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Address by Senator Strom Thurmond at the Citadel, the Military College of South Carolina, Charleston, S.C, 1958 March 29

Strom Thurmond

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Federal Usurpation

I wish to speak to you today on the subject of a clear and present danger to American freedom.

I am not speaking of the threat posed by any foreign nation.

I am speaking of a grave domestic problem: Usurpation of power, the arch threat to individual liberty in America. I am speaking of a two-pronged attack on the Constitution of the United States, an attack which has already achieved an alarming degree of success, and which, if not checked NOW, will result in the complete extinction of individual freedom in this country.

This is, I assure you, no exaggeration. We are faced with an issue/the gravity of which cannot be overemphasized. Our free institutions are in critical danger. Yet the American people are tragically unaware of just how great, and how imminent, is the danger. This is in part because so many of our people are also tragically unfamiliar with the Constitution, not versed in its meaning, its aims and its purposes.

In order to show how vital is the maintenance of our constitutional structure to the preservation of our individual freedom, it will be helpful for us to go back for a moment to the time of the framing of that basic document. By examining the fears and the purposes of the Framers, we can more clearly see the enormous threat to our liberties which is posed by this dual assault on the Constitution today -- this usurpation by the Federal government of the rights and powers of the States, and, within the Federal government itself, the usurpation by one branch of powers rightfully belonging to the other two branches.
The men who framed the Constitution knew full well that the greatest potential threat to the liberty of the individual lay in government. That is why they were insistent that the government they were setting up be limited and decentralized. They were determined not to create a power-apparatus which, however well it might work and however beneficent it might prove while in their hands, would someday become an instrument of tyranny over the people should it fall into the hands of evil or power-hungry men.

And, being realists, they knew that the power of government would -- on many occasions, at least -- fall into the hands of evil men of boundless ambition. They knew that the idea of benevolent government, without checks, is a delusion. They knew the utter folly of setting up a government without limitations, in the reliance that good men would control it. Listen to the words of Patrick Henry:

"Would not all the world," he asked, "from the eastern to the western hemisphere, blame our distracted folly in resting our rights upon the contingency of our rulers being good or bad? Show me that age and country where the rights and liberties of the people were placed on the sole chance of their rulers being good men, without a consequent loss of liberty? I say that the loss of that dearest privilege has ever followed, with absolute certainty, every such mad attempt."

Or as Thomas Jefferson later expressed it, in his famed "Kentucky Resolutions":

"...It would be a dangerous delusion were a confidence in the men of our choice to silence our fears for the safety of our rights; that confidence is everywhere the parent of despotism -- free government is founded in jealousy, and not in confidence; it is jealousy and not confidence which prescribes limited constitutions, to bind down those whom we are obliged to trust with power: that our Constitution has accordingly fixed the limits to which, and no further, our confidence may go; ... In questions of power, then, let no more be heard of confidence in man, but bind him down from mischief by the chains of the Constitution."
What were the chains which the Framers fashioned, to bind man down from mischief, in defense of liberty? Principally, they were two simple and workable devices, which together form the main components of our well-known checks-and-balances system.

First, the newly-established central government was to be kept small and limited. It was a government of enumerated powers only, all powers not delegated to it by the Constitution (nor prohibited to the States) being reserved to the States or to the people. In other words, the central government would exercise power over only a limited number of fields of general concern to all the States. Among these would be foreign affairs, military defense, commerce of a genuinely interstate nature, and so on; while the great bulk of domestic matters would continue to be under the jurisdiction of the several States. The States were by no means supposed to be mere provinces or administrative subdivisions of the general government, but were separate and distinct sovereignties, co-existent with the general government. Thus was a balance set up between the new central government on the one hand and the States on the other.

Second, within the framework of the new general government itself, the Founders provided for a distinct separation of powers. That is, in order to prevent all the powers of the new government from being exercised by one man or a single small group of men, it was provided that the legislative, the executive and the judicial powers should be in the hands of separate branches. By a series of devices, these branches were to be kept independent of one another, insofar as possible.

It was by these two governmental principles, these two constitutional devices, that our forefathers sought to prevent that
concentration of centralized power/which they knew would be the
death-knell of individual liberty in America. Liberty would be
safe so long, and only so long, as these two principles remained
intact and were scrupulously upheld.

