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COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

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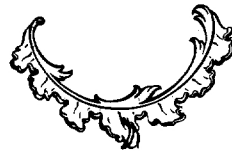
C. EVERETT KOOP, M.D., Sc.D.

SURGEON GENERAL

OF THE

U.S. PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICE

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES



PRESENTED AT THE COMMENCEMENT EXERCISES
OF THE F. EDWARD HEBERT SCHOOL OF MEDICINE OF THE
UNIFORMED SERVICES UNIVERSITY OF THE HEALTH SCIENCES
WASHINGTON, D.C.

MAY 20, 1989

(GREETINGS TO HOSTS, GUESTS, FRIENDS, ETC.)

I AM DEEPLY TOUCHED BY YOUR INVITATION TO BE YOUR COMMENCEMENT SPEAKER THIS YEAR ... FOR THE SECOND YEAR IN A ROW ... A UNIQUE HONOR FOR ME.

YOU'VE GIVEN ME THIS HONOR, AND I SINCERELY APPRECIATE IT.

BUT THAT IS NOT THE ONLY GIFT I'VE RECEIVED AT THE HEBERT SCHOOL OF MEDICINE HERE AT U.S.U.H.S. DESPITE MY BUREAUCRATIC RESPONSIBILITIES, YOU'VE NEVERTHELESS ACCEPTED ME AS YOUR COLLEAGUE IN THE HEALING ARTS.

U.S.U.H.S. STUDENTS AND FACULTY HAVE GATHERED ME IN AS A FELLOW PHYSICIAN WHO IS STILL STRUGGLING -- ALONG WITH THE REST OF YOU -- TO UNDERSTAND AND TO FULFILL BOTH THE SCOPE AND THE DEPTH OF OUR OATH OF SERVICE TO COUNTRY ... AND TO MANKIND.

I'VE ALSO FOUND GREAT UNDERSTANDING AND COMFORT FROM AMONG MY PEERS IN THE OTHER UNIFORMED SERVICES, MY FELLOW SURGEONS GENERAL IN PARTICULAR AND THE CHIEFS OF MEDICAL SERVICES.

THEY'VE COUNSELED ME WHEN I WAS TROUBLED ABOUT THE COURSE OF HEALTH CARE IN THE SERVICES, AND THEY IN TURN LISTENED TO MY COUNSEL WITH PATIENCE, GREAT GOOD GRACE, AND A MEASURE OF CHARITY AS WELL. FOR ALL THAT, I THANK THEM MOST SINCERELY.

KNOWING WHAT I KNOW TODAY, I WANT TO TELL THE AMERICAN PEOPLE THAT OUR COUNTRY IS IN GOOD HANDS ... THAT WE AMERICANS ARE DEFENDED BY MEN AND WOMEN WHO WILL MEET AND DEFEAT ANY ENEMY -- WHETHER IT BE AN ARMY FROM WITHOUT ... OR A DISEASE FROM WITHIN.

I LOVE YOU ALL ... BUT THERE'S A SPECIAL SPOT IN MY HEART FOR THOSE IN THE UNIFORM OF THE U.S. PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICE. YOU ARE "MY PEOPLE." THERE ARE JUST A FEW OF YOU ... BUT YOU'RE A PRECIOUS FEW ... PRECIOUS TO ME ... TO THE P.H.S. ITSELF ... AND PRECIOUS TO OUR NATION.

IF I SOUND A LITTLE SENTIMENTAL, I GUESS IT'S BECAUSE I FEEL SENTIMENTAL. IN 6 WEEKS I WILL GO ON LEAVE AND BECOME "INACTIVE" ... AND THAT WILL CERTAINLY BE A NEW EXPERIENCE FOR ME. THEN, ON OCTOBER 1 I WILL SAY "FAREWELL" TO ONE OF THE MOST EXCITING PERIODS OF MY LIFE.

OVER THE NEXT SEVERAL MONTHS I WANT TO CLEAN OUT A FEW FILES, TIE UP SOME LOOSE ENDS, AND PUT SOME THOUGHTS DOWN ON PAPER REGARDING MY FORMER INCARNATION AS A PEDIATRIC SURGEON AND MY MORE RECENT EXPERIENCES OF THESE PAST 8 YEARS AS YOUR SURGEON GENERAL.

AND, WITH YOUR INDULGENCE, I'D LIKE TO DO JUST A LITTLE REMINISCING WITH YOU TODAY.

