

President John F. Kennedy on being a liberal...

“I believe in human dignity as the source of national purpose, in human liberty as the source of national action, in the human heart as the source of national compassion, and in the human mind as the source of our invention and our ideas. It is, I believe, the faith in our fellow citizens as individuals and as people that lies at the heart of the liberal faith. For liberalism is not so much a party creed or set of fixed platform promises as it is an attitude of mind and heart, a faith in man’s ability through the experiences of his reason and judgment to increase for himself and his fellow men the amount of justice and freedom and brotherhood which all human life deserves.

I believe also in the United States of America, in the promise that it contains and has contained throughout our history of producing a society so abundant and creative and so free and responsible that it cannot only fulfill the aspirations of its citizens, but serve equally well as a beacon for all mankind. I do not believe in a superstate. I see no magic in tax dollars which are sent to Washington and then returned. I abhor the waste and incompetence of large-scale federal bureaucracies in this administration as well as in others. I do not favor state compulsion when voluntary individual effort can do the job and do it well. But I believe in a government which acts, which exercises its full powers and full responsibilities. Government is an art and a precious obligation; and when it has a job to do, I believe it should do it. And this requires not only great ends but that we propose concrete means of achieving them.

Our responsibility is not discharged by announcement of virtuous ends. Our responsibility is to achieve these objectives with social invention, with political skill, and executive vigor. I believe for these reasons that liberalism is our best and only hope in the world today. For the liberal society is a free society, and it is at the same time and for that reason a strong society. Its strength is drawn from the will of free people committed to great ends and peacefully striving to meet them. Only liberalism, in short, can repair our national power, restore our national purpose, and liberate our national energies.

What do our opponents mean when they apply to us the label “Liberal?”

If by “Liberal” they mean, as they want people to believe, someone who is soft in his policies abroad, who is against local government, and who is unconcerned with the taxpayer’s dollar, then the record of this party and its members demonstrate that we are not that kind of “Liberal.”

But if by a “Liberal” they mean someone who looks ahead and not behind, someone who welcomes new ideas without rigid reactions, someone who cares about the welfare of the people -- their health, their housing, their schools, their jobs, their civil rights, and their civil liberties -- someone who believes we can break through the stalemate and suspicions that grip us in our policies abroad, if that is what they mean by a “Liberal,” then I’m proud to say I’m a “Liberal.”

President John Fitzgerald Kennedy