We may express the Framers' thinking graphically in this way:
The structure of our liberty rests upon these two supports, the twin
pillars of States' Rights and Separation of Powers. So long as both
these pillars stand, unimpaired, our liberties stand also. But if
either one of these pillars be destroyed, or slowly eroded away,
then, surely and inevitably, the temple of liberty will come
crashing down.

Gentlemen, we are nearer to that eventuality than is generally
realized. We are very near, dangerously near, to it. By processes
which at first were gradual, but which in recent years have assumed
a progressively increasing rate, the structure of States' Rights has
been almost completely eroded away, until what was once a sturdy and
massive support of American freedom has been whittled down to a very
tenuous column indeed.

Actually, the process of infringing on the rights of the States
is not new. It began early in our history. Thomas Jefferson saw
the beginning of this process of usurpation by the Federal judiciary;
he feared its ultimate result, and he expressed his fears as follows:

"...There is no danger I apprehend so much as
the consolidation of our government by the noiseless,
and therefore un alarming, instrumentality of the
Supreme Court."

With prophetic vision, the great Virginian warned further/that
the germ of dissolution of our Federal system lies in the Federal
judiciary,
Jefferson's description of the process and methods of judicial usurpation is truly remarkable. It could well have been written today. These are his words:

"The judiciary of the United States is the subtle corps of sappers and miners constantly working underground to undermine the foundations of our confederated republic. They are construing our Constitution from a coordination of a general and special government to a general and supreme one alone. This will lay all things at their feet... They skulk from responsibility to public opinion... An opinion is huddled up in conclave, perhaps by a majority of one, delivered as if unanimous, and with the silent acquiescence of lazy or timid associates, by a crafty chief judge who sophisticates the law to his mind, by the turn of his own reasoning..."

This process which Jefferson depicted was beginning even in his own day. Nevertheless, despite this early beginning of judicial usurpation; despite the War Between the States and the force-imposed post-War amendments, which radically altered the original concept of the Union; despite the nationalizing influence of the commercial expansion of the post-War period -- despite all of these things, the basic principle of States' Rights remained fundamentally intact. The North, the nation as a whole, might have rejected the Southern contention that States' Rights included the right to secede and dissolve the Union; but within the framework of Union, the country was still dedicated to the principle of local self-government.

In 1868 Chief Justice Salmon P. Chase echoed the prevailing view when he characterized the United States as "an indestructible
Thus, until the 1930's, our governmental system was still fundamentally based on States' Rights, both in principle and in practice. Not to the extent that some of us had desired, to be sure; not to the extent that the Framers had recommended; but still to the extent that the great majority of those vital economic, political and social activities most closely affecting the people were the subjects of State control only and were outside the province of the Federal government. And the country and the people seemed aware of the vital importance of keeping them that way. In an address delivered in 1930, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, then Governor of New York, emphasized the necessity of preserving States' Rights, when he declared:

"...To bring about government by oligarchy masquerading as democracy, it is fundamentally essential that practically all authority and control be centralized in our National Government. The individual sovereignty of our States must first be destroyed, except in mere minor matters of legislation. We are safe from the danger of any such departure from the principles on which this country was founded just so long as the individual home rule of the States is scrupulously preserved and fought for whenever it seems in danger."

As a distinguished commentator has pointed out, the significance of this address by Governor Roosevelt lies in the fact that it was not merely a statement of the views he himself then held, but rather was a re-phrasing, a re-statement, of "the long-established American principles which had been well understood and firmly accepted by generation after generation of the American people, and voiced in varying forms innumerable times throughout the country for almost a century and a half."
In the last quarter-century, however, we have seen assaults on States’ Rights at every point. We have seen the national government in Washington expanded to its present swollen size, accompanied by a steady diminution of the reserved powers of the States. It is not my purpose to attempt to fix the blame for this development. Suffice it to say that all three branches of the Federal government participated in it, and that an acquiescent and desperate people permitted it.

The Supreme Court resisted the trend until 1937, but, in that year, as the Honorable Hamilton A. Long of the New York Bar explains in his brilliant study, **USURPERS -- FOES OF FREE MAN**, the Court underwent a major policy-revolution. From that time forward, the Supreme Court’s role has been one of willing, and then eager, collaboration in the process of aggrandizing the central government at the expense of the States. In 1954, with the school segregation decision, the Supreme Court really moved into high gear against the States and the Constitution. It sustained the assault with the subsequent Steve Nelson and Girard College cases. In 1957, the Congress and the Executive Branch joined in the attack. The passage -- in an atmosphere of bogus sanctity and mock legality -- of the mis-called Civil Rights bill was followed shortly by the subjection of a once-sovereign State to bayonet rule, which still continues.

