

Citizens of Clarksburg and honored guests, it's an honor to be here. This is an historic occasion. Clarksburg is the fifth Town Meeting '76. Today there is also a Town Meeting in Philadelphia scheduled for Congress Hall, a Town Meeting in Washington, the nation's capital, and also one way out west, in Boulder Colorado.

In these Town Meetings, local citizens can get together and begin to work on the issues of our time. I believe that this is the next step our nation must take to once again get hold of the voice, the thinking and the proposals of local citizens. It might be interesting, as at least 5000 Town Meetings spread across this nation, to have IBM take all these proposals that people have worked on across the nation, some of which you are going to take home today and build a program that will create a statement of the consensus of the direction in which the American people see that the future needs to go. In fact, the 5000 might even be an interesting way to discover what it is that the American people see needs to take place, where they look seriously at the hopes and complexities and begin to build the models to do what's needed in the world. I believe this is the next step in terms of reshaping the nation.

Some of you have seen the play 1776 and maybe some of you participated in it. It's an exciting play. What that play illustrated was that it was people like yourselves who had to struggle and go through all kinds of difficulty to begin to build this nation. That's the way it has always been. I am excited about this day because I think that it holds promise for the future. Who knows what is going to finally come out of this day? But some how I know I'm going to be different at the end of this day and I suspect you will be too.

All of us are caught up in thinking about the time that we live in. We just don't have any other time to live in. And when you look at our time, what you begin to see is a long string of things like the energy crisis, shortages of one kind or another, Cambodia, Viet Nam, inflation, the Middle East, ecological worries, Watergate and on and on and on the list goes. A kind of a whirl begins to hit us. When I was growing up, we had a swirl on our hands to deal with. But this decade we are living in now is a radical time, a time of great transitions. In fact, things are impossible. Even the spray cans you use may be sending up difficulties into the atmosphere by knocking out the ozone barrier which will allow the sun's rays to infiltrate our atmosphere that will mutate our plants and maybe some of us a little more. That's an impossible situation.

It is hard to face that I live in an age that worries about running out of things, or about changes occurring that are irreversible. What really woke me up was watching a congressional committee the other day on TV who were interviewing the nation's economic advisors. It was dreary business. At the end of the show, one of the economic advisors was asked by a congressman, "Well, what do we do?" The advisor looked blank and dropping his head, said, "I just don't know, I just don't know." Then he asked, "Well, what do you think we should do?" That woke me up to the fact that I've been living out of a kind of understanding of life that said, Well, things are always worked out in the world and they will just go on. There is always somebody who knows what to do and will do it, somebody who has the answer and will work it out." I got shaken quite a bit, because here were the experts and what they said was that they didn't know. I began to think and it hit me again that there are

people around this globe who are starving to death today. I remember speeches back in the 50's and 60's predicting that the agricultural technology of our time was such that in a few years we would't have any food shortages or starvation. Something sparked within me that said something was wrong. Something was out of kilter there.

Also you know there is the whole business of unemployment. The papers said that it was well over 6% first and then it was well over 6½%, and then 7%, and now, I was led to understand the other day, that the experts don't think that unemployment will get much beyond 9½%, unless it goes to 10%. That began to hit me because some of those percentage points are relatives and friends of mine, and their checks and their bank accounts are about gone. I'm a little bit concerned and afraid of inflation too. I've noticed everytime I have gone to the store recently that, although there are prices that go down, there are more prices that go up. I don't seem to feel as though I'm coming out on the top end of the scores anymore. I began to wonder what's taking place. Economists say that any time something happens in this country, it happens two to ten times worse every place else.

What bothers me about this is really not the fact that things are moving out of control but that nobody's quite clear what to do about it. It's like becoming a bowl of spaghetti, all separate noodles, but all tied together. When you pull one string, you never know what it's going to set loose. When the Arabs pulled the war off in the Middle East, a friend who is a doctor in Denver had to call his staff together. He works on kidney patients and the staff had to decide all over again which people in their city were not going to be placed on the kidney machine, that is, were going to be left to die, because the orders for new kidney machines were split in half. The decision had been made that there simply was not going to be enough power available for all the machines that were needed. Now I am sure that whoever switched off that oil is not intending to make it hard for somebody in Denver. But that's just a practical matter--our world is so interrelated that you begin to push something here, and things begin to pop through all over the place.