FIRST, LET ME SAY I REMAIN TOTALLY GRATEFUL TO PRESIDENT REAGAN FOR HAVING NOMINATED ME IN 1981 AND FOR RE-NOMINATING ME IN 1985.

IN 1981 I WASN'T A VERY POPULAR CHOICE. I HAD A REPUTATION AS AN OUTSPOKEN PERSON WITH VERY STRONG OPINIONS ON IMPORTANT ISSUES. AND THOSE OPINIONS -- AND MY AGE, WHICH WAS 65 WAY BACK THEN -- WERE RAISED AS ARGUMENTS AGAINST MY BEING THE COUNTRY'S SURGEON GENERAL.

THE DEBATE WENT ON FOR ABOUT 8 MONTHS UNTIL AT LAST THE SENATE GRUDGINGLY CONFIRMED ME. I GUESS SOME OF YOU WERE STILL IN HIGH SCHOOL THEN AND PROBABLY DIDN'T GIVE THIS MATTER MUCH THOUGHT ... IF, IN FACT, YOU WERE DOING ANY THINKING AT ALL AT THAT TIME.

BUT I KNOW I WAS DOING A GREAT DEAL OF THINKING. I WAS WONDERING IF I COULD -- OR EVEN IF I SHOULD -- BECOME A WHOLE NEW PERSON IN ORDER TO GAIN THE APPROVAL OF THE UNITED STATES SENATE.

SHOULD I, FOR EXAMPLE, DEPOSIT MY RELIGIOUS BELIEFS IN A BLIND TRUST AND LEAVE THEM THERE FOR THE DURATION??

SHOULD I DONATE MY MORAL VALUES TO A WORTHY CHARITY?

SHOULD I PACK MY ETHICAL PRINCIPLES IN AN OLD ATTIC TRUNK AND FORGET ABOUT THEM UNTIL MY TERM WAS OVER?

TO ALL OF THOSE OPTIONS I SAID, "NO ... NONE OF THE ABOVE."

I BELIEVED THEN -- AND I CERTAINLY BELIEVE NOW -- THAT ONE'S BEST APPROACH TO PUBLIC SERVICE IS TO PROMISE TO GIVE IT EVERYTHING YOU HAVE ... OF WHATEVER IT IS YOU DO HAVE.

YOU MUST BE WILLING AND EVEN EAGER TO DRAW HEAVILY FROM YOUR OWN STOREHOUSE OF KNOWLEDGE AND LIFE EXPERIENCE ... FROM THE IDEAS AND SENTIMENTS YOU'VE ABSORBED FROM FRIENDS AND FROM FAMILY.

AND FROM ALL THAT ACCUMULATED KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE, YOU MUST SQUEEZE OUT EVERY OUNCE OF GOOD JUDGMENT, OF DEEP FELLOW FEELING, AND OF LOVE OF COUNTRY.

SO I DECIDED NOT TO CHANGE C. EVERETT KOOP. RATHER, I DECIDED I WOULD TRY TO BECOME THE BEST C. EVERETT KOOP THAT I COULD POSSIBLY BE.

I THINK I MADE THE RIGHT CHOICE. BUT IT DIDN'T MAKE MY ASSIGNMENT ANY EASIER. INSTEAD, I WAS FORCED TO DISCOVER THINGS ABOUT MYSELF AND ABOUT MY COUNTRY THAT I DID NOT FULLY UNDERSTAND UNTIL I EMBARKED ON THIS NEW EXPERIENCE AS SURGEON GENERAL.

AND I WOULD GUESS THAT EACH OF YOU IS ABOUT TO CROSS THAT SAME THRESHOLD AS WELL. AND WHEN YOU DO, YOU WILL LEAVE BEHIND THE SIMPLER QUESTIONS OF MEDICAL SUBSTANCE AND TAKE ON THE FAR TOUGHER QUESTION OF YOUR OWN PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL CHARACTER.

I WILL CONFESS TO YOU THAT, IN THE HEADY EXCITEMENT OF BEING CALLED UP BY THE PRESIDENT ... OF BEING FOLLOWED AROUND BY THE PRESS ... OF LATE-NIGHT CONVERSATIONS WITH POWERFUL SENATORS AND CONGRESSMEN ... WHEN ALL THIS WAS HAPPENING, I DID NOT -- AT THE SAME TIME -- TRULY UNDERSTAND WHAT MY JOB AND MY LIFE WERE REALLY GOING TO BE LIKE.