Before leaving the subject of States’ Rights and going into this second aspect of usurpation, within the Federal government itself, I should like to pause for a moment to reflect upon a circumstance which frankly puzzles me.

I can easily understand why those who are at heart enemies of America and enemies of liberty would seek to destroy States’ Rights. I can easily see why our secret enemies, those who would weaken our
civilization and bring our nation to its knees, would seek to destroy local self-government.

What I cannot understand is, how it is that many loyal and sincere Americans, conscientious and zealous advocates of civil liberty, have in recent years been in the very forefront of the effort to break down the integrity of the States.

These men honestly picture themselves as champions of individual freedom; yet they are its worst enemies. They see some real or imagined violation of civil liberty on the State level -- generally a situation in which a member of some racial minority group is allegedly deprived of an alleged right -- and, egged on by shrewd and conscienceless politicians bent on corralling the vital minority-group vote, these liberals become inflamed with righteous wrath and filled with deep and honest concern over the fact that an individual’s rights are being violated.

So what is their remedy? Do they seek corrective action on the State level? No. They do all in their power to break down the rights of the States and to build up a super-government which is supposed to be for the protection of the individual, a super-government strong enough to rule the recalcitrant States with an iron hand and thus to prevent them from continuing their alleged denials of the rights of individuals of certain classes.

But does it never occur to these self-styled liberals that this super-government they are building up, this "big brother" to police the States, someday may, inevitably will, become itself the greatest possible threat to the rights of the individual? That, by tearing down the rights of the States and centralizing power in Washington, they are building up a power-apparatus before which the States first, and later the individual, will be completely powerless? Can they not
admit the inexorable truth of Calhoun's solemn warning that:

"The powers which it is necessary for government to possess in order to repress violence and preserve order, cannot execute themselves. They must be administered by men in whom, like others, the individual are stronger than the social feelings. And hence the powers vested in them to prevent injustice and oppression on the part of others, will, if left unguarded, be by them converted into instruments to oppress the rest of the community."

Surely they know that the reins of government will fall into the hands of such men, "in whom the individual are stronger than the social feelings." Or do they naively trust that completely good and altruistic men -- themselves, perhaps? -- will always be in control?

Strange to say, these shocking events have actually been applauded by those who claim to serve the cause of individual liberty. The so-called "liberals," who claim to support the principle of States' Rights, are busily engaged in breaking down the principle of Separation of Powers and thus destroying what is, in the long view, the greatest single bulwark of our individual freedom.

Perhaps they rely on the idea that it is safe to destroy the rights of the States and create a centralized government so long as, within this centralized government, the principle of Separation of Powers is strictly enforced; that the latter principle is all that is really necessary to guarantee individual liberty.

Nothing could be more wrong. The two pillars, States' Rights and Separation of Powers, are complementary to each other. Destroy or remove one, and the other will soon collapse. Jefferson warned that:
"...when all government, domestic and foreign, in little as in great things, shall be drawn to Washington as the centre of all power, it will render powerless the checks provided of one government on another, and will become as venal and oppressive as the government from which we separated."

And even the arch-Federalist Alexander Hamilton saw clearly that the fate of individual liberty was inextricably tied up with the fate of the States. Said Hamilton:

"The States can never lose their powers till the whole people of America are robbed of their liberties. They must go together; they must support each other, or meet one common fate."

Let us now examine the other face of the coin; let us turn to the second pillar of our checks-and-balances system, the principle of Separation of Powers, and see how it has fared over the years.

Generally speaking, Separation of Powers has not been subjected to anything like the degree of attack that has so largely eroded away States' Rights. This constitutional support is still in a comparatively healthy condition. But in the past four years, especially, the Supreme Court has stepped up the assault in this direction too.

You are probably generally familiar with a series of decisions handed down by the Warren Court, in cases involving various aspects of internal security -- commonly referred to as the Subversion Cases. Some of the decisions in these cases constituted further restrictions on the rights of the States, denying them the right to prosecute for or even to investigate sedition and treason or to exclude suspected Communists from the practice of law. Others restricted the executive branch of the Federal Government in its anti-subversion efforts and limited the power of congressional investigating committees in
questioning witnesses.

