

Lyndon Baines Johnson (1908-1973)

Remarks Upon Signing the Air Quality Act of 1967

given on November 21, 1967

I deeply appreciate your patience and I plead for your understanding. But this is the last day that I will have an opportunity to visit with General Westmoreland, Ambassador Bunker, and Mr. Komer, and others.

We started out at 8 o'clock this morning and we have been running a little late. But each one of them is trying to get everything on their agenda reviewed before they leave.

5 So I am a little behind time, but I am grateful to you for whatever understanding you can give me.

I would like to begin this morning by reading you a little weather report:

"... dirty water and black snow pour from the dismal air to ...the putrid slush that waits for them below."

Now that is not a description of Boston, Chicago, New York, or even Washington, D.C. It is from Dante's "Inferno," a 600-year-old vision of damnation.

10 But doesn't it sound familiar?

Isn't it a forecast that fits almost any large American city today?

I think those like Secretary Gardner and Senator Muskie, and all you Members of the Congress and the Cabinet who have worked with this subject would agree with that.

Don't we really risk our own damnation every day by destroying the air that gives us life?

15 I think we do. We have done it with our science, our industry, and our progress. Above all, we have really done it with our own carelessness--our own continued indifference and our own repeated negligence.

Contaminated air began in this country as a big-city problem. But in just a few years, the gray Fall of pollution has spread throughout the Nation. Today its threat hangs everywhere--and it is still spreading.

20 Today we are pouring at least 130 million tons of poison into the air each year. That is two-thirds of a ton for every man, woman, and child that lives in America.

And tomorrow the picture looks even blacker. By 1980, we will have a third more people living in our cities than are living there today. We will have 40 percent more automobiles and trucks. And we will be burning half again as much fuel.

25 That leaves us, according to my evaluation, only one real choice. Either we stop poisoning our air--or we become a nation in gas masks, groping our way through the dying cities and a wilderness of ghost towns that the people have evacuated.

We make our choice with the bill that we are going to sign very shortly. It is not the first clean air bill--but it is, I think, the best.

I am indebted to all of you who had a part in its fashioning.

30 Congress passed the Clean Air Act in 1963. I signed it to establish the Government's obligation and to establish the Government's authority to act forcefully against air pollution.

Two years later we amended that act. Standards were set in 1965 to control automobile pollution.

35 These were important steps. But they were really, as Senator Muskie has reminded us many times, just really baby steps. Today we grow up to our responsibilities. This new Air Quality Act lets us face up to our problem as we have never faced up before.

In the next 3 years, it will authorize more funds to combat air pollution--more funds in the next 3 years to combat air pollution--than we have spent on this subject in the entire Nation's history of 180 years.

It will give us scientific answers to our most baffling problem: how to get the sulphur out of our fuel--and how to keep it out of our air.

40 It will give Secretary Gardner new power to stop pollution before it chokes our children and before it strangles our elderly--before it drives us into a hospital bed.

It will help our States fight pollution in the only practical way--by regional airshed controls--by giving the Federal Government standby power to intervene if and when States rights do not always function efficiently.

It will help our States to control the number one source of pollution--our automobiles.

45 But for all that it will do, the Air Quality Act will never end pollution. It is a law--and not a magic wand to wave that will cleanse our skies. It is a law whose ultimate power and final effectiveness really rests out there with the people of this land--on our seeing the damnation that awaits us if the people do not act responsibly to avoid it and to curb it.

Last January, in asking Congress to pass this legislation, I had this to say: "This situation does not exist because it was inevitable, nor because it cannot be controlled. Air pollution is the inevitable consequence of neglect. It can be
50 controlled when that neglect is no longer tolerated.

"It will be controlled when the people of America, through their elected representatives, demand the right to air that they and their children can breathe without fear."

So, let us then strengthen that demand from this moment on. Let us seize the new powers of this new law to end a long, dark night of neglect.

55 Let our children say, when they look back on this day, that it was here that a sleeping giant--it was here that their Nation awoke. It was here that America turned away from damnation, and found salvation in reclaiming God's blessings of fresh air and clean sky.

We are distressed at the condition that we cannot at the moment find the solution for--our men dying on the battlefields.

60 We are troubled with the economic international uncertainties and deficits here at home. But, there are many things that we can do and that we must do in this 20th century that have not been done in the two centuries that have gone by.

I talked yesterday about some of the protections that this century requires for the consumers of this country. We have 12 measures that we have recommended and most of them are moving along. There is no reason why anyone in this
65 country ought to be permitted to eat dirty, diseased, filthy meat and it is not going to bankrupt the Treasury to bring a stop to that.

There is no reason why anyone in this country should not know how much interest they are paying. So, we can have a truth-in-lending bill. The poorest people are paying the highest interest. We ought to act there. It is not going to bankrupt the Treasury.

70 There is no reason in the world why a baby ought to be put in a blanket and burned up. We ought to take some steps to protect them from all these casualties.

I feel the same way in this general field. All the Members of Congress whom I am looking at--I would call every one of your names if I had them--some of you tell me you are coming and don't make it--some of you say you won't come here and then you are here. So, when I start calling your names I am embarrassed.

75 However, I am indebted to everyone--beginning with the first man on the row and going down to attractive Edna Kelly, then, going over here and seeing the Cabinet members and Congressmen who worked on this--for what you are doing to keep our air clean and to keep our water pure, and to give our children a place where they can go and play without having their lungs filled with disease.

I sat with a great person, one of the greatest products of this land. I suffered with him not long ago because he could
80 hardly utter a full sentence without coughing and choking because of the effects of what he had breathed and what had gone into his body from residence here in this town.

Senator Muskie has been shoving me as no other person has, all these years, to do something in the pollution field.

I remember an old man told me when I came to Washington, he said, "Son, you get ready. If you are going to live in this town you are either going to be shoving somebody or somebody is going to be shoving you."

85 So, when I see influential Senators, chairmen of committees like Senator Randolph and other Members of Congress here this morning, I want to shove you.

It may not cost you \$1 billion for the things we are shoving because we are going to have to watch those expenditures with the way things are developing. But we can purify our water. We can clean up our air. We can give protection to our babies and to our old folks.

90 We can mark how much we are paying on some of these things. We can clean up our diseased meats.

I think actually we will find it is pretty profitable if we deal with this question of disease. I expect we lose more from it than it would cost us to protect ourselves against it.

So, I appeal to you to try to do your best to get us those 12 consumer bills. If you can't pass them just exactly as we recommend, we will understand. Just give us 90 percent this year and we will come back next year--if we are all here--
95 -for the other 10 percent.

(1548 Wörter)

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