



Mario Cuomo

1984 Democratic National Convention Keynote Address



Delivered 16 July 1984, San Francisco

AUTHENTICITY CERTIFIED: Text version below transcribed directly from audio

Thank you very much.

On behalf of the great Empire State and the whole family of New York, let me thank you for the great privilege of being able to address this convention. Please allow me to skip the stories and the poetry and the temptation to deal in nice but vague rhetoric. Let me instead use this valuable opportunity to deal immediately with the questions that should determine this election and that we all know are vital to the American people.

Ten days ago, President Reagan admitted that although some people in this country seemed to be doing well nowadays, others were unhappy, even worried, about themselves, their families, and their futures. The President said that he didn't understand that fear. He said, "Why, this country is a shining city on a hill." And the President is right. In many ways we are a shining city on a hill.

But the hard truth is that not everyone is sharing in this city's splendor and glory. A shining city is perhaps all the President sees from the portico of the White House and the veranda of his ranch, where everyone seems to be doing well. But there's another city; there's another part to the shining the city; the part where some people can't pay their mortgages, and most young people can't afford one; where students can't afford the education they need, and middle-class parents watch the dreams they hold for their children evaporate.

In this part of the city there are more poor than ever, more families in trouble, more and more people who need help but can't find it. Even worse: There are elderly people who tremble in the basements of the houses there.



American Rhetoric.com

And there are people who sleep in the city streets, in the gutter, where the glitter doesn't show. There are ghettos where thousands of young people, without a job or an education, give their lives away to drug dealers every day. There is despair, Mr. President, in the faces that you don't see, in the places that you don't visit in your shining city.

Mr. President you ought to know that this nation is more a "Tale of Two Cities" than it is just a "Shining City on a Hill."

Maybe, maybe, Mr. President, if you visited some more places; maybe if you went to Appalachia where some people still live in sheds; maybe if you went to Lackawanna where thousands of unemployed steel workers wonder why we subsidized foreign steel. Maybe, Mr. President, if you stopped in at a shelter in Chicago and spoke to the homeless there; maybe, Mr. President, if you asked a woman who had been denied the help she needed to feed her children because you said you needed the money for a tax break for a millionaire or for a missile we couldn't afford to use.

Maybe, Mr. President. But I'm afraid not. Because the truth is, ladies and gentlemen, that this is how we were warned it would be. President Reagan told us from the very beginning that he believed in a kind of social Darwinism. Survival of the fittest. "Government can't do everything," we were told, so it should settle for taking care of the strong and hope that economic ambition and charity will do the rest. Make the rich richer, and what falls from the table will be enough for the middle class and those who are trying desperately to work their way into the middle class.

You know, the Republicans called it "trickle-down" when Hoover tried it. Now they call it "supply side." But it's the same shining city for those relative few who are lucky enough to live in its good neighborhoods. But for the people who are excluded, for the people who are locked out, all they can do is stare from a distance at that city's glimmering towers.

It's an old story. It's as old as our history. The difference between Democrats and Republicans has always been measured in courage and confidence. The Republicans believe that the wagon train will not make it to the frontier unless some of the old, some of the young, some of the weak are left behind by the side of the trail. "The strong," they tell us, "will inherit the land."

We Democrats believe in something else. We democrats believe that we can make it all the way with the whole family intact, and we have more than once. Ever since Franklin Roosevelt lifted himself from his wheelchair to lift this nation from its knees -- wagon train after wagon train -- to new frontiers of education, housing, peace; the whole family aboard, constantly reaching out to extend and enlarge that family; lifting them up into the wagon on the way; blacks and Hispanics, and people of every ethnic group, and native Americans -- all those struggling to build their families and claim some small share of America. For nearly 50 years we carried them all to new levels of comfort, and security, and dignity, even affluence. And remember this, some of us in this room today are here only because this nation had that kind of confidence. And it would be wrong to forget that.



American Rhetoric.com

So, here we are at this convention to remind ourselves where we come from and to claim the future for ourselves and for our children. Today our great Democratic Party, which has saved this nation from depression, from fascism, from racism, from corruption, is called upon to do it again -- this time to save the nation from confusion and division, from the threat of eventual fiscal disaster, and most of all from the fear of a nuclear holocaust.

That's not going to be easy. Mo Udall is exactly right -- it won't be easy. And in order to succeed, we must answer our opponent's polished and appealing rhetoric with a more telling reasonableness and rationality.