The net effect of these decisions, of course, was to hamper seriously the activities of our government in the anti-subversion field.

But what principally concerns us here is not so much the serious impairment of our government's anti-subversion efforts, deplorable as that is. Nor is it simply the fact that the decisions placed certain restrictions on the Executive and on the Congress.

The more fundamental cause for concern is that, in some of these cases, the Supreme Court has usurped powers rightfully belonging only to the legislative branch of the government. In other words, the Court has been guilty of judicial legislation. In the Steve Nelson case, for example, the Court violated the intent of Congress by construing the Smith Act as giving the Federal government complete pre-emption of the anti-subversion field, to the exclusion of the States. When the Court thus violates, or goes beyond, the intent of Congress, it is, in effect, making new law, or legislating -- a function which the Constitution bestows exclusively upon Congress.

That the Court has in fact exercised legislative powers is clear to lawyers, and they have reacted with considerable concern. Only a few weeks ago, Judge Learned Hand, one of the most eminent jurists in this country, and considered of liberal views, observed that the Court was apparently becoming a third house of the legislature.

Laymen, however, may have some difficulty in grasping the significant difference between interpretation and judicial legislation and I should therefore like to take a few moments to discuss this point. The Honorable Hamilton A. Long, of New York, of whom we have already spoken, dealt with this vital subject in an editorial which
appeared last year in the Saturday Evening Post. Mr. Long wrote:

"Few subjects are surrounded by more confusion than the function of the United States Supreme Court in interpreting the Constitution. There can be no doubt, however, that the Court has no right to change this basic law or to violate the intent of those who initially adopted it or of those who later amended it. Only the people can change the Constitution, by amendment.

"For the Supreme Court to try to bypass this process, by interpreting the Constitution contrary to that original intent, is to usurp power never given it."

In other words, the Supreme Court, in interpreting a provision of the Constitution, must stay strictly within the limits set by the intent of the Framers and Adopters. Likewise, in the case of construing a statute, the Court cannot violate the intent of Congress.

Once the Court has initially defined this intent, its decision on the matter becomes binding -- on the Court itself, as on all others --, becomes in effect an integral part of the Constitution, or of the statute. This legislative intent, as initially determined by the Court in the first pertinent case to come before it, is absolutely binding thereafter and is not subject to change, except of course by new legislation or by constitutional amendment. For the Supreme Court to assume the power to revise, at will, this initial determination of intent completely destroys the stability of the law; and for the Court, in subsequent decisions, to violate this intent (as initially determined) or to go beyond it, is to usurp power never given it.

Where an Act of Congress is involved, such action by the Court amounts to judicial legislation. In handing down a decision contrary to the intent of the lawmakers, the Court is itself making new law, and is thus usurping a function which the Constitution vests exclusively in the legislative branch.
And where the Court is interpreting a constitutional provision (or amendment), violation by the Court of the Framers' and Adopters' intent constitutes an illegal amending of the Constitution. In such a case, the Court would be usurping a power rightfully belonging to the people alone; for only the people, through their States, have the right to change the Constitution, and they can do so only by amendment. The decision in the school segregation case of May 17, 1954, is a flagrant example of this type of usurpation.

What are we to do to remedy this critical situation? What steps can we take to save these beleaguered constitutional principles, so vital to our liberty as free men?

In the case of Separation of Powers, we, the people, by exercising vigilance and firm determination, can nip the process of usurpation in the bud, comparatively speaking. We must remember Mr. Justice Brandeis' words:

"The doctrine of the separation of powers was adopted by the Constitution of 1787, not to promote efficiency but to preclude the exercise of arbitrary power. The purpose was, not to avoid friction, but, by means of the inevitable friction incident to the distribution of the Governmental powers among the three departments, to save the people from autocracy."

The Congress can protect itself against further judicial usurpation by exercising its constitutional right to limit the appellate jurisdiction of the Court. I disagree with those who feel that this is too drastic a remedy. It is an effective way to curb the excesses of the Court and to discipline that body, and it is a curb which the Congress could as easily remove later as it would now impose.

Let me cite just two examples of this kind of remedial legislation.

