

Inaugural Address of Governor John D Rockefeller IV

January 17, 1977

A NEW DAY

Distinguished guests, my fellow West Virginians:

We inaugurate today a new generation of leadership and a new spirit of hope.

Bold, confident, determined, from the Ohio to the Shenandoah, we awaken to a common purpose.

Today, we leave behind the defeatism of the past. Starting here, starting now, you and I together step out into the rising sun of a new day for West Virginia. Let it be understood that the start of America's third century marks as well a fresh start for our Mountain State. Our time has come.

To seize our rightful destiny will not be easy, but West Virginians have never sought a life of ease. Shaped by the Appalachians, conceived by the Civil War, tempered by a spirit as hard as the coal beneath our earth, our state has become strong and adaptable, and so have its people.

Yet, in recent decades we lost ground. The Great Depression, the depletion of our assorted natural resources and the mechanization of the mines each resulted in a loss of jobs and population. And in 1960, when John Kennedy put the national spotlight on some of our problems, we became characterized as a poor and almost helpless state; it has been hard to shake that stigma.

But throughout our turbulent history, in times good and bad, West Virginians have remained strong and proud. And so we are today.

"America," Pearl Buck said, "is young and unfinished," and so, my friends, is West Virginia. We are a state on the move. Our population is once again growing. Our unemployment rate, while still too high, is lower than the national average. And we are blessed with 17,000 square miles of coal and a growing coal industry, at a time when suddenly coal is again critical to the energy needs of our nation.

There is no reason why West Virginia should not flourish. So I say to you today, as we begin anew: reach out now, reach out West Virginia, for your fair share of the American dream.

Ultimately, of course, it is up to us as a people to realize our own potential. But as your new Governor. I pledge, for my part, that state government will be a vital force for progress.

We shall start by providing government worthy of your trust honest government. Public service must be - and is - a proud career.

I pledge to do everything humanly possible to end, once and for all, official and political corruption in West Virginia, at whatever level. No one will profit from appointive office while I am Governor. And if there are those in the private sector who would dare to tempt or corrupt those who are under my responsibility - let them beware. The free rides are over.

As taxpayers, you are going to get your money's worth. Acting in close cooperation with the Legislature, we are going to give you efficient, carefully-planned government. Government - and a state budget - without frills or fat.

Yet even the most conscientious government cannot meet the ever-accelerating demands for social services without the revenue to pay for them. Until we expand our tax base, the quality of service you deserve will remain ever out of reach. That is why economic and industrial development is the first priority of this administration. A strong, growing economy is not only essential to the more than 40,000 among us who need jobs and cannot find them; it is the key to our becoming as dynamic as any state in the nation. Only when we can depend on a sturdy statewide economy - one that expands in productivity and payrolls year after year - can state and county governments begin to address our unmet needs.

Beginning today, we will make an effort, unprecedented in our 113-year history, to broaden our industrial base and attract new industry to West Virginia. Working closely with local officials and with our elected representatives in Washington, we will provide the technical and financial assistance necessary to bring new jobs, steady employment and unprecedented growth to the communities that we call home.

The economic growth of our state depends, foremost, on the economic growth of our coalfields, the long disparity between the richness of our land and the unsteadiness of our economy is about to end. This administration will make sure that West Virginia coal is used to the maximum in meeting America's energy needs.

Furthermore, we cannot - and we shall not - ignore the men and women who are the lifeblood of the coal industry - the West Virginia coal miners. Their struggle for the most elemental rights has been a long and bitter one. Yet even now, among all the coal-producing states in the nation, our own mines still have one of the highest accident rates. Last Year: 8,000 accidents, 32 deaths. That is completely unacceptable, and I will not allow it to continue. My administration will safeguard the well-being of West Virginia's coal miners. We intend to save lives. The coal miner's life must become a safer life. I pledge it.

To our 300,000 elderly West Virginians, we pledge to help you help yourselves. You have seniority in everything that matters most - in experience, in wisdom, in your service to others. We will do all we can to make your lives more comfortable and more rewarding without infringing upon your dignity or self-esteem.

And to every West Virginian, pledge the following:

- An end to the 3% tax on food.
- A faster Workmen's Compensation system.
- A fairer utility rate structure for our homes.

- And, to the best of my ability, a network of primary and secondary roads worthy of a mobile, modern state.

Central to each of these goals, central to the very existence of this administration, will be a caring emphasis on people. I will not be blinded by a blizzard of bureaucratic paper, and I will not stay chained to my desk. Rather, I will be among you - listening to you - talking with you - learning from you. Nothing will keep us apart!

I will be accessible. I will be accountable. But I am just one man. There is no magic wand to instantly transform long-neglected roads into super highways, or West Virginia into Camelot. My name is Rockefeller, but that will not pay our bills.

For the next four years, I dedicate my heart, my mind, my strength to you, my West Virginia family. But I cannot accomplish anything alone. We are, everyone of us, in this together. Of me, you must demand my very best, and that you shall have. And here is what I ask of you. My fellow West Virginians:

- I ask you to be bolder, for yourselves and for your state. For too long, there has been a collective failure of initiative among us - economically, culturally, intellectually, and yes, politically.

- I ask you to take some risks with me - to take a chance on things that cannot be absolutely guaranteed.

- I ask you, and will ask you again and again, to redouble your community efforts and responsibilities. There can be no substitute for your energy, your sacrifice and your determination for West Virginia's future. It is our day-to-day living, the examples we set for one another, the sacrifices we are willing to make, that provide the real test of our love for our state.

The responsibility for West Virginia, for her condition and for her fate, rests then finally with each one of us. "Mountaineers Are Always Free." For well over 100 years, that has been our motto. And let us never forget it: we are free, free to make of this state what we will. For though there are limits as to what government can do, or as to what I can do, there are no limits on what all of us can do together.

As we grow and as we prosper, let us together preserve those things which make our state so special. Even as we tend to its necessary development, we must be certain not to sacrifice this rugged beauty which surrounds us everywhere, this gift from God.

But beyond all else, we must take care to preserve the human scale of life here. Like the rest of the nation, we have grown increasingly urban; unlike the rest of the nation, we have retained our rich rural values.

We enjoy the lowest violent crime rate in America, not by chance, but because we honor each other's humanity - because we continue to care about each other. That tradition of caring is as old as our hills themselves. It is the tradition of community, the tradition of family.

In West Virginia, we are a family, a family worth holding together. Let us begin today to build a future for our children and their children, a future in these Appalachian highlands that we call home, here to grow and work and laugh and love; here to experience the joy of being alive.

In this endeavor, be we rich or poor, young or old, black or white, we are as one. One in our purpose, and one in our pride.

And so I say to you today with God's help, we are coming home, West Virginia; home to our destiny.