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Speech at Washington National Cathedral commemoration of 25th
anniversary of US Air Force. 4 May 1980.

Marc Tanenbaum:

Canon [Kassin?], Secretary Marc, General Allen, Reverend, clergy, and dear friends, the last time that I preached in a cathedral was a number of months ago in Detroit, Michigan.

[1:00] It was a Roman Catholic cathedral, magnificent, as is this historic place. And I felt so much at home with Cardinal Dearden and my Roman Catholic friends in that cathedral, as well as with the Protestant and Jewish guests who were present, that when Cardinal Dearden did me the honor of introducing me to that congregation he turned to me and said, "And now it gives me great pleasure to introduce to you Bishop Tanenbaum." [02:00]

(laughter) Well, you don't fool around in a congregation of that esteem, and so I bethought myself and responded to his eminence by saying, "Your eminence, that is indeed a very great tribute that you have paid to me, but in truth, I was not unfrocked; I was just unsuited." (laughter) I should like to feel that my presence here today, through the gracious invitation of the bishop of this great Episcopal church is another symbolic sign of the growing respect [03:00], reconciliation, and solidarity of the Christian and Jewish peoples of this nation who come

together to manifest their unity not only as brothers and sisters in God's human family, but as brothers and sisters in this great American democracy who need each other's strength, mutual support, and nurture as almost at no other time in the history of this great republic.

I have had both the good fortune [04:00] and the high privilege of having spent a substantial amount of time with members of the United States Air Force conducting seminars at Air Force University and at numerous other bases. So it is not a novelty for me to be present at an occasion marking the twenty-fifth anniversary service for the United States Air Force, and yet I would be less than candid if I did not say to you that when the kind invitation was extended to me to come here to preach I wondered aloud to myself, "Why is it necessary for a great Christian church such as this [05:00] and a Jew, a rabbi such as myself, to want to come together to celebrate the presence of the Air Force of the United States, which is altogether a civic expression of the defense of our nation? Why is it necessary for religious people to hold liturgical observances to seek to undergird somehow, some way the importance of upholding the need of a strong defense of America, in particular its Air Force? And as I thought about that question [06:00], which essentially is a moral question, I recall reading in a book by Professor Clinton

Rossiter, who wrote an essay about the foundations of the American Revolution, which issued forth in the birth of this great democracy. In his book, *The Political Thought of the American Revolution*, Professor Rossiter wrote the following: "Revolutionary thinkers drew heavily on their colonial heritage in proclaiming virtue, the essence of freedom. There was a widespread conviction that free government rested on a definite moral basis, [07:00] a virtuous people. Conversely, the decay of a people's morals signaled the end of liberty and happiness. At no point in the whole range of political theory," Rossiter wrote, "were Americans more thoroughly in accord. Free government was, in large part, a problem in practical ethics at the heart of which was the proclamation and the defense of freedom."

What does freedom mean to us in this year of 1980? [08:00] Do we, far too often, take the gift and the blessing of freedom still for granted in the turbulent world in which we live today? Let me share with you in a personal way how I have come to a renewed understanding of the meaning of freedom and the need for the constant vigilance to defend freedom and how precarious it can become for the welfare of this nation if, God forbid, we become so self-indulgent that our own personal pursuit of

pleasure [09:00] allows us to suspend that need for that vigilance.

Just some two months ago, I traveled with a group of prominent American citizens as well as some 150 Europeans from France and Germany and Italy and elsewhere in Europe on a Cambodian march for survival. We came together traveling along the roads of Thailand bringing behind us some 20 truckloads of food and medicine, trying to bring that through the border of Thailand to Cambodia for the purpose of trying to save [10:00] tens of thousands of human lives. This was the third mission in which groups of Christians of all denominations and Jews of all persuasions came together during the course of the past two years to try to help relieve the suffering, the hunger, the pain, the starvation, and death itself for hundreds of thousands of human beings in Southeast Asia. And as we came to the border of Cambodia we saw on the other side of the bridge a group of Vietnamese soldiers and Kampuchean soldiers and we were told not to take a single step across that bridge with those truckloads of food [11:00] and life-sustaining medicine, for if we would, we were told, we would all be machine gunned on the spot. And so we turned around with those truckloads with food and medicine, took them back to the camps of Thailand where there were found

some 300,000 -- 400,000 Cambodian refugees, Vietnamese boat people, ethnic Chinese.