We must win this case on the merits. We must get the American public to look past the glitter, beyond the showmanship to the reality, the hard substance of things. And we'll do it not so much with speeches that sound good as with speeches that are good and sound; not so much with speeches that will bring people to their feet as with speeches that will bring people to their senses. We must make the American people hear our "Tale of Two Cities." We must convince them that we don't have to settle for two cities, that we can have one city, indivisible, shining for all of its people.

Now, we will have no chance to do that if what comes out of this convention is a babel of arguing voices. If that's what's heard throughout the campaign, dissident sounds from all sides, we will have no chance to tell our message. To succeed we will have to surrender some small parts of our individual interests, to build a platform that we can all stand on, at once, and comfortably -- proudly singing out. We need a platform we can all agree to so that we can sing out the truth for the nation to hear, in chorus, its logic so clear and commanding that no slick Madison Avenue commercial, no amount of geniality, no martial music will be able to muffle the sound of the truth.

And we Democrats must unite. We Democrats must unite so that the entire nation can unite, because surely the Republicans won't bring this country together. Their policies divide the nation into the lucky and the left-out, into the royalty and the rabble. The Republicans are willing to treat that division as victory. They would cut this nation in half, into those temporarily better off and those worse off than before, and they would call that division recovery.

Now, we should not be embarrassed or dismayed or chagrined if the process of unifying is difficult, even wrenching at times. Remember that, unlike any other Party, we embrace men and women of every color, every creed, every orientation, every economic class. In our family are gathered everyone from the abject poor of Essex County in New York, to the enlightened affluent of the gold coasts at both ends of the nation. And in between is the heart of our constituency -- the middle class, the people not rich enough to be worry-free, but not poor enough to be on welfare; the middle class -- those people who work for a living because they have to, not because some psychiatrist told them it was a convenient way to fill the interval between birth and eternity. White collar and blue collar. Young professionals. Men and women in small business desperate for the capital and contracts that they need to prove their worth.



American Rhetoric.com

We speak for the minorities who have not yet entered the mainstream. We speak for ethnics who want to add their culture to the magnificent mosaic that is America. We speak for women who are indignant that this nation refuses to etch into its governmental commandments the simple rule "thou shalt not sin against equality," a rule so simple -- I was going to say, and I perhaps dare not but I will. It's a commandment so simple it can be spelled in three letters: E.R.A.

We speak for young people demanding an education and a future. We speak for senior citizens. We speak for senior citizens who are terrorized by the idea that their only security, their Social Security, is being threatened. We speak for millions of reasoning people fighting to preserve our environment from greed and from stupidity. And we speak for reasonable people who are fighting to preserve our very existence from a macho intransigence that refuses to make intelligent attempts to discuss the possibility of nuclear holocaust with our enemy. They refuse. They refuse, because they believe we can pile missiles so high that they will pierce the clouds and the sight of them will frighten our enemies into submission.

Now we're proud of this diversity as Democrats. We're grateful for it. We don't have to manufacture it the way the Republicans will next month in Dallas, by propping up mannequin delegates on the convention floor. But we, while we're proud of this diversity, we pay a price for it. The different people that we represent have different points of view. And sometimes they compete and even debate, and even argue. That's what our primaries were all about. But now the primaries are over and it is time, when we pick our candidates and our platform here, to lock arms and move into this campaign together.

If you need any more inspiration to put some small part of your own difference aside to create this consensus, then all you need to do is to reflect on what the Republican policy of divide and cajole has done to this land since 1980. Now the President has asked the American people to judge him on whether or not he's fulfilled the promises he made four years ago. I believe, as Democrats, we ought to accept that challenge. And just for a moment let us consider what he has said and what he's done.

Inflation is down since 1980, but not because of the supply-side miracle promised to us by the President. Inflation was reduced the old-fashioned way: with a recession, the worst since 1932. We could have brought inflation down that way. How did he do it? 55,000 bankruptcies; two years of massive unemployment; 200,000 farmers and ranchers forced off the land; more homeless than at any time since the Great Depression in 1932; more hungry, in this world of enormous affluence, the United States of America, more hungry; more poor, most of them women. And he paid one other thing, a nearly 200 billion dollar deficit threatening our future.

Now, we must make the American people understand this deficit because they don't. The President's deficit is a direct and dramatic repudiation of his promise in 1980 to balance the budget by 1983. How large is it?



