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Van Am award for Idea of Party system

Mainly I would like to speak briefly about my book, but first a personal word. Particularly because so much time and effort goes into the administering of the Van Am awards by those who are connected with them, I would like to make it specially clear how much receiving this award at this time has meant to me. At any time, of course, one can always reckon with that vanity which is the inevitable, natural, and sustaining trait of authors. But there was much more than this at stake for me, and particularly this year. Like so many faculty members of a relatively conservative turn of mind where academic order and decorum are concerned, I have had to battle over the last few years with a rising impulse toward paranoid responses to the situation in our university and in those of the country generally. A great many things that one used to take for granted can now no longer be taken for granted. In some cases, it is just as well. But in others, there is a real loss. Not very long ago we all assumed the following kind of reciprocity of feeling: first, that faculty members, in any good college or university, were eagerly hunting for signs of talent and intellectual vitality among their students and were eagerly ready to develop these things as best they could. One assumed also that the students esteemed what the faculty members stood for, that the kind of concern and achievement manifest in scientific or scholarly work was indeed a very real and profound value to students. What the Van Am Society does for me not simply in making an award to myself and the others who are here tonight for this purpose but also simply in conceiving and maintaining the award, is to

prod my memory to refresh my awareness that this old reciprocal bond is not really broken, so far as the great majority of professors and students are concerned. For this reason I thank you with an especially intense gratitude.

My book is essentially the study of the development of the rationale for party opposition in the United States, which for reasons that were historical and perhaps fortuitous played a pioneering role in the development of the idea of a legitimate opposition between the federal era and the middle of the nineteenth century. In effect I was trying to understand why people came to believe, especially working politicians, in the party system which now we more or less take for granted. It was by no means taken for granted on either side of the Atlantic Ocean in the seventeenth or the eighteenth century. In fact, the prevailing idea, over a very wide political spectrum from Tory aristocrats to radical Whigs, was that parties were an evil thing, perhaps an unavoidable evil, but indubitably an evil. What arrested me was the paradox, that though this prevailing notion was generally accepted among the founding fathers, one of the first things that they did when they had a country of their own was to develop a national party system. This system, and the whole practice of a legitimized nationwide opposition that came along with it, developed not because of their convictions but in the teeth of their convictions. My book was meant to unravel this paradox, and to trace the very slow process by which thinking men acted in American politics came to believe that a party system is better than an inevitable evil, that it is a good thing, though susceptible to a

variety of kinds of abuse.

What my book is concerned with, then, is a central problem in the development of modern democracy. Most historical students of democracy have spent the greater part of their energy on the advance of the suffrage, which is indeed a major element in a democratic polity. I have been persuaded that democracy, in so far as it is realized--and it is everywhere imperfectly realized, rests not upon a single shaft such as the breadth of the suffrage, but rather stands like a tripod on three essential things: a broad suffrage, guaranteed and enforceable rights of freedom of speech and the press, and the ability not merely to criticize government but to criticize it through the agency of formally organized oppositional structures. This is what we mean when we speak of the idea of legitimate opposition, and it was this that was coming to be accepted in the United States in the years from 1780 to 1840.

One of the things with which I became particularly impressed was the rareness among the political cultures of the world of any accepted practice of legitimate opposition. As of a few years ago, Professor Robert A. Dahl, surveying all the countries represented in the United Nations, found that in the preceding decade only 30 of 113 countries had had political systems in which legal opposition by organized political parties had existed throughout the preceding decade. We must, then, I think, regard the idea of a legitimate and recognized opposition as an immensely sophisticated notion with which most of the world has not caught up. It is of course no guarantee of good government, but without it the idea of a democratic politics seems to me to be substantially without meaning.

I did not write my book with the intention of justifying the American two-party system, otherwise I should have written a different kind of book covering a much different period of time. In fact, there is a great deal to be said on this subject. Today we are told that the system is a total failure. And in truth, I would be prepared to concede that over the long span of American history I can think of only a few eras in which I would be prepared to say that, even with our two-party system, the United States has been well governed. That is, if we make our criteria of being well governed the following two rather demanding ones: first, that major gratuitous mistakes do not occur with obscene frequency; second, that social problems of the kind properly subject to governmental attention are perceived and coped with before they reach an extremely grave state. It is my own conviction, however, not very easily argued for here, that the reason for the rather negative aversion on the quality of American government which I have just made is not something that can be charged up to the party system but rather to other factors, mainly historically conditioned and derived, in American political culture. Moreover, we have not had to the degree that we might have wished, the benefits of the two-party system, since in a federal nation like ours it has not existed over a long span of time and in a fully functioning form in states and municipalities.

I would like to turn, finally, to my conviction that the idea of a formally legitimated opposition is an enormously sophisticated one. It is, in this respect, quite comparable to the idea of academic freedom, or to the general liberal commitment to the free exchange of ideas in the

market place. It rests upon the notion that those one regards as wrong must yet be heard; that those one regards as wrong have something to contribute to the general political dialogue under which a country lives; and finally, that government cannot be perpetually possessed by one party or faction but that it must be exchanged and rotated between parties or factions who extend to each other the comity of recognizing each other's legitimacy.

It was vividly brought to my attention not very long ago that this idea is not only highly sophisticated but in some places still incomprehensibly subversive. Recently at an academic meeting I met a physicist who is friendly with the Russian physicist Sukharov, who has become so well known for his efforts to persuade the Soviet regime to respect intellectual liberty and to soften some of its policies. To my pleasure and amazement, the American physicist had read my book and was convinced that Professor Sukharov would be particularly interested in it. However, after consulting a mutual friend who was better informed than he on the intellectual conditions in the Soviet Union, my acquaintance was advised that taking my book to Professor Sukharov might prove to be somewhat dangerous for him, and that it was a thing that had better not be done. I can't tell you how exciting it is for an establishment fink to have written a book that is regarded in the Soviet Union as subversive, and would be so regarded in many places in the world. However, many of the so-called backward or undeveloped countries of the world, which are trying to develop new economies and polities, are curious and interested in the whole phenomenon

of the functions of a party system and of a legitimate opposition. I have learned that efforts are already underway to translate my book into Bengali and Burmese. In their day, the Americans were experimenting with new political forms, and although their situation is profoundly different, some intellectuals in the so-called third world are very interested in seeing what they can use from our experience.