On the afternoon in which we returned to Aranya Prathet, which was the first camp on the border between Thailand and Cambodia, I sat with a group of some twelve young Cambodian men. This mission had the blessing of the White House and the State Department [12:00] and we were asked to bring back recommendations to the American government in terms of what our government might continue to do to help save lives and relieve so much pain and suffering in that part of the world. And I sat with young Cambodians and asked them to tell me their story, and each one of the 12 young people told me stories of how every single one of them had had their entire families taken away from them, taken out into the forests, and shot or else burned alive in thatched huts.

In 1975, there were eight million Cambodians living in Kampuchea. Under the Communist Pol Pot regime which came to [13:00] bring about a great social revolution, to create the new utopia of Kampuchea, to create the new man and the new woman in that new society, between 1975 and 1978-79 they murdered systematically four million human beings. They destroyed everything that was regarded as a contamination of western

civilization. Roads were destroyed, hospitals were destroyed, newspapers were destroyed, books were destroyed. In 1975 there were 500 physicians in Cambodia to care for some eight million people; there are today fewer than 50 physicians left to care for less than three million [14:00] people. Almost no medicines. And when we met with the Queen of Thailand not too long ago she told us the harvest this year in Cambodia will be an absolute disaster unless massive aid is brought to that country. It is not inconceivable that by the end of this year, this country which has suffered the ravage of more than half of its people being murdered, will be faced with the destruction of anywhere between a quarter of a million to a half million lives. And if the harvest is not turned around to sustain these people in the coming year, there is no question in my mind that we will have witnessed the greatest humanitarian tragedy since the Nazi [15:00] holocaust.

Having lived through the Nazi holocaust, together with millions of other Jewish brothers and sisters I came out of that experience overwhelmed by a conviction which is a paraphrase of the Book of Leviticus: "Thou shalt not stand idly by while the blood of your brothers and sisters cry out to you from the earth." This trauma of Cambodia, like the Nazi holocaust before it, represents the central, moral, spiritual human challenge of

our lifetime. At stake in the comprehension of what is happening in that part of the world and in any other parts of the world -- in Africa, in Latin America, [16:00] in Eastern Europe -- is the central challenge to the convictions on which Christians and Jews stake their existence as committed people. If the Torah and the Gospel mean anything in this world today it is the affirmation that every human being is created in the sacred image of God; that every human life is of infinite worth and preciousness; that no human being is expendable; that no human being created with the sanctity of God's presence in his or her being can be used for anyone else's revolution, ideology, violence, or terrorism. [17:00] And so we come together here to reaffirm that at the center of our belief system as Jews and Christians, as common inheritors of a shared biblical tradition, as brothers and sisters in the greatest democracy in the world at the center of whose ethos is this identical affirmation of the freedom and dignity of every human being, we come here to affirm again that this is the highest calling to which we are summoned in the kind of world in which we live today.

Not only in Southeast Asia are human lives destroyed day in and day out. In the Sudan, [18:00] in Uganda 400,00 black Christians were destroyed and the response of the world was by and large the silence of the cemetery. Ethiopia, Somalia, Kenya: four

million refugees in Africa today, many of them suffering as terribly as the Cambodians. Who pays attention to their plight? Who really cares about their individual dignity? Is that simply a liturgical piety to be recited in a high church and then forgotten in the beauty of the flowers outside the door? Or does it call for a radical change in our consciousness? To retrieve that to be a Christian or a Jew in this kind of world means to be prepared, to be present to every human being, every child of God, whatever the color [19:00] or race or religion who has a moral claim on our care, our nurture, our sustenance.

