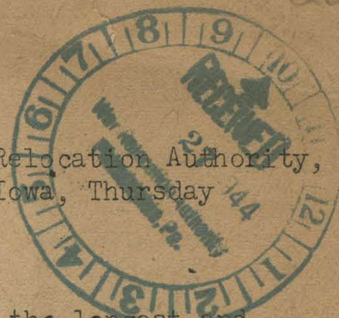

A TENTH OF A MILLION PEOPLE

An address by Dillon S. Myer, Director of the War Relocation Authority, before the Des Moines Adult Education Forum, Des Moines, Iowa, Thursday evening, October 26, 1944.

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As we approach the end of the third year of war -- the longest and hardest war this Nation has had since 1865 -- it becomes a little easier to put some of the home-front events of the past three years into proper perspective. Actions that rushed by almost unnoticed or were greatly misunderstood a year or two ago can now be carefully evaluated and their long-range significance appraised. The time has come, it seems to me, when we should take careful stock of the way this democratic Nation has reacted to the shock of total war and see what lessons can be derived as a guide to our course of action in the exceedingly crucial period that lies ahead.

Tonight I want to examine with you one of the most badly misunderstood and strongly controversial programs we have had on the home front during the current war -- the program for handling our people of Japanese descent who formerly lived along the Pacific Coast. It has been a unique program -- and one which I fervently hope this Nation will never have to repeat. But it has raised issues which lie extremely close to the heart of our democratic faith and has brought out in bold relief some of the dangers we may face in the post-war period.

Just before the attack at Pearl Harbor there were approximately 112,000 people of Japanese extraction living in the three coastal States of Washington, Oregon, and California. Roughly one third of them were natives of Japan who came to this country 25, 30, and even 40 years ago in search of greater economic opportunity. Under our laws they were never able to gain American citizenship -- except for a few hundred who served with the American Army in the first World War -- but many acquired properties, built up businesses, and established families on American soil. Most of those who remained here at the end of 1941 had long since abandoned all thought of ever returning to Japan. Chiefly because of language difficulties and economic discriminations, they had shown some tendency to congregate in compact little communities more or less apart from the general population. But at the same time they had established a widespread reputation as hard-working, law-abiding, and thoroughly substantial people.

The children and grandchildren of these immigrants made up the other two-thirds of the Japanese-American population in the coastal States. Unlike their elders, these youngsters were American citizens by right of birth. The vast majority of them had been educated in American public schools and colleges, had mingled more freely than their parents with Americans of other extraction, and had shown a decided preference for the American culture of their schoolmates over the Oriental culture of their forebears. Seventy-two percent of them had never even been to Japan for a summer visit, and only a few thousand had taken any substantial part of their education in the Orient. In all really important respects, they were as American as apple pie and a living proof of the strength and vitality of American educational institutions.

U.S. Department of the Interior
War Relocation Authority
Washington, D. C.

When war broke out between the United States and Japan, this whole segment of our population was badly shaken and confused. In the weeks immediately following Pearl Harbor several hundred of the alien Japanese suspected of having strong ties with the Japanese homeland were picked up by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and sent to detention stations or internment camps. For a short period the property of aliens was frozen, and their economic life temporarily came almost to a standstill. Somewhat later the American citizen Japanese working for the State of California were all suspended without individual hearing simply on the basis of their ancestry. Meanwhile, in the press and over the radio of the coastal States, there was a steadily mounting drumfire of villification and hatred directed toward all people of Japanese descent. Completely baseless rumors of widespread sabotage by resident Japanese in Honolulu on December 7 were accepted without question and published as unimpeachable fact. People who had always regarded the immigrant Japanese as harmless gardeners and vegetable merchants began to see them suddenly through the eyes of fear, as cunning and ruthless agents of Tokyo. Every protestation of loyalty by the American-born Japanese was interpreted in some quarters as simply a mask for subversive activity and un-American intentions. As the Japanese armed forces extended their area of conquest through the early months of 1942, this campaign of fear and hatred grew to fever pitch. From the standpoint of the Japanese-American residents, the climax came in early March when the Army decided that all of them -- citizens and aliens alike -- would have to be moved from an area about 200 miles wide running the entire length of the Pacific Coast and into southern Arizona.