The deficit is the largest in the history of the universe. President Carter's last budget had a deficit less than one-third of this deficit. It is a deficit that, according to the President's own fiscal adviser, may grow to as much 300 billion dollars a year for "as far as the eye can see." And, ladies and gentlemen, it is a debt so large -- that is almost one-half of the money we collect from the personal income tax each year goes just to pay the interest. It is a mortgage on our children's future that can be paid only in pain and that could bring this nation to its knees.

Now don't take my word for it -- I'm a Democrat. Ask the Republican investment bankers on Wall Street what they think the chances of this recovery being permanent are. You see, if they're not too embarrassed to tell you the truth, they'll say that they're appalled and frightened by the President's deficit. Ask them what they think of our economy, now that it's been driven by the distorted value of the dollar back to its colonial condition. Now we're exporting agricultural products and importing manufactured ones. Ask those Republican investment bankers what they expect the rate of interest to be a year from now. And ask them -- if they dare tell you the truth -- you'll learn from them, what they predict for the inflation rate a year from now, because of the deficit.

Now, how important is this question of the deficit. Think about it practically: What chance would the Republican candidate have had in 1980 if he had told the American people that he intended to pay for his so-called economic recovery with bankruptcies, unemployment, more homeless, more hungry, and the largest government debt known to humankind? If he had told the voters in 1980 that truth, would American voters have signed the loan certificate for him on Election Day? Of course not! That was an election won under false pretenses. It was won with smoke and mirrors and illusions. And that's the kind of recovery we have now as well.

But what about foreign policy? They said that they would make us and the whole world safer. They say they have. By creating the largest defense budget in history, one that even they now admit is excessive -- by escalating to a frenzy the nuclear arms race; by incendiary rhetoric; by refusing to discuss peace with our enemies; by the loss of 279 young Americans in Lebanon in pursuit of a plan and a policy that no one can find or describe.

We give money to Latin American governments that murder nuns, and then we lie about it. We have been less than zealous in support of our only real friend -- it seems to me, in the Middle East -- the one democracy there, our flesh and blood ally, the state of Israel. Our foreign policy drifts with no real direction, other than an hysterical commitment to an arms race that leads nowhere -- if we're lucky. And if we're not, it could lead us into bankruptcy or war.

Of course we must have a strong defense! Of course Democrats are for a strong defense. Of course Democrats believe that there are times that we must stand and fight. And we have. Thousands of us have paid for freedom with our lives. But always -- when this country has been at its best -- our purposes were clear. Now they're not. Now our allies are as confused as our enemies.



American Rhetoric.com

Now we have no real commitment to our friends or to our ideals -- not to human rights, not to the refuseniks, not to Sakharov, not to Bishop Tutu and the others struggling for freedom in South Africa.

We have in the last few years spent more than we can afford. We have pounded our chests and made bold speeches. But we lost 279 young Americans in Lebanon and we live behind sand bags in Washington. How can anyone say that we are safer, stronger, or better?

That is the Republican record. That its disastrous quality is not more fully understood by the American people I can only attribute to the President's amiability and the failure by some to separate the salesman from the product.

And now it's up to us. Now it's up to you and to me to make the case to America. And to remind Americans that if they are not happy with all that the President has done so far, they should consider how much worse it will be if he is left to his radical proclivities for another four years unrestrained. Unrestrained.

If July brings back Ann Gorsuch Burford, what can we expect of December? Where would another four years take us? Where would four years more take us? How much larger will the deficit be? How much deeper the cuts in programs for the struggling middle class and the poor to limit that deficit? How high will the interest rates be? How much more acid rain killing our forests and fouling our lakes?

And, ladies and gentlemen, the nation must think of this: What kind of Supreme Court will we have?

We must ask ourselves what kind of court and country will be fashioned by the man who believes in having government mandate people's religion and morality; the man who believes that trees pollute the environment; the man that believes that the laws against discrimination against people go too far; a man who threatens Social Security and Medicaid and help for the disabled. How high will we pile the missiles? How much deeper will the gulf be between us and our enemies? And, ladies and gentlemen, will four years more make meaner the spirit of the American people? This election will measure the record of the past four years. But more than that, it will answer the question of what kind of people we want to be.

We Democrats still have a dream. We still believe in this nation's future. And this is our answer to the question. This is our credo: We believe in only the government we need, but we insist on all the government we need.

We believe in a government that is characterized by fairness and reasonableness, a reasonableness that goes beyond labels, that doesn't distort or promise to do things that we know we can't do.

We believe in a government strong enough to use words like "love" and "compassion" and smart enough to convert our noblest aspirations into practical realities.