I was working in Australia in 1972 with a village of aboriginal people who decided to get on their feet economically in order to progress. The village decided that all the women should go to work in the local meat processing plant. That was going to mean real income for them, money to buy their kids some clothes, food, and schooling. Shortly after the women were hired, all of them lost their jobs because the dock workers of San Francisco went on strike. That meat packing plant was making hamburgers to go to the United States, and nobody could unload them so the meat packing plant closed and those ladies were out of work. I somehow felt as if they should have had a voice in the folding of that plant, a way to get the whole picture of what was taking place, and make a decision to go to one place or another. This world is complex and it's tied together and you can't pull it apart. The whole world right now is demanding to be dealt with. We used to think that of the world, or at least of ourselves, as a melting pot. I think we are pretty clear now that it's not a melting pot that we're after, but it's a mosaic, where all people with their great gifts and their own sense of destiny, are related to every other people and where all people participate in creating this mosaic, with their gifts, and with their models.

I believe the time has come for a new response by local communities in the midst of this complex, intricate global mosaic. You can begin to see the repercussions of decisions about life that is lived in Clarkesburg, and that is acted out

in Rio De Janerio and vice versa. For that interrelatedness is the feel of the life today. That's just the way life is. The local community is the place where the new response is being built. That's not easy to do. It's a long struggle. It means that people are going to come together like this and begin to look at the total picture and very intentionally decide what it is they are going to do-x,y and z. They will be doing very practical things about naming the next steps to impossible situations.

I rather imagine that that's exactly who we, as Americans, are historically. I want to move back in history a little bit. We have always been a people of practicals. There has never been a time in our nation of 200 years that we have not been practical. We are also a crisis people. When you look back at 1776, the world was as complex and in as much crisis, and appeared as impossible to them as ours does to us today. Just imagine thinking about cutting loose from one of the most powerful nations of the world. That's what they were dealing with, and going out on a limb with such a new governmental system that nobody was quite sure what it was all about. It had never really had been tried out. Well, there were lots of experts in Europe that didn't give two hoots, and felt that this new venture would be an economical and political failure. But all the people who knew anything about anything, didn't have the answers. Just think, those characters we call our forefathers, created this nation out of stuff like that!

I think that we need to lift that up again and go back and reread our history. The world was at a crisis point. The colonists had been removed from their homeland in those thirteen colonies yet, had a love for their homeland. They didn't want to leave. They left Europe in order to form a demonstration of a new way that they hoped would link their nations up. That is, they saw that they weren't just running their own old thing, but they saw that the whole world was on their back. What they were risking was cutting a new path through what was obviously impossible to do anything about. Now, that's what I mean by revolution. We are a revolutionary people. We cut a path through what looks like a decided situation that nothing can be done about it.

That reminds me, that we've always been a people who struggle with civil war. I mean, we struggle! I mean we struggle with one another and what we struggle with is tradition. But just imagine a nation coming out of the civil war and in 25 years being the rising power in the world. Somebody told me that Abe Lincoln got a letter one day written by a lady (they write these kinds of letters, you know) who informed him that everything he was doing was wrong, he was wrong, in fact, everything about him was wrong. They say that Lincoln got out a note-book and wrote her back, "Dear Ma'am, You may be right. Sincerely, Abe Lincoln." We've all known people who are deeply unsure, but find a way to struggle through.

Another thing--we've always been a people who care for the world. After the Second World War, we felt that care for the world was never done before and we had to do it. We renewed Europe, thereby changing the course of history. Every decision to care for the future is a risk. It is always a great adventure. It is not determined, for there aren't any guarantees. What we have on our hands today is a brand new wilderness to venture out in and it's a risk either way you step, whether you step back or whether you step ahead. All of us sense that the time in which we live is confusing, that it is complex, that it is fragmented. You can never get all those pieces together in your mind to have a whole picture. We experience all of life that way. That's not wrong or bad or naughty, that is the way life is, in our time.

What we are faced with is creating some brand new ways to think about our lives and some brand new models that begin to cut through the gloom and the doom and the impossible, that we seem to be surrounded by. My father was a man who believed in this country. He believed in life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. He chose to have a job to be able to support his family, and he voted, and he pursued happiness, that is, he had leisure to enjoy himself. And when things got rough, as problems began to confront him, he mostly saw that what he had to do was either to make more money, vote differently or have a little more fun.

But I want to suggest that today my father's alternatives no longer work, that the economic, the political and the cultural are so tightly tied together that you can't touch one without touching the other. Take leisure for a minute, --you know, deciding that I'm going to have more fun. People start buying more boats, start buying more river-front property. You create a leisure industry. Theatres worry and restaurants worry. Entertainment becomes a major industry to compete with nature. Hotel and restaurant workers get a union to which you have to assign a special arbitration force. On and on it goes. Massive legislation is passed because of the new type of property rights that are exercised. New kinds of insurance have to be created for recreational sports. New kinds of litigation take place in the courts. You begin to touch this complexity and everything begins to be touched by it. If you begin to fiddle with the economic just a bit, just look what happens to the political. Life is inter-related like that spaghetti bowl. There is no way to pull it apart. You make a decision and you perform and act in Clarkesburg and it snowballs until it touches the last people on the fact of the earth.