This was a drastic step, completely unprecedented in our history. It meant uprooting a tenth of a million of our people, tearing them loose from their economic and social moorings along the Pacific Coast and setting them down somehow in other sections of the country. In time of peace -- if such a step were conceivable in time of peace -- the whole movement could have been carefully explained to the American public and planned out in scrupulous detail far in advance of operations. But in the first months of a global war which was shaking our civilization to its foundations, the evacuation was actually carried out under great pressure and in an almost incredible haze of public confusion and uncertainty. It is important to bear this constantly in mind in evaluating the events that have subsequently taken place.

The Army's first step was to encourage the people of Japanese descent to leave the prohibited coastal zone with their own funds and on their own initiative. Knowing that they would be compelled to leave eventually in any case, several thousand packed up their belongings and began the move eastward. But these pioneers soon ran into difficulties. Inland communities saw them arrive with mounting feelings of doubt and apprehension. The mere fact that the migrants were of Japanese racial stock and that they had been ordered off the Pacific Coast was enough -- in the absence of authoritative information -- to brand the whole group as dangerous and thoroughly undesirable individuals. Furthermore, the evacuees themselves had to resettle, in many cases, on a rather haphazard basis. They had no certain way of knowing where they could fit most expeditiously into the local economy, where they would be most readily accepted as decent, law-abiding people, where jobs and housing would be easiest to find. More often than not, they actually moved to communities which were most ill

prepared to receive them -- communities where their presence aroused resentment, abuse, and even threats of mob action. By the latter part of March, the unfeasibility of voluntary resettlement was plain as the morning sun. In its place, a plan of controlled movement was adopted -- a plan under which all the evacuees of Japanese descent would be moved into government-operated barrack cities and maintained, at least for a period, at government expense.

Just prior to the adoption of this plan, the War Relocation Authority was established by Executive Order of the President to handle the problem of human displacement created by the evacuation. Our first job -- and one that occupied almost all our thoughts and energies for many weeks -- was to supervise the establishment of the barrack cities where the evacuees could be quartered following their removal from the coastal zone. Eventually ten of these wartime communities known as relocation centers were established -- two in eastern California, two in Arizona, two in Arkansas, and one each in Colorado, Wyoming, Idaho, and Utah. By early November all of them were in operation and the last of the evacuees had been transferred from the Army-operated assembly centers where they were temporarily maintained in the vicinity of their former homes.

While this movement was going forward, the policies of WRA were being gradually hammered out, tested in the light of experience, and sharpened into a well ordered and cohesive program. One of the most vital questions that had to be settled very early was whether we should plan to maintain a substantial portion of the evacuees indefinitely in the relocation centers or whether we should make a persistent, deliberate effort to redistribute them as rapidly as possible in private life throughout the country. In the beginning practically all the top officials of the western States had expressed strong opposition against any movement of the evacuees into private employment. But in May of 1942 -- long before the relocation centers were fully populated -- some of these same States began demanding that the evacuees be temporarily released for seasonal work in agriculture. And so a plan was worked out under which more than 10,000 evacuees eventually went out to work during the harvest season chiefly in the sugar beet fields of the intermountain region. Meanwhile a demand for evacuee manpower began to arise in other lines of work and other sections of the country. Needless to say, this had a strong impact on our early thinking. But I think the most important consideration that influenced us in the direction of a wholesale relocation program was the nature of the relocation centers. Shortly after I succeeded Milton S. Eisenhower as Director of the Authority in June, 1942, I made a rather quick trip through several of the centers then operating and became completely convinced that the only decent, American way to operate our program was to work toward the liquidation of these centers at the earliest possible moment. And I should add that this decision was shared and even urged by practically all the members of our agency both in the Washington office and throughout the field. Despite our best efforts to develop a useful work program at the centers, we found that there was an inevitable waste of manpower at a time when manpower was drastically needed in nearly every line of work. We found that the very atmosphere of the centers tended to stifle initiative and discourage self-reliance. It was essentially an artificial atmosphere -- restrictive, heavy-laden with rumors and resentments, and subject to explosion at the tiniest spark of trouble. It was obviously the worst possible kind of environment in which

to have young Americans of school age spending their formative years.

