

CITIZENS UNION DINNER
ACCEPTANCE REMARKS

BY

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CITIZENS UNION

I am pleased and privileged to accept the Business Leadership award from the Citizens Union.

I would like however to skip over some of the niceties that generally accompany the receipt of an award such as this in order to have a moment to share with you a thought or two about why the work of organizations like the Citizens Union is so vitally important.

We need strong government in this country; we need efficient government and good government at the federal, state and local levels if we are to meet the myriad and indeed awesome challenges that face us.

The transition from the Great Society of the 1960s to the Reagan Revolution of the 1980s has been characterized by a decidedly negative view of the role and performance of government. Without question, some of the criticism directed toward government was deserved. Without question, there were numerous disappointments and some profound failures. These have been prominently, publicly and repeatedly bashed during the 1980s.

On the other hand, I think that we sometimes overlook or take for granted some of the stunning successes of government over the past twenty years, whether it be in civil rights or in voting rights, in the creation of Head Start and WIC programs, or in cleaner air and water.

But it serves little purpose to argue the past; let's instead ask the tough questions about the future.

How can we insure that all of our children will get access to high quality public elementary and secondary schools?

Who will feed the hungry?

Who will shelter the homeless?

How can we insure access to good health care for all of our citizens?

What are we going to do about the problems of the elderly and the infirm?

How are we going to rebuild our public transportation system in this city?

What are we going to do about the unconscionable rates of poverty that persist nationwide?

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It is utter nonsense in my opinion to say that the private sector will take care of these problems. They can't, and they won't. The private sector can contribute to the social good, but public-private partnerships should not mean private sector substitution for public sector responsibility.

I believe we have gone too far in our anti-government fervor. I believe we are overemphasizing the limitations of government and failing to recognize that government is an appropriate and indeed probably the most logical and efficient way to respond to many of society's great needs.

It is no easy task to restore the public's confidence and trust in their government -- federal, state or local. Organizations like the Citizens Union can be helpful. You don't have to be a naive Cheerleader, but you can be thoughtful and judicious communicators. You have credibility if you use it wisely.

But most important of all it is organizations such as yours all around the country who can through their vigilance help to insure that our public officials perform at their very best; that they earn every day, every week, every year the trust and confidence our citizens must place in them. In effect, you are an insurance policy against the systems' breakdowns that we cannot afford to allow.

If our governments can respond to the great needs of today and tomorrow, it will be at least in part attributable to what you have stood for over your long and glorious history and how you perform your functions in the coming years.

I am glad to be here this evening, to receive your honor, to be part of your legacy, and to share in your future.

Thank you.