An Ethic for Survival

May 23, 1961

Adlai Stevenson II's Address before the Jewish Theological Seminary, New York City

Excerpt:

"[T]here is, in every culture and every society, much that everyone can respect, and from which everyone can learn. There is no group of people so mean and so humble that they have only to be our pupils, and cannot in any respect offer us instruction."

Background:

> In this brief but perceptive speech, Stevenson called on American citizens to open their eyes and ears to the wider world. He believed it was important to listen to and learn from other nations, even those at odds with American interests.
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> Stevenson delivered this speech during the Cold War, a time when the U.S. and the Soviet Union threatened to annihilate each other with nuclear weapons. "War is no longer rational, we say, yet the response to our mistrust of one another is more lethal weapons," he told his audience. "It is no wonder that this is the anxious age and that we want an ethic—an ethic for survival."
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> Survival, Stevenson believed, depended on nations using nonviolent means to settle their differences. He believed the United Nations offered a peaceful forum for nations to discuss their problems and settle their grievances. As an example, he cited the UN's success in establishing international ethical standards in areas such as of human rights. "The creation of a world of civilized order is the victory of persuasion over force," declared Stevenson, paraphrasing Plato.

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FULL TEXT of May 23, 1961 speech, "An Ethic for Survival," before the Jewish Theological Seminary, New York City:

I cannot pretend to be an expert in a subject so vast and complex as ethics. But as an ex-politician I can assure you that it is very flattering to be asked to discuss it.

Dr. Finkelstein [Louis Finkelstein, chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary] and his associates at the Jewish Theological Seminary have devoted lives to study and reflection on this subject, and in their presence I feel most humble about expressing any

views of my own.

But I can express my gratitude to all of you whose contributions have created a foundation in my name for the study of ethics in international relations. In my years in public life I have enjoyed many honors and I have been richly rewarded with the loyalty and confidence of many friends. But nothing has moved or pleased me more. I am grateful that you should consider my name to be a fitting symbol for such a noble undertaking. I hope your generosity has not exceeded your judgment!

But I am sure that the Stevenson Foundation, under the wise and understanding guidance of Dr. Finkelstein and this famous center of theology and thought, will make valuable contributions to the search for those enduring values which transcend the day-to-day frictions which beset the world.

Over the centuries scores of great men have laid down a mosaic of ethical concepts treating with almost every aspect of human life. Yet, strangely enough, in 1961 millions of persons the world over appear to be groping for new ethical guidelines as if they had never before been traced, or as if the old ones were no longer relevant. This seems to me curious, and I wonder if we can trace this uneasiness and search for a new ethic to the nuclear power balance between East and West. Certainly men everywhere are now living under a new shadow of fear as the horrendous and universal implications of nuclear holocaust become more apparent.

We are, it seems, inextricably caught up by a devouring Frankenstein of our own creation—so complex and so volatile that even those directing it appear unable to control it. I suppose that many of us even long for the good old days of limited war with conventional weapons. But with such mistrust in the world, while we dread to go forward we seem to be unable to go back or even to stop this death march.

As the apprehensions caused by this Damoclean power struggle have mounted in the breasts of men everywhere, they have responded with ineffective, piecemeal protests. War is no longer rational, we say, yet the response to our mistrust of one another is more lethal weapons. And then to loudly proclaim that we never plan to use them.

It is no wonder that this is the anxious age and that we want an ethic—an ethic for survival.

Yet the very fact that man is acutely aware that he can no longer resolve his differences by force may well prove to be the key to his salvation. But practical steps are needed—and quickly.

Mere awareness of peril has never been known to eliminate it. The world is still very much a pressure cooker, and new ways must be found to release its tensions through nondestructive channels.

I think a relevant precept to remember in our quest for a world ethic was first stated by

Plato when he said: “The creation of a world of civilized order is the victory of persuasion over force.” Implicit in Plato’s practical thinking is the axiom that men will always be at odds over one thing or another. If such is the case, and so far there is little reason to doubt it, then we must devise means of equal durability for settling our contentions in a nonviolent manner.

It is for the realization of this end that the United Nations was founded. And for an organization so young and still so vulnerable, it has, in good measure, been successful. Its attempts to establish some international ethical standards, of international conduct and human rights, has made it a symbol of hope for millions of people all over the world.

A second and equally important precept is that men have as many similarities as they have differences and, as Prime Minister Nehru said: “We must learn to stress these similarities in order to create a harmonious atmosphere in which we can quietly and amicably work out our disagreements.”

