understand.
I think you can do something for people by being a voice for a more decent community and society.

A Tale of Two Cities

MARIO CUOMO

New York Governor Mario Cuomo soared into national prominence when he delivered the nominating speech for presidential candidate Walter Mondale at the 1984 Democratic Convention. Invoking stark images, Cuomo’s stirring oratory articulated the aggravation of those left behind in the booming 1980s. Mondale would lose by a significant margin to Reagan in the fall election.

Ten days ago, President Reagan admitted that although some people in this country seemed to be doing well nowadays, others were unhappy, and even worried, about themselves, their families, and their futures. The president said he didn’t understand that fear. He said, "Why, this country is a shining city on a hill." 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 part of 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 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 who can’t find it. Even worse: there are elderly people who tremble in the basements of the houses there. There are people who sleep in the city’s streets, in the gutter, where the glitter doesn’t show. There are ghettos where thousands of young people, without an education or a job, give their lives away to drug dealers every day. There is despair, Mr. President, in faces you never see, in places you never visit in your shining city.

In fact, Mr. President, this nation is more a "Tale of Two Cities" than it is a "Shining City on a Hill." Maybe if you visited more places, Mr. President, you’d understand.

Maybe if you went to Appalachia where some people still live in shacks and to Lackawanna where thousands of unemployed steel workers wonder why we subsidize foreign steel while we surrender their dignity to unemployment and to welfare checks; maybe if you stepped into a shelter in Chicago and talked with some of the homeless there; maybe, Mr. President, if you asked a woman who'd been denied the help she needs to feed her children because you say we need the money to give a tax break to a millionaire or to build a missile we can’t even afford to us—maybe then you’d understand. Maybe, Mr. President. But I’m afraid not. Because the truth is, this is how we were warned it would be.

President Reagan told us from the 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 their table will be enough for the middle class and those trying to make it into the middle class.

The Republicans called it trickle-down when Hoover tried it. Now they call it supply side. It is 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—locked out—all they can do is to stare from a distance at that city’s glittering towers.

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

We Democrats believe that we can make it all the way with the whole family intact. 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, people of every ethnic group, and Native
Americans—all those struggling to build their families a share of America....

We speak for the minorities who have not yet entered the mainstream: for ethnic groups who want to add their culture to the mosaic that is America; for women indignant that we refuse to etch into our governmental commandments the simple rule “thou shalt not sin against inequality,” a commandment so obvious that it can be spelled in three letters: E.R.A; for young people demanding an education and a future, for senior citizens terrorized by the idea that their only security, their Social Security, is being threatened; for millions of reasoning people 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. Refusing 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.

We’re proud of this diversity. Grateful we don’t have to manufacture its appearance the way the Republicans will next month in Dallas, by propping up mannequin delegates on the convention floor.

But we pay a price for it. The different people we represent have many points of view. Sometimes they compete and then we have debates, even arguments. That’s what our primaries were....

Inflation is down since 1980. But not because of the supply-side miracle promised by the president. Inflation was reduced the old-fashioned way, with a recession, the worst since 1932. More than 55,000 bankruptcies. Two years of massive unemployment. Two hundred thousand farmers and ranchers forced off the land. More homeless than at any time since the Great Depression. More hungry, more poor—mostly women—and a nearly $200 billion deficit threatening our future....

And what about foreign policy? They said they would make us and the world safer. They say they have. By creating the largest defense budget in history, one even they now admit is excessive, they failed to discuss peace with our enemies. By the loss of 279 young Americans in Lebanon in pursuit of a plan and a policy no one can find or describe. We give monies to Latin American governments that murder nuns, and then lie about it. We have been less than zealous in our support of the only real friend we have in the Middle East, the one democracy there, our flesh-and-blood ally, the state of Israel.

Our policy drifts with no real direction, other than a hysterical commitment to an arms race that leads nowhere, if we’re lucky. If we’re not—could lead us to bankruptcy or war....