What this means is that there is coming into being a new model for human community, a new way for communities to respond to the reality we live in-- human community where the relationships between the economic, cultural and the political can be looked at, where people can see the relationships between the local and the global, where people can make intentional decisions, instead of being victims of somebody else's decision, or the consequences of somebody else's acts. This new community can begin to design forceful action, can begin not only to resolve issues within their local community, but can begin to address the issues that need to be addressed in the world.

There is a new way of thinking coming, a new way of beginning to create a plan to move and to act that goes beyond just new mortar and brick. We know by now that you do not build a better community by putting up a better shopping center. The new community begins with transformed human beings, a new citizenry that cares deeply about its community, but cares about that community in relationship to the world. They know that they are in the same boat, that they live as one world, and that what they do affects the total, and vice versa.

This aboriginal community in Australia I mentioned decided to become this kind of new people. They decided to take their ancient culture and begin to put it into 20th century form. They would take their ancient economic life and begin to mold it into a new way, and would take their political life and begin to fashion it in such a way that it was viable for them to stand as a people.

It's very interesting that last November this community, which has for a very long time been a very dependent people and in bad shape, took all of their governmental checks that they get each month and endorsed them and sent them back to the government. Do you understand that? They decided to do that although anybody, particularly in this village, can always use a little more money. That

was a sign to demonstrate that they had made a decision to become a brand new community. The story that they tell is that somebody has got to become a new community to show all the other aboriginal people in Australia that it is possible, that you don't have to just lay down and let history roll over you. And the village people said it was not only a sign for the aboriginal people in Australia but a sign to the world that it's possible for people to care and to invent a new community, a new way to respond to the present times, freed from being victimized by what's going on.

Isn't that something amazing? They told themselves a new story. I was talking to one of the old aboriginal elders, and he said, "What else would you want to do with your life than to be able to create a new community that deals with our situation?" And they took one of their old tunes and wrote a new song to it. Would you like to hear it? I'm not going to sing it, but I'll read it to you. "Journey on, journey on, all of mankind, future is waiting for you. Struggling, stumbling, all of life through, our lives are limited to foretell. All of mankind and nature of unknown, future is waiting for you." They sing that song and it tells them what they're doing.

Well, what would the new song of Clarkesburg be that will tell you who you are and what you are doing--or maybe the new song of America? Just imagine for a moment a whole nation of Clarkesburgs breaking loose new models for human communities, deciding on the context of the whole globe. Can you get that picture? Talk about a new nation that has decided to be a sign to the whole world of what is possible, that really picks up on what our forefathers did. They were cutting a path through an impossible situation to release not just themselves but the whole world to a new way to live.

Now somebody may say, "That's a vision," as if that automatically disqualifies it. Well, I want to say that you're right, that's a vision, and in many ways America has never been anything else but a vision in somebody's head. That's really what we've been. But there's another side of it which is that we have always been a very practical people with respect to our visions. You go elsewhere in this world and there is one phrase that is associated with the term American, and it is not the phrase you are thinking of. The first thing that comes into people's minds is "can do, can do." They always talk about the American as the one who builds the next bridge, while other people look around trying to figure out what to do, thinking it can't be done. Americans are a practical people. They implement plans, they build the next steps to begin to actualize their plans and to give that gift to the world.

And this is not a bureaucratic thing but it is at the local level where this planning goes on out of the local initiative. I was surprised to read in Peter Drucker's book the other day the remarkable fact that all of the major industrial inventions that have shaped our century were developed outside of the great experimental and research centers. Let me point out that Henry Ford was not a social engineer but a tinkerer in a workshop. And Thomas Edison. And the Wright brothers were just a couple of boys in a backyard who took what they had on their hands, and saw a new way to arrange it, and by that created a brand new airplane. The way this country has been invented has been by people just taking what they had on their hands.

That is what the Town Meeting is all about. You have local people like you and me coming together to look squarely at the way life is today, and beginning to build a new picture of what the future needs to be. Someone suggested that

maybe we ought to write a new Declaration and call it the Declaration of Carependence in which you spell out clearly all the needs and all the gifts of the world and then lay out what needs to take place. That might be exciting to think about, but today we will list out the raw proposals, see what the issues are, and how those relationships fit together. Then we will begin to lay down what is it that needs to take place. The exciting thing about Town Meeting '76 is that it picks up on the aspect of our heritage which is deep in us. The town meeting dynamic has always been our way. It brings people together to work on the issues. Won't it be fun to write a new story about Clarkesburg? Oh by the way, aren't you glad that somebody had the sense to choose the eagle as our symbol? Can you imagine what would have happened if someone had picked a turtle? What would that have done to us? Something that has a thick shell and everytime it meets something new, it pulls in its head and feet and hides, pretending the situation doesn't exist. Maybe we ought to get busy and go into the day.

-- George Holcombe