AND I BELIEVE THE CLASS OF '89 MAY BE GOING THROUGH A SIMILAR PHASE. THERE'S SO MUCH EXCITEMENT IN THE AIR TODAY THAT IT'S DIFFICULT TO THINK CLEARLY ABOUT LIES AHEAD. AND IN ANY CASE, YOU CAN'T REALLY KNOW.

AND YOU DON'T DARE ASK.

THE BEST YOU CAN DO IS TO KNOW YOURSELF AS WELL AS YOU CAN,
SO THAT YOU CAN ABSORB WHATEVER FATE -- AND YOUR COMMANDERS --
MAY SEND YOUR WAY.

ESSENTIALLY, THAT WAS MY EXPERIENCE, AFTER BEING IN GOVERN-
MENT LESS THAN 6 MONTHS. IT WAS APRIL OF 1982 AND A LITTLE BOY
-- TO BE KNOWN FOREVER IN THE HISTORY BOOKS AS "BABY DOE" -- WAS
BORN IN BLOOMINGTON, INDIANA.

"BABY DOE" WAS BORN WITH MULTIPLE CONGENITAL DEFECTS,
INCLUDING AN ESOPHAGEAL OBSTRUCTION AND DOWN SYNDROME.

AN ATTENDING SURGEON TOLD "BABY DOE'S" PARENTS THAT THEIR SON HAD ABOUT A 50-50 CHANCE OF SURVIVING AN OPERATION TO CLEAR UP THE OBSTRUCTION. AND AN ATTENDING PEDIATRICIAN TOLD THEM THAT, EVEN IF "BABY DOE" DID SURVIVE, HE WOULD PROBABLY GROW UP SEVERELY RETARDED AND ENDURE A POOR "QUALITY OF LIFE."

BOTH THOSE PHYSICIANS WERE WRONG.

NEVERTHELESS, ON THE BASIS OF SUCH INFORMATION, THE PARENTS OF "BABY DOE" ASKED THAT THEIR SON BE GIVEN NO FURTHER MEDICAL ASSISTANCE OR NOURISHMENT OF ANY KIND.

THAT WAS "BABY DOE'S" DEATH SENTENCE.

THE CASE WAS IMMEDIATELY TAKEN TO COURT BY SOME OF THE HOSPITAL STAFF ACTING ON "BABY DOE'S" BEHALF. BUT IT DIDN'T HELP. ON APRIL 15, ONE WEEK AFTER HIS BIRTH, "BABY DOE" DIED. AND ALL THE COURT ARGUMENTS BECAME MOOT.

FRANKLY, THOUGH I WAS NOT A PARTY TO ANY OF THOSE PROCEEDINGS, I WAS STUNNED BY WHAT HAD HAPPENED. AFTER ALL, I HAD JUST COMPLETED 36 YEARS AS A PEDIATRIC SURGEON. DURING THAT TIME, I HAD SUCCESSFULLY CORRECTED ESOPHAGEAL ATRESIA ON HUNDREDS OF INFANTS. MY SUCCESS RATE WAS FAR HIGHER THAN 50-50: IN FACT, I HAD NOT LOST A FULL-TERM BABY IN MY LAST 8 YEARS IN SURGERY AND I HAD AN 88 PERCENT SURVIVAL RATE FOR PREMATURE BABIES.

MANY OF MY COLLEAGUES WERE DOING JUST AS WELL.

YET, AS THE NATION'S "SURGEON GENERAL," NO LESS, I COULD NOT DO FOR "BABY DOE" WHAT I HAD DONE FOR HUNDREDS OF OTHER BABIES WITH THE SAME CONDITION.

ALSO, I WOULD NEVER HAVE DARED TO PREDICT WHAT THE "QUALITY OF LIFE" MIGHT BE FOR AN INFANT WITH DOWN SYNDROME. PEOPLE WHO PREDICT THE "QUALITY OF LIFE" FOR HANDICAPPED CHILDREN ARE THE SAME PEOPLE WHO PREDICT THE WINNING NUMBERS IN ALL THE STATE LOTTERIES.

MY FIRST INSTINCT WAS TO SPEAK OUT LOUD AND CLEAR ON BEHALF OF "BABY DOE." BUT I QUICKLY REALIZED THAT I WAS NOT ONLY "BABY DOE'S" SURGEON GENERAL ... I WAS ALSO SURGEON GENERAL FOR HIS PARENTS AND FOR THOSE TWO PHYSICIANS AS WELL.