By the first of October we had definitely set our sights on the ultimate goal of restoring all loyal and law-abiding evacuees to private life in normal communities as rapidly as possible. We have never since wavered from that primary objective and have spent much of our time trying to streamline our procedures and speed up the relocation movement. Largely because of the disastrous experience with voluntary relocation in the early days, we have always tried to keep this movement on a controlled and orderly basis. We have done this in four ways. First, we have denied the privilege of relocation to any person whose record indicates that he or she might endanger the national security. Second, we have tried in every way possible to guide relocation into those communities and areas where the evacuees would be most readily accepted and where their services as employes were particularly needed in the local economic picture. Third, we have insisted that all relocating evacuees have a definite place to go and some means of support. And fourth, we have asked each relocator to keep us advised of any changes of address.

Perhaps the most crucial -- and certainly the most widely misunderstood -- of these requirements is the one relating to the national security. Most of the confusion has arisen, I think, because of a rather loose and sometimes irresponsible use of the term "loyalty". I have always felt that loyalty is essentially a slippery word and one that should be used with extreme care. The loyalty of any person to any institution is determined in the last analysis by a complex of factors that are exceedingly difficult to analyze and evaluate. Loyalty varies greatly in degree -- all the way from the fanatical devotion of Hitler's storm troopers to the rather mild attachment which the average American feels for his local civic club or organization. And lastly, loyalty most certainly does not grow and sustain itself in an atmosphere of suspicion and discrimination; it flourishes only when given a chance.

When I say these things, I do not mean to imply that I have any doubts about the essential loyalty of most of the evacuees. The overwhelming majority, I am convinced, are as anxious as any of us to see the military clique of Japan crushed and wiped off the earth. Nevertheless, some people have asserted that there is no definite and final way of determining the loyalty of a person of Japanese descent. I see no reason why the problem should be more difficult in the case of a person of Japanese descent than it is with anyone else. But the important point -- the point which these critics of the WRA leave program persistently ignore or brush aside -- is the purpose for which the loyalty determinations are being made. That purpose is protection of the national security, pure and simple. What we have attempted to do in our program is to single out those individuals in the evacuee population who are so clearly disaffected with the United States that they might interfere with the national war effort. This is all we have the time, the ability, or -- for that matter -- the right to do in connection with our leave program. But we have done it in the most painstaking possible manner. And if we have erred, I feel certain it has been on the side of overcaution.

The first major step in this program was taken in the spring of 1943 when we conducted a mass registration of all evacuees beyond the age of 17

at all relocation centers. At that time we asked each evacuee resident to fill out a questionnaire providing detailed information on such topics as knowledge of the Japanese language, religious and organizational affiliations, number of relatives in Japan, financial interests in Japan, travel to Japan, and even sports and hobbies. In addition, we asked each citizen whether he would pledge unqualified allegiance to the United States and each alien whether he would promise to abide by the Nation's laws and refrain from interference with the war effort. These data were gathered on over 70,000 adult evacuees and later combined with information which we obtained from the Federal intelligence agencies. Anything in the files of those agencies reflecting on an evacuee's attitude toward the United States has been made available to us as a regular procedure and incorporated in the leave file of the individual. Finally, we have built up at each center, through day-to-day contact with the evacuees, a substantial amount of first-hand information on their behavior and attitudes. All these records are carefully examined and evaluated before an evacuee is cleared for relocation. If the weight of evidence indicates that he is a dangerous person -- a person who should not be permitted at large in time of war with Japan -- then leave clearance is and always has been denied. The great bulk of those who have been found ineligible for relocation are now quartered at the Tule Lake Center in northern California -- the only center we maintain for segregation purposes.

Over the past two years we have relocated approximately 33,000 evacuees. These people who formerly lived in a comparatively narrow strip along the Pacific Coast are now spread out clear across the remainder of the country -- all the way from Spokane, Washington, to Boston, Massachusetts. Nearly 6,000 have settled down among the teeming millions of Chicago. Several hundred have found new homes and new jobs in New York City. Other clusters are located in smaller communities and on farm lands throughout the East, the Middle West, and the intermountain region. A minority of our American population which was once almost strictly regional in significance has become clearly the concern of the entire Nation.