How high will we pile the missiles? How much deeper will be the gulf between us and our enemies? Will we make meaner the spirit of our 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, our credo: We believe in only the government we need, but we insist on all the government we need.

We believe in a government characterized by fairness and reasonableness, a reasonableness that goes beyond labels, that doesn’t distort or promise to do what it knows it can’t do. A government strong enough to use the words “love” and “compassion” and smart enough to convert our noblest aspirations....

We believe, as Democrats, that a society as blessed as ours, the most affluent democracy in world’s history, 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, hope for the destitute.

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, in the union movement, in privacy for people, openness by government, civil rights, and human rights....

That struggle to live with dignity is the real story of the shining city. It’s a story 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 hands work fifteen and sixteen 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. 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 to be protected in those moments when they would not be able to protect themselves. This nation and its government did that for them.

And on January 20, 1985, it will happen again. Only on a 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 immigrants and pioneers.

We will have America’s first woman vice president, the child of immigrants, a New Yorker, opening with one magnificent stroke a whole new frontier for the United States.

It will happen, if we make it happen.

I ask you, ladies and gentlemen, brothers and sisters—for the good of us all, 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.

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**Texas v. Johnson:**

“We do not consecrate the flag by punishing its desecration”

**SUPREME COURT JUSTICE WILLIAM J. BRENNAN, JR.**

To the chants of fellow protesters outside the 1984 Republican National Convention in Dallas, Gregory Lee Johnson burned an American flag to express his disgust at President Reagan’s policies. Texas authorities charged him with “desecration of a venerated object” and sentenced Johnson to a year in prison.

Johnson appealed on the grounds that the decision was an infringement of his civil rights. Five years later, by 5-4 vote, the Supreme Court agreed and overturned the conviction in Texas v. Johnson. In 1990, the Supreme Court also overturned a law passed by Congress to punish flag burners.

After publicly burning an American flag as a means of political protest, Gregory Lee Johnson was convicted of desecrating a flag in violation of Texas law. This case presents the question whether his conviction is consistent with the First Amendment. We hold that it is not.

While the Republican National Convention was taking place in Dallas in 1984, respondent Johnson participated in a political demonstration dubbed the “Republican War Chest Tour.” As explained in literature distributed by the demonstrators and in speeches made by the respondent, the purpose of this event was to protest the policies of the Reagan administration and of certain Dallas-based corporations. The demonstrators marched through the Dallas streets, chanting political slogans and stopping at several corporate locations to stage “die-ins” intended to dramatize the consequences of nuclear war. On several occasions they spray-painted the walls of buildings and overturned potted plants, but Johnson himself took no part in such activities. He did, however, accept an American flag handed to him by a fellow protester who had taken it from a flag pole outside one of the targeted buildings.

The demonstration ended in front of Dallas City Hall, where Johnson unfurled the American flag, doused it with kerosene, and set it on fire. While the flag burned, the protestors chanted, “America, the red, white, and blue, we spit on you.” After the demonstrators dispersed, a witness to the flag burning collected the flag’s remains and buried them in his backyard. No one was physically injured or threatened with injury, though several witnesses testified that they had been seriously offended by the flag burning.

Of the approximately one hundred demonstrators, Johnson alone was charged with a crime. The only criminal offense with which he was charged was the desecration of a venerated object in violation of Texas Penal Code Ann. 42.09(a)(3)(1989). After a trial he was convicted, sentenced to one year in prison, and fined two thousand dollars.

The State of Texas conceded for purposes of its oral argument in this case that Johnson’s conduct was expressive conduct. Johnson burned an American flag as part—indeed, as the culmination—of a political demonstration that coincided with the convening of the Republican Party and its renomination of Ronald Reagan for President. The expressive, overtly political nature of this conduct was both intentional and overwhelmingly apparent. At his trial, Johnson explained his reasons for burning the flag as follows: “The American Flag...