"BABY DOE" NEEDED HELP ... BUT SO DID HIS PARENTS. LIKE MANY OTHER PARENTS, THEY MAY HAVE SIMPLY LACKED THE RESOURCES -- BE THEY MATERIAL, SOCIAL, OR ECONOMIC ... OR EMOTIONAL, MORAL, OR PSYCHOLOGICAL -- TO CARE FOR A DISABLED CHILD IN THEIR OWN FAMILY.

YOU CAN'T URGE PARENTS TO FIGHT FOR THE LIVES OF THEIR
DISABLED OR HANDICAPPED CHILDREN ... AND THEN JUST WALK AWAY WHEN
THE FIGHT IS WON.

AS EVERY GRADUATE HERE WILL SURELY DISCOVER IN HIS OR HER
OWN PROFESSIONAL LIFE, EVERY OUTCOME -- SUCCESSFUL OR NOT --
GENERATES ITS OWN TRAJECTORY OF CONSEQUENCES.

I BELIEVE YOU MUST DO WHAT YOU THINK IS RIGHT ... PERIOD.
THAT'S FUNDAMENTAL.

BUT I ALSO BELIEVE YOU MUST PREPARE YOURSELF FOR THE
OUTCOME, AND -- TO THE EXTENT POSSIBLE AND PERMISSIBLE -- YOU
SHOULD HELP YOUR PATIENTS AND THEIR FAMILIES PREPARE THEMSELVES
AS WELL.

I BELIEVE THIS IS TRUE FOR EVERY PRACTICING HEALTH
PROFESSIONAL. BUT IT'S ESPECIALLY TRUE FOR THOSE PROFESSIONALS
IN UNIFORM IN PUBLIC SERVICE.

NEEDLESS TO SAY, THERE WERE MANY PHYSICIANS WHO AGREED WITH "BABY DOE'S" PARENTS AND DID NOT AGREE WITH ME. I LISTENED TO THEIR ARGUMENTS AND THEN SOMEHOW MANAGED TO HELP THEM MODIFY THEIR OWN THINKING ENOUGH SO THAT ALL OF US -- PARENTS, PHYSICIANS, CHILD ADVOCATES .. ALL OF US TOGETHER -- COULD COME UP WITH A MORE RATIONAL AND MORE HUMANE WAY OF DEALING WITH HANDICAPPED NEONATES THAN MERELY LETTING THEM STARVE TO DEATH.

I WON'T BORE YOU WITH ALL THE DETAILS. INSTEAD, LET ME JUST SAY THAT WE NOW HAVE A LAW ON THE BOOKS THAT PROTECTS THE LIVES OF FUTURE "BABY DOES," WHILE STILL RECOGNIZING THE ROLE OF PARENTS AND ATTENDING PHYSICIANS.

WHAT TRULY SURPRISED ME, HOWEVER, WAS THE ATTITUDE OF MY MANY FRIENDS IN THE PRO-LIFE MOVEMENT. TO THEM, I HAD BECOME A TURNCOAT. THEY SAID I WAS TEMPORIZING AND EVEN ABANDONING THE ABSOLUTIST POSITIONS I HAD TAKEN -- SIDE-BY-SIDE WITH THEM -- FOR MANY YEARS.

THEIR CRITICISMS WERE UNFAIR. MY PERSONAL IDEOLOGY HAD NOT CHANGED ONE IOTA. IT IS ESSENTIALLY UNCHANGED TODAY. BUT MY PUBLIC POSITION DID REQUIRE SOME ADDITIONAL THOUGHT.

I LEARNED THAT IN PUBLIC HEALTH MATTERS, IDEOLOGY CAN BE HELPFUL ... BUT IDEOLOGY IS NOT ENOUGH. AS A PUBLIC PHYSICIAN IN A UNIFORMED SERVICE ... SOMEONE WHO CAN'T ALWAYS PICK AND CHOOSE WHERE I WILL PRACTICE AND WHOM I WILL SERVE, I HAD A RESPONSIBILITY TO BE TRUE TO MY OWN BELIEFS AND IDEALS ... BUT NEVER AT THE EXPENSE OF THE PEOPLE WHOM I HAD TAKEN A SOLEMN OATH TO SERVE.

FOLLOWING THE YEAR-LONG "BABY DOE" DIALOGUE, I CONVENED A SERIES OF "SURGEON GENERAL'S WORKSHOPS" THAT FOCUSED ON THE NEEDS OF THE HANDICAPPED CHILD AND HIS OR HER FAMILY. WHAT EVOLVED WAS A CONCEPT OF "FAMILY-CENTERED, COMMUNITY-BASED, COMPREHENSIVE CARE FOR CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS."