There have been troubles here and there under the relocation program -- sporadic flareups of local prejudice and unpleasant incidents caused mainly by the rantings of bar-room patriots. But, on the whole, there is something profoundly encouraging and heart-warming about the progress that has been achieved and the adjustments that evacuees have made in literally hundreds of small and large communities. It is a sign, I think, that even in the midst of all the terrible strains of a global war, the overwhelming majority of Americans are able to retain their fundamental decency, their basic sense of justice and fair play. Despite all the wild rumors and all the unvarnished appeals to raw emotion made by the race-baiters, the country as a whole has refused to be stampeded into rash, undemocratic, and inhuman action against a helpless minority. It has held firm to the principles which run like a clear, bright thread through the entire fabric of our history, the principles for which we are now fighting a global war.

The story of relocation here in Des Moines is an outstanding example of tolerance, fair play, and effective community action in acceptance of these uprooted people. Almost two years ago, even before the WRA established an office in this city, the local YWCA and the Friends Service Committee developed an interest in relocation and formulated a program to help us in

carrying out our job. More recently, an over-all coordinating committee of nearly 50 members representing virtually every club, organization, and church of prominence in the community has been formed to carry on this work. And the results might well be held up as a model to the entire country.

At the present time there are approximately 300 people in Des Moines who formerly lived in relocation centers. They are living not in a crowded, ghetto-like section of the city, but in comfortable homes pretty much scattered throughout the community. They are holding down jobs in retail shops and markets, in the hotels and restaurants, in one of the local hospitals, in newspaper work, and in many other lines of responsible and important activity. Three of them are serving as pastors or assistant pastors in the local churches. One is working as a pharmacist, another man has established his own watch repair shop and, like most people of his profession today, has far more business than he can possibly handle.

The 300 evacuees who have resettled here include a number of single individuals and about 50 whole family groups. These people have been accepted not merely as efficient and willing workers but -- perhaps even more important -- as people in the full sense of the word. They have been given a blanket invitation by the local ministerial association to take part in all church activities. They have been taken into local trade unions and into clubs and organizations. One of them, a veteran of the first World War, is a member of Iowa's largest post of the American Legion. About 30 are students in the public schools, 30 more are continuing their higher education at Drake University, and ten are enrolled at various business colleges and trade schools throughout the city. The youngsters in the group have been readily accepted and are playing an active part in the Boy Scouts, Campfire Girls, and similar activities. Both the YMCA and the YWCA have made their recreational facilities available to the evacuees and have taken them in as members.

Behind this quietly effective record of community integration is a lot of hard work by dozens of high-minded citizens of Des Moines. So many organizations have contributed to the effort that I could not possibly single them all out for individual praise. But I do think that this city can derive a deep sense of satisfaction from the mature and intelligent way in which this problem has been handled and from the results that have been achieved. And I would like to pay special tribute to the Register and Tribune for the judicious and fair-minded attitude it has consistently displayed toward the relocation program, not only here in Des Moines but nationally.

I wish I could say that the "Des Moines Idea" toward this minority group problem prevails everywhere throughout the United States. But unfortunately that is not quite the case. Ever since the early days of the WRA program, a number of groups and individuals on the West Coast and elsewhere have been carrying on a persistent, vigorous, and well organized campaign to arouse racial hatreds and poison the public mind against all persons of Japanese descent without regard for individual records of behavior. Capitalizing on the bitterness and repugnance which practically all Americans feel toward the barbaric military clique of Japan, these race-baiters have sought to identify American citizens and harmless, law-abiding aliens of long residence with the actual enemy. Without one shred of evidence and in defiance of all reliable scientific opinion, they have branded all persons of Japanese descent as inherently treacherous, disloyal, and thoroughly

dangerous people. They have spread wild and completely unfounded stories about the treatment accorded to the evacuees in relocation centers and have conveyed the impression that WRA is either heedlessly or deliberately turning potential spies and saboteurs loose upon the Nation. In short, they have made a crafty appeal to all the baser and less worthy emotions that are particularly likely to be prevalent in time of war -- fear, anger, personal frustration, and the desire to find a scapegoat close at hand for troubles which are really remotely caused. This technique, of course, is familiar to all of us through the writings and practices of Adolf Hitler and other skilled manipulators of the mob mind.

