third ballot.

In this brief but eloquent acceptance speech, Stevenson pledged to “talk sense to the American people.” He made no candy-coated promises of a better tomorrow all-too common in convention oratory, but rather warned of a “long, patient, costly struggle.”

Near the end of his acceptance speech, Stevenson declared: “Better we [the Democratic Party] lose the election than mislead the people, and better we lose than misgovern the people.”

FULL TEXT of July 26, 1952 speech of acceptance before the Democratic National Convention, Chicago:

Mr. President, Ladies and Gentlemen of the Convention, My Fellow Citizens. I accept your nomination and your program.

I should have preferred to hear those words uttered by a stronger, a wiser, a better man than myself. But, after listening to the President's speech, I feel better about myself!

None of you, my friends, can wholly appreciate what is in my heart. I can only hope that you may understand my words. They will be few.

I have not sought the honor you have done me. I *could* not seek it because I aspired to another office, which was the full measure of my ambition. One does not treat the highest office within the gift of the people of Illinois as an alternative or as a consolation prize.

I *would* not seek your nomination for the Presidency because the burdens of that office stagger the imagination. Its potential for good or evil, now and in the years of our lives smothers exultation and converts vanity to prayer.

I have asked the Merciful Father—the Father of us all—to let this cup pass from me. But from such dread responsibility one does not shrink in fear, in self-interest, or in false humility.

So, “If this cup may not pass from me, except I drink it, Thy will be done.”

That my heart has been troubled, that I have not sought this nomination, that I could not seek it in good conscience, that I would not seek it in honest self-appraisal, is not to say

that I value it the less. Rather it is that I revere the office of the Presidency of the United States.

And now, my friends, that you have made your decision, I will fight to win that office with all my heart and soul. And, with your help, I have no doubt that we will win.

You have summoned me to the highest mission within the gift of any people. I could not be more proud. Better men than I were at hand for this mighty task, and I owe to you and to them every resource of mind and of strength that I possess to make your deed today a good one for our country and for our Party. I am confident too, that your selection of a candidate for Vice President will strengthen me and our Party immeasurably in the hard, the implacable work that lies ahead of all of us.

I know you join me in gratitude and respect for the great Democrats and the leaders of our generation whose names you have considered here in this convention, whose vigor, whose character, whose devotion to the Republic we love so well have won the respect of countless Americans and have enriched our Party. I shall need them, we shall need them, because I have not changed in any respect since yesterday. Your nomination, awesome as I find it, has not enlarged my capacities. So I am profoundly grateful and emboldened by their comradeship and their fealty, and I have been deeply moved by their expressions of good will and of support. And I cannot, my friends, resist the urge to take the one opportunity that has been afforded me to pay my humble respects to a very great and good American, whom I am proud to call my kinsman, Alben Barkley of Kentucky.

Let me say, too, that I have been heartened by the conduct of this Convention. You have argued and disagreed, because as Democrats you care and you care deeply. But you have disagreed and argued without calling each other liars and thieves, without despoiling our best traditions in any naked struggles for power.

And you have written a platform that neither equivocates, contradicts, nor evades. You have restated our Party's record, its principles and its purposes, in language that none can mistake, and with firm confidence in justice, freedom and peace on earth that will raise the hearts and the hopes of mankind for that distant day when no one rattles a saber and no one drags a chain.

For all these things I am grateful to you. But I feel no exultation, no sense of triumph. Our troubles are all ahead of us. Some will call us appeasers; others will say we are the war party. Some will say we are reactionary. Others will say that we stand for socialism. There will be inevitable cries of "throw the rascals out;" "it's time for a change;" and so on and so on.

We'll hear all those things and many more besides. But we will hear nothing that we have not heard before. I am not too much concerned with partisan denunciation, with epithets and abuse, because the workingman, the farmer, the thoughtful businessmen, all know that they are better off than ever before, and they all know that the greatest danger to free

enterprise in this country died with the great depression under the hammer blows of the Democratic Party.