IT'S NEW.

AND IT WORKS.

AND IT'S BEING ADOPTED MORE AND MORE ALL ACROSS THE
COUNTRY.

I'VE RECEIVED MUCH PRAISE FOR MY INVOLVEMENT WITH SMOKING
AND WITH AIDS. YET, I MUST CONFESS THAT I COUNT AS ONE OF MY
MAJOR ACHIEVEMENTS OF THESE PAST 8 YEARS THIS EVOLUTION OF A MORE
WIDESPREAD, MORE EFFECTIVE, AND MORE COMPASSIONATE APPROACH TO
CHILDREN WHO ARE BORN WITH A NON-FATAL HANDICAP.

AT ABOUT THIS SAME TIME SEVERAL OTHER ISSUES WERE GERMINATING AT THE HIGHEST LEVELS OF PUBLIC HEALTH POLICY: SMOKING, FAMILY VIOLENCE, THE HEALTH OF THE AGED, INFANT MORTALITY, AND SO ON. BUT ONE WAS TO CONSUME MOST OF MY WAKING HOURS FOR MY LAST THREE YEARS IN OFFICE.

THAT ISSUE, OF COURSE, HAS BEEN AIDS.

THE SUBJECT OF AIDS HAS BEEN COVERED SO EXTENSIVELY AND IN SUCH DEPTH THAT I'LL JUST OFFER A COUPLE OF PERSONAL PERCEPTIONS THIS MORNING.

FIRST, YOU MAY RECALL THAT, ON JUNE 5, 1981, THE U.S. PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICE PUBLISHED THE FIRST REPORTS OF WHAT WAS TO BECOME THE AIDS EPIDEMIC. THEY CONCERNED 5 "PREVIOUSLY HEALTHY" HOMOSEXUALS WHO WERE ADMITTED TO LOS ANGELES HOSPITALS WITH PNEUMOCYSTIS CARINII PNEUMONIA, A VERY RARE FORM OF PNEUMONIA.

THESE AND SUBSEQUENT PATIENTS ALSO PRESENTED EVIDENCE OF CYTOMEGALOVIRUS AND CANDIDA INFECTIONS ... PLUS KAPOSI'S SARCOMA, A HIGHLY UNCOMMON FORM OF CANCER ... ALSO, HERPES SIMPLEX, CRYPTOCOCCAL MENINGITIS, SPLENOMEGALY, GENERALIZED LYMPHADENOPATHY, TOXOPLASMOSIS, DISSEMINATED MYCOBACTERIUM AVIUM-INTRACELLULARE, AND SO ON.

I'M SURE YOU'VE HEARD OF SOME OF THESE DISEASES. I'M ALSO SURE YOU'VE SEEN VERY FEW OF THEM. AND THE TRUTH OF THE MATTER IS THAT FROM THE VERY BEGINNING OF THIS EPIDEMIC, WE'VE BEEN DEALING WITH MYSTERIES COMPOUNDED BY MYSTERIES.

OUR COUNTRY DID NOT HAVE MANY TRAINED CLINICIANS AND RESEARCHERS FAMILIAR WITH THE RARE DISEASES ASSOCIATED WITH AIDS. AND IN ANY CASE, WE HAD NO CURES FOR THEM.

IN ADDITION, HOMOSEXUAL MEN, AMONG WHOM THE AIDS SYMPTOMS WERE BEING PRESENTED, HAD CHOSEN TO PATRONIZE PHYSICIANS AND CLINICS WHO WERE MORE UNDERSTANDING OF THE SO-CALLED "GAY LIFESTYLE."

THIS CHOICE EFFECTIVELY PLACED A GREAT MANY HOMOSEXUALS OUTSIDE MAINSTREAM CLINICAL MEDICINE AND, THEREFORE, MORE DIFFICULT TO KNOW ... TO REACH ... AND TO HELP.

THIS ALSO OCCURRED -- NOT COINCIDENTALLY -- AT THE TIME OF THE "GAY REVOLUTION," WHEN HOMOSEXUAL AND BISEXUAL MEN WERE "COMING OUT OF THE CLOSET" AND ASSERTING THEIR CIVIL RIGHTS.