These are grand precepts of incontestable validity, but what is to be done about implementing them, and who will do the job? It seems to me that most of the institutions and people needed to further better understanding among men or to arbitrate their differences already exist.

Most countries in the world have religions, laws, educated leaders, scholars, and great institutions of learning. Almost every country has access to the United Nations.

Buttressing all this are millions of other human beings who would like nothing better than to live in peace and friendship with their neighbors, be they down the block or on the other side of the world.

But, whether we care to admit it or not, diplomacy until very recently has been rooted in the Machiavellian principle that: “Where the safety or interests of the homeland are at stake there should be no question of reflecting whether a thing is just or unjust, humane or cruel, praiseworthy or shameful . . . one must take only that course of action which will secure the country’s life and liberty.”

I suspect that many statesmen still hold to this basic tenet and certainly the Communists acknowledge no greater interest than their own.

But today’s statesmen must seek to improve the state of the world as well as the state of the nation. If it was once true that decisions were based solely on the interests of the state, it is now equally true that power politics and war are anachronistic. Today the ideals of individual dignity and liberty, and a human community transcending national boundaries, are the growing notions and the unfolding hope of world community and peace.

In relations among men, it is not enough to help those who are at a disadvantage, but it is necessary also to save, and if possible to increase their self-respect. Perhaps the most significant contribution of the New Deal to our life was not the fact that it brought

security and help to many who lacked both before, but that it gave it to them as a right, as citizens of our country, and not as charity, for which one expected gratitude and which was to be accepted with appropriate humility.

The problem of our time hinges to some extent on whether this principle can be applied also among nations. We in America are certainly expending more on the help of less advantageously placed peoples than has ever been expended by any other people. Yet something more is needed—a contribution to the sense of self-respect, of dignity of these ancient societies and civilizations, which are now emerging into effective influence on the world.

How to develop this self-respect among peoples who have never known it as individuals, and having dimly felt it as tribes and nations are losing it in confrontation with the powerful of the earth, is a challenge to our ingenuity, and our wisdom.

Much has already been achieved through the establishment of the United Nations. Once more, we have created an institution, in which the weakest of peoples has a voice, and a vote, which in difficult moments is sought by the powerful.

Yet there remains one aspect of the self-respect of peoples. Like the individuals composing them, so nations and states are more than bodies. They also are minds, and their minds require a sense of dignity, no less than their bodies.

When this sense of dignity is denied them, it is frequently replaced with belligerent and even chauvinistic, unrealistic and unthinking nationalism, which astounds the older and more highly developed peoples. We see this so often among the new countries. But the ferocity and narrowness which are born out of self-depreciation, cannot be exorcised except by appreciation. And this appreciation should itself be offered not as charity, but as a human right. That the small states exercise such decisive influence in the United Nations, for example, is a major contribution to this appreciation, this right, and we can hope that the consciousness of their power in this new forum can and will help to develop self-appreciation, self-confidence and dignity among the new states.

If there were no reason to respect ancient, and what are often called primitive societies and cultures, we could not by sheer will develop that feeling toward them. But fortunately for mankind, there is, in every culture and every society, much that everyone can respect, and from which everyone can learn. There is no group of people so mean and so humble that they have only to be our pupils, and cannot in any respect offer us instruction. That in fact is one of the distinctive qualities of Homo sapiens. Wherever he has organized himself as a society (and he has done so wherever he exists), he has created a tradition, a system of sanctions and habits which we might properly call “law,” a language, a collective, as well as an individual, conscience.

In each of these traditions, systems of sanctions, and dialects of morals, there is a residue of what might be called wisdom. Much of what is done in the name of this wisdom may seem to us of another world, utter folly, just as no doubt much of what we do must seem

bizarre to peoples of other backgrounds.

Certainly, we of the West can scarcely boast of the manner in which we have twice in our time fumbled our way into the most ferocious of all wars, and seem to be preparing for a third even more destructive. No folly perpetrated in any simple and primitive culture can approach the collective folly, as exhibited in the tragedy of the two world wars of the first half of this century, and the menace of a possible third one in the second half.

Yet despite these follies, and those attendant on them, like the worldwide rise in the rate of crime, especially among the youth, Western civilization certainly contains, as no one will deny, much that is wise, and which other peoples could ponder to their benefit. May this not be likewise true of the primitive races? And may it not be that one of the gravest failures of Western thought has been its underestimate of this residue of wisdom in other societies than its own?