American Rhetoric.com

We believe in encouraging the talented, but we believe that while survival of the fittest may be a good working description of the process of evolution, a government of humans should elevate itself to a higher order.

Our government should be able to rise to the level where it can fill the gaps that are left by chance or by a wisdom we don't fully understand. We would rather have laws written by the patron of this great city, the man called the "world's most sincere Democrat," St. Francis of Assisi, than laws written by Darwin.

We believe, as Democrats, that a society as blessed as ours, the most affluent democracy in the world's history, one that can spend trillions on instruments of destruction, ought to be able to help the middle class in its struggle, ought to be able to find work for all who can do it, room at the table, shelter for the homeless, care for the elderly and infirm, and hope for the destitute. And we proclaim as loudly as we can the utter insanity of nuclear proliferation and the need for a nuclear freeze, if only to affirm the simple truth that peace is better than war because life is better than death.

We believe in firm but fair law and order.

We believe proudly in the union movement.

We believe in privacy for people, openness by government.

We believe in civil rights, and we believe in human rights.

We believe in a single fundamental idea that describes better than most textbooks and any speech that I could write what a proper government should be: the idea of family, mutuality, the sharing of benefits and burdens for the good of all, feeling one another's pain, sharing one another's blessings -- reasonably, honestly, fairly, without respect to race, or sex, or geography, or political affiliation.

We believe we must be the family of America, recognizing that at the heart of the matter we are bound one to another, that the problems of a retired school teacher in Duluth are our problems; that the future of the child in Buffalo is our future; that the struggle of a disabled man in Boston to survive and live decently is our struggle; that the hunger of a woman in Little Rock is our hunger; that the failure anywhere to provide what reasonably we might, to avoid pain, is our failure.

For 50 years we Democrats created a better future for our children, using traditional Democratic principles as a fixed beacon, giving us direction and purpose, but constantly innovating, adapting to new realities: Roosevelt's alphabet programs Truman's NATO and the GI Bill of Rights; Kennedy's intelligent tax incentives and the Alliance for Progress; Johnson's civil rights; Carter's human rights and the nearly miraculous Camp David Peace Accord.



Democrats did it and Democrats can do it again. We can build a future that deals with our deficit. Remember this, that 50 years of progress under our principles never cost us what the last four years of stagnation have. And we can deal with the deficit intelligently, by shared sacrifice, with all parts of the nation's family contributing, building partnerships with the private sector, providing a sound defense without depriving ourselves of what we need to feed our children and care for our people. We can have a future that provides for all the young of the present, by marrying common sense and compassion.

We know we can, because we did it for nearly 50 years before 1980. And we can do it again, if we do not forget that this entire nation has profited by these progressive principles; that they helped lift up generations to the middle class and higher; that they gave us a chance to work, to go to college, to raise a family, to own a house, to be secure in our old age and, before that, to reach heights that our own parents would not have dared dream of.

That struggle to live with dignity is the real story of the shining city. And it's a story, ladies and gentlemen, that I didn't read in a book, or learn in a classroom. I saw it and lived it, like many of you. I watched a small man with thick calluses on both his hands work 15 and 16 hours a day. I saw him once literally bleed from the bottoms of his feet, a man who came here uneducated, alone, unable to speak the language, who taught me all I needed to know about faith and hard work by the simple eloquence of his example. I learned about our kind of democracy from my father. And I learned about our obligation to each other from him and from my mother. They asked only for a chance to work and to make the world better for their children, and they asked to be protected in those moments when they would not be able to protect themselves. This nation and this nation's government did that for them.

And that they were able to build a family and live in dignity and see one of their children go from behind their little grocery store in South Jamaica on the other side of the tracks where he was born, to occupy the highest seat, in the greatest State, in the greatest nation, in the only world we would know, is an ineffably beautiful tribute to the democratic process.

And ladies and gentlemen, on January 20, 1985, it will happen again -- only on a much, much grander scale. We will have a new President of the United States, a Democrat born not to the blood of kings but to the blood of pioneers and immigrants. And we will have America's first woman Vice President, the child of immigrants, and she will open with one magnificent stroke, a whole new frontier for the United States.

Now, it will happen. It will happen if we make it happen; if you and I make it happen. And I ask you now, ladies and gentlemen, brothers and sisters, for the good of all of us, for the love of this great nation, for the family of America, for the love of God: Please, make this nation remember how futures are built.

Thank you and God bless you.