UNFORTUNATELY, THE GAY ACTIVISTS COMBINED THE SEPARATE HEALTH AND POLITICAL ISSUES INTO A SINGLE PACKAGE OF GRIEVANCES, FOR WHICH THEY SOUGHT PUBLIC REDRESS. BUT THE PUBLIC HAS NEITHER THE PATIENCE NOR THE SKILL TO SORT OUT THESE ISSUES. HENCE, THE STRATEGY OF THE "GAY COMMUNITY" AROUSED MORE PUBLIC CONFUSION AND ANGER THAN PUBLIC SYMPATHY.

AS A RESULT, OUR FIRST PUBLIC HEALTH PRIORITY -- THAT IS, TO STOP FURTHER TRANSMISSION OF THE AIDS VIRUS -- BECAME HOPELESSLY AND NEEDLESSLY MIRED IN THE SEXUAL POLITICS OF THE EARLY 1980s.

WE LOST SOME PRECIOUS TIME BECAUSE OF THIS ... AND I SUSPECT WE LOST SOME LIVES AS WELL.

YET, DESPITE THE CONFUSION AND FRUSTRATION, THE ANGER AND THE IGNORANCE, THE TERROR AND THE DEATH, BIOMEDICAL SCIENCE AND RESEARCH DID PRESS FORWARD AND A RELIABLE BLOOD TEST WAS DISCOVERED AND MADE GENERALLY AVAILABLE IN THE FALL OF 1985.

THAT REMAINS -- IN MY BOOK, ANYWAY -- ONE OF THE RESEARCH
MIRACLES OF THIS CENTURY.

I'D LOVE TO TAKE CREDIT FOR THE EARLY LEADERSHIP SHOWN BY
THE U.S. PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICE -- BUT I CAN'T. I WAS NOT
INVOLVED AT ALL IN THE EARLY DAYS OF THE AIDS EPIDEMIC. BUT FOR
A VERY MUNDANE REASON.

IN CASE YOU DON'T KNOW IT BY NOW, THE POSITION OF SURGEON
GENERAL IS SUPPORTED BY A HALF-DOZEN STAFF AND ENOUGH MONEY TO
BUY PAPER CLIPS AND NAME-TAGS. AND THAT'S ABOUT IT.

THE AIDS RESEARCH HAS BEEN CARRIED OUT AT THE NATIONAL INSTITUTES OF HEALTH, THE CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL, AND THE FOOD AND DRUG ADMINISTRATION. THE SURGEON GENERAL RUNS NONE OF THESE.

THE CASE REPORTING IS DONE BY STATE AND LOCAL PUBLIC HEALTH AGENCIES. THEY'VE BEEN EXTRAORDINARY THROUGHOUT THE YEARS OF THE AIDS EPIDEMIC. BUT I DON'T RUN THEM EITHER.

AND SO, THERE WAS LITTLE REASON TO GET THE SURGEON GENERAL INVOLVED IN THE EARLY YEARS OF THE EPIDEMIC.

BUT SOMETHING WAS GOING ON IN 1985 AND 1986 THAT BROUGHT ME INTO THE AIDS ISSUE. BY THAT TIME THE PUBLIC HAD BEEN RECEIVING A GREAT MANY MIXED AND CONFUSING MESSAGES ABOUT THE DISEASE OF AIDS.

HENCE, THE TIME HAD COME FOR THE GOVERNMENT TO INVEST ITS CREDIBILITY IN ONE PERSON WHOSE TASK IT WOULD BE TO TELL THE AMERICAN PEOPLE WHAT WE KNEW TO BE TRUE ABOUT THE AIDS EPIDEMIC ... WHAT WE KNEW TO BE FALSE ABOUT THE EPIDEMIC ... AND WHAT WE STILL DID NOT KNOW ABOUT THE AIDS EPIDEMIC.

IN FEBRUARY 1986, PRESIDENT REAGAN DIRECTED THAT I BE THAT PERSON AND THAT I PREPARE A REPORT TO THE AMERICAN PEOPLE ON AIDS. THE REPORT HAD TO GIVE THE FACTS ABOUT AIDS AND HOW PEOPLE COULD PROTECT THEMSELVES FROM GETTING IT.

THE REPORT ALSO HAD TO EXPOSE THE FALSE MYTHOLOGIES THAT HAD BEGUN TO APPEAR CONCERNING AIDS ... MYTHOLOGIES PERPETUATED BY MEAN-SPIRITED PEOPLE WITH A MACABRE VIEW OF THE HUMAN CONDITION.