Perhaps none of us has ever thought of the Tibetan people, who in our time have been exposed to so much suffering, as one by whom we could be instructed. Their manners and ways certainly seemed strange to most people. What was one to think of a people which considered it wrong to destroy even the most pestiferous insect? And yet is there not something for us to learn from this astonishing respect for life, where it is impossible for a cultured person to kill a fly, as it might be for a similarly situated person among us to walk naked through the streets?

Is it possible that one of the world's urgent needs in our time is really a collective Socrates, who was in his time called by the Oracle of Delphi, the wisest of men, solely, he maintains, because he alone knew his shortcomings and tried so hard to learn from all men.

What a remarkable pedagogue he was, who was able to give his young disciples instruction, while at the same time increasing their self-confidence in their own ability to think. And what a glorious place in the annals of history awaits that group of people, and that institution, which seeks above all to make sure that those whom it encounters, realize that they have much to teach.

So I therefore applaud the efforts being made by your Seminary under the guidance and leadership of Dr. Finkelstein to create just such a forum and institution. What has been achieved by your Institute for Religious and Social Studies and by the Conference on Science, Philosophy and Religion, which it sponsors, by the Herbert H. Lehman Institute on Ethics, by your radio and television programs in this area is already impressive. It is perhaps significant that while it cannot be said that the publications of the Conference on Science, Philosophy and Religion are popular reading in this country, I am told some of them have gone through eight editions in Japan.

It is not an accident that an institution, which stands at the apex of your own Jewish tradition, should be so concerned with the problem of mutual respect of men. All great religions and philosophies share the doctrine that men must learn to love and respect one

another, and that they have to discover in each other that which demands respect and love. But in your instance, history fortifies this tradition, in a special way. You know as scripture puts it "the spirit of the stranger," for during centuries you have suffered indignity and persecution, probably unparalleled both in extent and continuity in the history of any other people.

And surprisingly in our own civilized century and our highly civilized Western world, your brethren underwent greater torment and suffering than any recorded in your own long history. Yet throughout this period of suffering and indignity, your ancestors knew how to preserve their soul and mind: seeing in their tradition something worth not only dying for but for which they were willing to court contumely and disdain. They had a purpose to fulfill in the human drama, and the cost to themselves as individuals or as a group mattered little, if at all. Not all peoples have such a built-in machinery for the preservation of their own sense of dignity; but intuitively, you, scholars and laymen alike, recognize its importance.

From this, I take it, springs the desire manifested by so many of you here tonight to continue and to expand this aspect of the labors of the great institution in whose name you are gathered here.

Your desire to expand and perpetuate the aspect of your work dealing with ethics and human relations, your aspiration to hold conferences under the aegis of your institute for religious and social studies in other parts of the world, and your ultimate goal of a world academy, which will devote itself solely to the extraction of the wisdom implicit in various intellectual and cultural traditions, seems to me not only praiseworthy, but to hold forth a promise of great good to mankind.

So it is important for religions to explore those common human values which give people everywhere a sense of belonging to a common world community. For if the growing self-consciousness of national cultures increases, the creedal differences in religious systems may be exploited to accentuate tension in the world society.

We would then have, as we have had in the past, the anomaly of universalist religions undermining world brotherhood.

So I see a great opportunity here to further the search for those enduring values which transcend the divisive frictions between nations. While each country supports its national interest through an ethical rationalization, human progress can only be achieved if a way is found to identify the ethical ideas which are the basis for long-range goals helpful to all men.

I am proud and grateful to be identified with such healing scholarship [Arthur D. Morse's 1967 work *While* Six *Million Died:* A *Chronicle of American Apathy*]. And I would be even more honored and grateful if the foundation just established in my name held an occasional seminar for statesmen. If they could be induced to divorce themselves for even a few days from the griminess of daily politics and plunge into this new Walden Pond,

they will, I feel, be much better leaders the rest of the year.

— Adlai E. Stevenson II

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Discussion Questions:

1. What is "mutually assured destruction", and how did that influence Stevenson's thoughts on modern war?
2. What institution did Stevenson believe was the answer against the "devouring" spread of modern war?
3. Did Stevenson believe that peaceful nations owed a responsibility to other nations in need? What was the situation in Tibet that he was referencing?
4. Who was Machiavelli, and why did Stevenson believe that "Machiavellian" politics were more dangerous than ever in the nuclear age?

Keywords: United Nations, UN, Israeli-Palestinian, Zionism, Louis Finkelstein, Jewish Theological Seminary, nuclear ethics, nuclear bomb, Plato, Jawaharlal Nehru, Machiavelli, communism, individual dignity, New Deal, Tibet, Holocaust, Walden Pond