For a time I was frankly puzzled by the attitude of the race-baiters on the West Coast toward our relocation program. This program, it seemed to me, should be highly acceptable to those in the coastal states who have always resented the presence of the Japanese Americans and who have been working so tirelessly for their permanent exclusion from that area. For the effect of the program has been to disseminate rather thinly across the country a minority which was, without a doubt, too densely congregated before the war in one particular region. In all probability some of the evacuees who have resettled in the Middle West and the East will go back to their former homes once the military situation makes it possible for the Army to lift the exclusion order. But a substantial number, I am convinced, will remain where they are, and I feel certain that the eastward movement from the relocation centers will continue. The ultimate net result of the entire operation will unquestionably be a substantial reduction in the pre-war population of Japanese ancestry on the Pacific Coast.

All of this has been explained on the Coast, time and time again. Yet the resolutions condemning the relocation program continue to spew forth from the tight, noisy little groups which have managed to persuade a number of thoughtful Americans that they speak for the entire population along the Pacific slope. In fact, I have just recently received a personal letter from a prominent official of one of these organizations informing me that he views the entire relocation process with alarm and suggesting that it be discontinued immediately. Within the past several months I have begun to realize why it is that many of these groups persist in advocating a mass confinement of evacuees -- citizens and aliens alike -- for the duration of the war. Their ultimate objective, it now becomes apparent, is nothing less than mass deportation. Although some of the groups are more candid than others in admitting this totally undemocratic, thoroughly unconstitutional objective, I am convinced that all of the more fervent opponents of relocation really have such an aim in mind and that they will not be satisfied until they have driven every last person of Japanese lineage forever from our soil. I do not believe for a moment that the Congress, the Courts, or the American people will ever countenance such a complete reversal of all our traditions and principles. But the mere fact that such thinking does exist in this country and that it is being deliberately fostered and whipped up is a dangerous portent for the future.

There were times in 1943 when there was a widespread public misunderstanding of the desperately crucial issues that are involved in our program. The whole trend of the war tended to stimulate a deep-rooted antagonism -- in some cases, a blind hatred -- for the Japanese enemy. And in altogether too many instances, this hostility became transferred and transfixed on the

people of Japanese descent here at home. Large sections of the American public seemed to be in no mood for making essential distinctions and appeared almost eager to believe the most fantastic yarns about the Japanese Americans. Myths that have been handed down on the Pacific Coast for over a generation began to spread across the country and infect the public mind in many other areas. Stories about troubles in relocation centers and wild charges of wholesale subversive activity on the part of Japanese Americans naturally made better newspaper "copy" than the quiet, comparatively undramatic chronicle of relocation and were more prominently featured in most of the Nation's press. For a period of several days last November the demonstrations at the Tule Lake Center actually took precedence over all the war news as the Number One news story in many California papers.

But in the past ten months or so, the Japanese Americans have been making news -- front-page news, frequently -- of a wholly different character. They have had an opportunity to provide evidence of their loyalty and patriotism in the most convincing way possible -- on the field of battle -- and they have written a record of heroism and devotion to duty that cannot be ignored even by the race baiters. In fact, I believe that when all the facts are fully known, the story of Japanese Americans in the Army will do more than any one thing to bring about a sound and equitable solution for the problem that now surrounds this minority of our population.

When war broke out between this country and Japan, there were about 5,000 Nisei -- American citizens of Japanese descent -- who had been taken into the Army both through volunteering and Selective Service in 1940 and 1941. But for a period of more than a year after Pearl Harbor, regular induction of the Nisei was suspended. Then in January of 1943, the War Department announced plans for the formation of a combat team to be composed entirely of Japanese American volunteers -- men from the relocation centers and other points on the mainland and men from the Territory of Hawaii. This team, which included several hundred boys from the WRA centers plus a large contingent from Hawaii, went into training at Camp Shelby, Mississippi, in the spring of 1943 and was transferred overseas early this year. The record achieved by this organization and by other Japanese American soldiers, both in training and in combat, was so impressive that the War Department decided in January of this year to resume induction of citizens of Japanese descent through the regular Selective Service procedures. Still more recently, just within the past few weeks, the Department has further determined to accept volunteers from among the alien Japanese in this country who can meet the qualifications for Army service.