I MENTIONED THAT THE HOMOSEXUAL COMMUNITY HAD HOPELESSLY AND NEEDLESSLY POLITICIZED THE AIDS ISSUE IN THE BEGINNING. IN ALL FAIRNESS, I MUST RECALL THAT THE ISSUE WAS FURTHER POLITICIZED -- AGAIN, NEEDLESSLY AND CALLOUSLY -- BY EXTREME CONSERVATIVES, PEOPLE FOR WHOM IDEOLOGY WAS EVERYTHING.

THEY CHEERED THE PRESIDENT'S DECISION. BUT MANY OF THEM MISTAKENLY PREDICTED THAT I WOULD PRODUCE THE "RIGHT" KIND OF REPORT, APPROPRIATELY LAUNDERED TO THEIR LIKING.

AFTER 8 MONTHS OF LISTENING TO ALL SHADES OF OPINION -- LEFT, RIGHT, AND CENTER -- FROM A BROAD CROSS-SECTION OF AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE, I RELEASED MY REPORT DIRECTLY TO THE PUBLIC AT AN OCTOBER 1986 PRESS CONFERENCE.

I CONFESS THAT I KNEW WELL IN ADVANCE THAT MY FRIENDS IN CONSERVATIVE PROTESTANT SECTS AND IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH -- FRIENDS AND ALLIES IN MANY PAST BATTLES AGAINST ABORTION -- I KNEW THAT THEY WEREN'T GOING TO LIKE MY REPORT.

THEY VIEW ANAL INTERCOURSE -- OR SODOMY -- AS A VIOLATION OF LAWS BOTH SPIRITUAL AND TEMPORAL. SO DO I.

BUT THAT WAS HARDLY THE ISSUE IN 1986. THE ISSUE THEN WAS THAT ANAL INTERCOURSE WAS THE PRIME METHOD OF TRANSMISSION OF THE VIRUS. WE HAD TO RECOGNIZE THAT FACT AND THEN WE HAD TO CONVINCEN MEN TO STOP DOING IT.

BUT WHAT IF THEY DID NOT STOP? WHAT THEN? AND THAT LED ME TO A SECOND CONCLUSION THAT FURTHER IRRITATED MANY OF MY OLD FRIENDS AND ALLIES.

IF HOMOSEXUALS AND BISEXUAL MEN PERSISTED IN ENGAGING IN ANAL INTERCOURSE, ESPECIALLY WITH ANONYMOUS OR CASUAL SEX PARTNERS, THEN THEY HAD TO PROTECT THEMSELVES WITH SOME KIND OF IMPERMEABLE BARRIER TO TRANSMISSION.

SUCH BARRIERS ARE COMMONLY KNOWN AS CONDOMS. AND I'M AFRAID THAT I MADE CONDOMS THE "C-WORD" OF 1986 AND '87.

BUT I NEVER CONSIDERED THEM TO BE OUR FIRST LINE OF DEFENSE -- AND I STILL DON'T. I ALWAYS TOLD MY AUDIENCES THAT ABSTINENCE WAS FIRST ... FAILING THAT, THE NEXT BEST DEFENSE WAS A MUTUALLY FAITHFUL, MONOGAMOUS RELATIONSHIP ... AND FAILING THAT, THEN YOU'D BETTER USE CONDOMS.

BUT THAT WAS HARDLY THE END OF IT. FROM THE DATA GIVEN TO ME BY THE CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL, I LEARNED THAT THE MEDIAN AGE OF AIDS VICTIMS WAS QUITE LOW, YOUNG MEN IN THEIR EARLY 20s.

AND BY THEN WE ALSO KNEW THAT A PERSON COULD CARRY THE AIDS VIRUS FOR AS LONG AS 7 YEARS -- POSSIBLY LONGER -- BEFORE SHOWING SIGNS OF AN OPPORTUNISTIC INFECTION ... KAPOSI'S SARCOMA, PNEUMOCYSTIC CARINII PNEUMONIA, CYTOMEGALOVIRUS, AND SO ON.

WHAT DID THAT MEAN? THAT MEANT THAT THOSE YOUNG MEN WHO WERE REPORTED AS AN AIDS-RELATED DISEASE HAD VERY POSSIBLY BECOME INFECTED WITH THE AIDS VIRUS WHEN THEY WERE STILL IN THEIR TEENS.