One other experience in Thailand: a refugee camp called [Sako?], 875 Vietnamese boat people, they were the lucky ones. 60% of their brothers and sisters had perished in the South China Sea before the President of the United States turned loose the fleet from Subic Bay who literally changed the whole situation by taking people out of the water whenever they were in difficulty. But in [Sako?] these Vietnamese boat people were packed in what was formerly a prison camp, [20:00] and when I walked into that camp people packed together as if they were insects, so congested, so dense was the population. There was no art in the camp. One wall that was used as the wall of the oven in which the rice was cooked, one painting made by one of the Vietnamese boat people who was artistically gifted, I will never forget

that painting. It was a work of grace and genius. It was the Statue of Liberty. That great lady was painted literally from some kind of unconscious [21:00] memory. Beautiful, graceful on that wall; plain charcoal paint on a gray brick wall. And underneath, three words indelible on my consciousness: [orc la liberte?], this lady for liberty. And as I walked around that camp and talked to literally hundreds of Vietnamese boat people and asked them after they told me the harrowing stories of their escape, "Where do you want to go?" "America." "Why America?" "Freedom! Liberty! Democracy!" Children four years old, five years old who could [22:00] hardly speak words of English, their whole lives, all of their passion, one word: America! Liberty! And throughout the whole of southeast Asia every camp I went to, some went to France and Australia and Germany and Canada. To these people who have experienced the denial of their freedom, to a Catholic high school teacher in Saigon who was told by the Hanoi government overnight to go with his family out to the forest to be reeducated in a collective farm. He dropped everything and overnight fled the country to get a boat to come in order to be able to come to the freedom and democracy of America. [23:00] To these people and to millions of other human beings -- the Haitian refugees that I saw in Florida, Cubans out of Fidel Castro's utopia -- that which our fathers and mothers held aloft as their source of sustenance: that Lady of Liberty

who flamed with hope for a better tomorrow out of the darkness of the pogroms and the oppression of Europe; that which we have now far too often taken for granted and see that only as a tourist attraction. For millions of human beings in the world today that lady standing in that harbor of New York represents the quintessential hope for a life of dignity [24:00], of human decency, of civility, of material comfort, of a life, a plane, elementary, democratic, civil, and political rights.

That's why I wanted to be here to participate in this observance honoring the role of the United States Air Force as well as the Army and the Navy and the Marines. So much "can't" about militarism; so much "can't" about the Defense Department, the Pentagon. No institution is above criticism in an open democratic society, but criticism that becomes a carping, destructive force that weakens the morale and the intention of sustaining this defense [25:00] go to those parts of the world where liberty has been snatched from people's life and breath; go to those parts of the world where people are victimized by near-slavery, where democracy is only a faint memory...and you will recover, as I have, a whole new sense of appreciation of how precious is this great land of ours, how urgent is the need to sustain its capacity to defend itself. Look at the map of freedom in the world, how many countries are left that still

honor civil and political and human rights and you will find [26:00] that among all the nations of the earth more than some 137 countries of the world, there are only 19 countries left in the world that honor in any significant way democratic, civil, political, and human rights.

And so I see our coming here today not only to recommit ourselves to the democratic cause, to recommit ourselves to the need for an adequate defense of the virtues of this democracy. Even more profoundly, this is a moment to commit ourselves to the basic affirmations of Exodus and Sinai and Calvary, [27:00] to the foundations of biblical humanism, to really feel deeply and act out actively our central conviction regarding the value of every human life created in the sacred image of God and a determination to sustain this republic, to sustain its democratic virtues, its civil and political liberties not only for the citizens of this nation, but to know deeply in our consciousness that with whatever failings we may have as all mortal human being have failings, this nation, this nation under God, [28:00] to millions upon million human beings throughout the world still represents the last best hope for freedom and liberty and human dignity throughout the world. May we be worthy to sustain that great biblical and democratic tradition in the difficult and challenging months and years ahead.

Reverend:

Yours, O Lord, is the greatness, the power --

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