Meanwhile in Italy the oldest Japanese American fighting organization -- the 100th Infantry Battalion -- has been covering itself with glory on the field of battle. This unit, originally composed almost exclusively of Nisei from Hawaii, went into action on the beach-head at Salerno last fall and has been in the forefront of the fighting in Italy almost continually ever since. Time and again, the members of this organization have volunteered for the most hazardous assignments and shown fighting qualities far above and beyond the ordinary call of duty. Time and again, they have been singled out by their commanding officers for official commendation and by their comrades in arms simply as "a bunch of damn good soldiers." In this one Battalion, over 1,000 have received the Purple Heart for wounds

received in action. Forty-four members of the unit have been awarded the Silver Star, 31 the Bronze Star, nine the Distinguished Service Cross, and three the Legion of Merit Medal. Within the past few months the entire battalion was awarded a Presidential citation by General Clark "for outstanding performance of duty in action." Recent reports indicate that the 100th Battalion is now part of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team and that some of the Nisei soldiers who have been serving in Italy have recently gone into action in the Belfort Gap section of France. Beyond almost any question, Japanese Americans boys will soon be fighting on German soil.

The impact on the public mind created by the exploits of the 100th Battalion and by the service of the 442nd Combat Team and of Nisei in other battle theaters has been gradual, but it has been far-reaching and profound, Since the early part of the year we in the War Relocation Authority have seen mounting evidence of a troubled public conscience about the way we have treated our Japanese minority and a growing demand for more tolerance and understanding in the future. Returning servicemen who have fought side by side with the Nisei in Italy and elsewhere have bitterly condemned the outrageous persecution of the Japanese-American people, the ceaseless and malicious attacks on the very families of men who are fighting and dying for the preservation of democracy. As this feeling grows and pervades the general atmosphere even on the Pacific Coast, we find the race baiters stammering and faltering, seeking desperately for new ammunition and fresh lines of attack. Some of their attempts would be laughable if the whole situation were not so starkly ominous and tragic. One, for example, has suggested that Japanese American boys are eager to serve in the Army so that they will come into possession of military secrets which they will then pass on to enemy agents. Just how the Nisei soldiers under enemy fire in the foothills of the Appenines will communicate with these agents is not wholly clear. Another even more vicious attempt to besmirch our Nisei in uniform is the claim that these boys enjoy fighting in Italy because they are killing "white men." I would like to ask the author of this particularly tasty little morsel for comment on the activities of the Nisei serving with Merrill's Marauders or about the six Japanese Americans who were decorated for bravery in the attack on Saipan. These boys were not fighting "white men." Like their comrades in Italy, they were simply battling against the enemies of their native land.

I have cited these examples to show the almost fantastic lengths to which some of our race-baiters will go in their efforts to achieve their un-American objectives. But I do not mean to imply for one moment that the forces of racial intolerance are completely demoralized or that the battle for good race relations in this country has been finally won. Actually I think our progress can be measured in inches along a road that stretches out for many miles.

I don't believe any of us is naive enough to think that this problem will be automatically solved the moment the war is over. We know this time that there will be no easy return to "normalcy", no setting of the clock back to 1939, after the armistice is signed. In fact, I think there is reason for believing that the adjustments we shall face in the post-war period may be even more drastic and far-reaching along some lines than those we have undergone during the past several years. Racial feeling, instead of

simmering down after the war, may well rise to new heights of tension as it did during the early 1920's with the Ku Klux Klan and other similar movements. Unless the forces of good will and tolerance are well organized and constantly alert, the virus of racism that has grown up during the war may spread throughout our whole body politic and produce some of the ugliest manifestations of man's inhumanity to man in our entire history.

The answer, I think, lies in the kind of approach that has been used so successfully here in Des Moines in connection with relocation. It lies in the organization of local committees -- hundreds of them in large and small communities all over the country -- composed of responsible and respected citizens and civic leaders. These committees can check rumors that tend to confuse the public mind and counteract them with accurate and carefully documented statements. They can carry on a continuing job of public education in race relations. They can help the various minority groups become better adjusted into the total community life.

Carey McWilliams, in his fine book Prejudice, reports that there are over 200 such race relations committees already in existence. I can only hope that they will grow and that their activities will become increasingly effective. For, as I see it, this one issue is of crucial importance to our whole democratic life. Unless we can check and even reverse the trends to racial thinking that have grown up during this war, we may find our whole structure of personal freedom crumbling around us. But if we accept the challenge and meet it effectively -- as I feel sure we will -- I think we can create a better atmosphere of race relations than we have ever previously known and take our rightful place as one of the outstanding freedom-loving nations of the world.

Once again, I recommend the "Des Moines Idea" to the country as a whole.