AND THAT MEANT THAT THE WHOLE AIDS ISSUE -- COMPLETE WITH EDUCATION PRECEDING THE ONSET OF SEXUAL EXPERIMENTATION AND -- YES -- INCLUDING DISCUSSIONS ABOUT CONDOMS -- ALL THAT WOULD SOMEHOW HAVE TO BE INTRODUCED INTO OUR SECONDARY SCHOOLS, WITH SOME PREPARATION NECESSARY IN OUR ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS AS WELL.

PLEASE REMEMBER THAT WE DID NOT HAVE THEN -- AND WE DO NOT YET HAVE -- AN EFFECTIVE AND GENERALLY AVAILABLE VACCINE. THAT'S STILL YEARS AWAY. THEREFORE, OUR SINGLE WEAPON AGAINST AIDS -- IN 1986 AND 1987 AND FOR MANY MORE YEARS TO COME -- WAS AND WILL CONTINUE TO BE EDUCATION ... EDUCATION ... AND MORE EDUCATION.

I WAS PROMPTLY AND WITLESSLY ACCUSED OF TEACHING SODOMY TO THIRD-GRADERS AND PASSING OUT CONDOMS TO 8-YEAR-OLDS. AND THERE HAS BEEN MORE OF THAT.

I WAS VERY ANNOYED AT ALL THIS, BUT NOT BECAUSE OF THE PERSONAL ATTACKS. I KNEW THOSE WOULD HAVE NO LASTING EFFECT ON ME. THEY NEVER HAVE.

RATHER, I WAS ANNOYED AT THOSE FEW CRITICS WHO -- BY ATTACKING ME -- WERE HOPING TO COMPROMISE THE GOVERNMENT'S ABILITY TO DELIVER THE FACTS ABOUT AIDS TO THE AMERICAN PEOPLE. THEY WERE PLAYING WITH FIRE. AND I THINK THEY KNEW IT.

YOU MUST ALSO REMEMBER THAT MY PREDECESSORS HAD SO CONDUCTED THEMSELVES AS SURGEONS GENERAL SUCH THAT THIS OFFICE WAS AMONG THE MOST CREDIBLE AND RELIABLE IN THE GOVERNMENT ... THE ENVY OF SOME PRESIDENTS, I MIGHT ADD.

NOW IT WAS MY JOB TO SAY WHAT WAS NECESSARY IN THIS VERY COMPLEX AND EMOTIONALLY CHARGED ISSUE OF AIDS -- BUT I ALSO HAD TO MAINTAIN THE CREDIBILITY OF THIS OFFICE FOR MY SUCCESSORS AND FOR THE NATION. I'D LIKE TO THINK THAT I DID BOTH.

IN ANY CASE, WHEN MY SUCCESSOR ARRIVES, I HOPE THAT HE OR SHE WILL FIND THE OFFICE AS STRONG -- IF NOT STRONGER -- THAN IT WAS WHEN I ARRIVED SOME 8 YEARS AGO.

OBVIOUSLY, AS I INDICATED AT THE BEGINNING OF THESE REMARKS, I DID NOT LOCK AWAY MY PERSONAL BELIEFS AND PERSONAL ETHICS BEFORE COMING TO WASHINGTON. I DREW UPON THEM CONTINUOUSLY TO GIVE ME MY DIRECTION AND MY STRENGTH.

THE RESULTS WERE NOT ALWAYS PREDICTABLE. SOMETIMES I WAS AS SURPRISED AS EVERYONE ELSE BY THE CONCLUSIONS I REACHED IN THE COURSE OF DOING MY JOB FOR THE PEOPLE OF THIS COUNTRY.

BUT SO BE IT.

AND I GUESS THAT'S THE SUM AND SUBSTANCE OF MY MESSAGE TO THE CLASS OF 1989. IT'S NOT VERY ORIGINAL ... EVEN THOUGH EACH PERSON HAS TO DISCOVER IT IN HIS OR HER OWN GOOD TIME. BUT THE MESSAGE IS SIMPLY THIS:

KNOW YOURSELF ... AND BE TRUE TO YOURSELF ... AND
EVERYTHING ELSE WILL FOLLOW.

I'D RECOMMEND THAT MOTTO TO EVERY GRADUATE. BUT I BELIEVE
IT HAS SPECIAL RELEVANCE TO PEOPLE LIKE YOU AND ME, WHO HAVE
CHOSEN TO SERVE OUR COUNTRY.

TO EACH OF YOU ... TO YOUR FAMILIES ... AND TO YOUR FRIENDS
... I WISH YOU GODSPEED.

THANK YOU.

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