Nor am I afraid that the precious two-party system is in danger. Certainly the Republican Party looked brutally alive a couple of weeks ago and I mean both Republican Parties! Nor am I afraid the Democratic Party is old and fat and indolent. After 150 years it has been old for a long time; and it will never be indolent as long as it looks forward and not back, as long as it commands the allegiance of the young and the hopeful who dream the dreams and see the visions of a better America and a better world.

You will hear many sincere and thoughtful people express concern about the continuation of one party in power for twenty years. I don't belittle this attitude. But change for the sake of change has no absolute merit in itself. If our greatest hazard is preservation of the values of Western civilization, in our self-interest alone, if you please, is it the part of wisdom to change for the sake of change to a party with a split personality; to a leader, whom we all respect, but who has been called upon to minister to a hopeless case of political schizophrenia?

If the fear is corruption in official position, do you believe with Charles Evans Hughes that guilt is personal and knows no party? Do you doubt the power of any political leader, if he has the will to do so, to set his own house in order without his neighbors having to burn it down?

What does concern me, in common with thinking partisans of both parties, is not just winning the election but how it is won, how well we can take advantage of this great quadrennial opportunity to debate issues sensibly and soberly. I hope and pray that we Democrats, win or lose, can campaign not as a crusade to exterminate the opposing party, as our opponents seem to prefer, but as a great opportunity to educate and elevate a people whose destiny is leadership, not alone of a rich and prosperous, contented country as in the past, but of a world in ferment.

And, my friends, more important than winning the election is governing the nation. That is the test of a political party—the acid, final test. When the tumult and the shouting die, when the bands are gone and the lights are dimmed, there is the stark reality of responsibility in an hour of history haunted with those gaunt, grim specters of strife, dissension and materialism at home, and ruthless, inscrutable and hostile power abroad.

The ordeal of the twentieth century—the bloodiest, most turbulent era of the whole Christian age—is far from over. Sacrifice, patience, understanding and implacable purpose may be our lot of years to come. Let's face it. Let's talk sense to the American people. Let's tell them the truth, that there are no gains without pains, that we are now on the eve of great decisions, not easy decisions, like resistance when you're attacked, but a long, patient, costly struggle which alone can assure triumph over the great enemies of man—war, poverty, and tyranny—and the assaults upon human dignity which are the most grievous consequences of each.

Let's tell them that the victory to be won in the twentieth century, this portal to the Golden Age, mocks the pretensions of individual acumen and ingenuity. For it is a citadel guarded by thick walls of ignorance and of mistrust which do not fall before the trumpets' blast or the politicians' imprecations or even a general's baton. They are, my friends, walls that must be directly stormed by the hosts of courage, of morality and of vision, standing shoulder to shoulder, unafraid of ugly truth, contemptuous of lies, half truths, circuses, and demagoguery.

The people are wise—wiser than the Republicans think. And the Democratic Party is the people's party, not the labor party, not the farmers' party, not the employers' party—it is the party of no one because it is the party of everyone.

That I think, is our ancient mission. Where we have deserted it, we have failed. With your help there will be no desertion now. Better we lose the election than mislead the people and better we lose than misgovern the people. Help me to do the job in this autumn of conflict and of campaign; help me to do the job in these years of darkness, doubt, and of crisis which stretch beyond the horizon of tonight's happy vision, and we will justify our glorious past and the loyalty of silent millions who look to us for compassion, for understanding and for honest purpose. Thus we will serve our great tradition greatly.

I ask of you all you have; I will give to you all I have, even as he who came here tonight and honored me, as he has honored you—the Democratic Party—by a lifetime of service and bravery that will find him an imperishable page in the history of the Republic and of the Democratic Party—President Harry S. Truman.

And, finally, my friends, in the staggering task you have assigned me, I shall always try “to do justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with my God.”

— Adlai E. Stevenson II

Discussion Questions:

1. How did Adlai Stevenson feel about running for president in 1952?
2. What were some of the tough issues he saw on the horizon?
3. What was at risk if the American public was uninformed?

Keywords: 1952 presidential race, Joseph McCarthy, Korean War, Dwight Eisenhower, Harry Truman, Democratic Party, Democratic Party platform, Republican Party platform, “talk sense”