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One such bill was introduced by me last year. It would limit the jurisdiction of the Supreme Court in two fields -- the activities of local school boards in regulating school attendance, and the efforts of State governments to combat subversive activities through legislation.

Another bill of this sort, one that has been given widespread attention in recent weeks, is Senator Jenner's bill to remove the Supreme Court's appellate jurisdiction in certain cases involving subversion. I have been actively supporting the Jenner Bill, because I feel that the Supreme Court has overstepped its bounds and encroached on the prerogatives of Congress, the Executive Branch of the government, and several agencies of local government in the cases to which the Jenner Bill is applicable.

If Congress will enact laws restricting the jurisdiction of the Supreme Court, I believe that the Court will see the handwriting on the wall and curb its impulses. Unless the Court is restricted by legislation to judicial matters, we can expect to see new and more far-reaching forms of judicial legislation in the future.

The problem of States' Rights is more difficult, because here the process of usurpation has been going on so much longer. It has proceeded so far that it will be difficult to stop. That is the great danger in permitting "just a little bit" of usurpation, of acquiescing in just a little deprivation of one's rights: Before one realizes it, the point of no return has been reached.

The States, however, have not quite been destroyed. If they will stand firm from here on out, they can preserve a good measure of their independence and can keep the pillar of States' Rights standing as a sturdy support of our individual freedom.
Congress, too, can play a part in preserving the power of the States. In the first place, it should examine each piece of legislation that comes before it to determine whether it will expand Federal power at the expense of the States. Some bills with admirable aims must be rejected because of the means they would employ to reach their ends.

An example of such a law is the legislation now pending to limit the erection of billboards along the new Interstate highway system. The purpose of the bill is laudable; it would help keep these highways beautiful. However, the method is deplorable; it would take away the right of the States to control and limit the erection of billboards on land purely under jurisdiction of the States. If States' Rights is to have a practical meaning, the principle must apply to good proposals as well as to bad ones.

Congress can also take an active role in upholding the rights of the States by enacting legislation that will help in restoring power to the States.

In this connection, I can mention several pieces of legislation now pending in Congress.

There is S. 337, a bill which I am co-sponsoring. It provides that no Act of Congress shall be construed to nullify State laws in the same field, unless the Act expressly states that this is the intention. The Supreme Court could not have ruled as it did in the Steve Nelson case if this bill had been enacted.

On March 3, the cause of States' Rights was substantially strengthened by the passage in the Senate of S. 1538, another bill I have co-sponsored. It would return to the individual states a large measure of legislative jurisdiction over lands in the several states,
In January, I introduced S. J. Res. 145 to set up a Commission on Federal and State Jurisdiction. The purpose is to study the usurpation of State powers by the Federal government, and the usurpation of powers by each branch of government from the others. The Commission would report to Congress, recommending legislation that would redraw the boundary lines in places where they have become completely obliterated or obscured.

I am co-sponsoring another important piece of States' Rights legislation, S. 1723. This bill would eliminate the no-man's land now existing between State and Federal jurisdiction in the field of labor relations. This gap was caused by the Supreme Court's decision last year in the Guss case. S. 1723 would empower the States to act for the protection of both labor and management rights where the National Labor Relations Board declines to assert its jurisdiction.

I will mention just one more example. This is my bill, S. 6, which was recently passed by the Senate. It would prevent private contractors executing Federal contracts from escaping States' sales taxes on their purchases under the guise of Federal immunity. This would reverse a 1954 Supreme Court decision which closed another State revenue source.

These are merely examples; they will do for starters. There are many ways in which Congress can assist the States to regain the powers they should be exercising and which powers are reserved to them under the Constitution.

Among the many fields of activity which are still under State control, however, there are two which are pre-eminent -- law-
enforcement and public education--; and it is these two which have been singled out for attack by the enemies of States' Rights and of American freedom.

One of the greatest obstacles in the way of any grab for power, by Communists or any other group, is the existence in this country of forty-eight separate and independent police systems. As was demonstrated in the cases of several Eastern European countries, which fell to Communism after World War II, a useful, perhaps essential, factor in seizing power in any country is a centralized police organization, which can be infiltrated, then controlled, then used at the crucial hour to suppress the opposition.

So long as we avoid this centralized control of our police systems, then, no matter what internal crises and tensions the years may bring, there is little likelihood of even an attempt at a Communist-style coup-d'état in this country. Such would not be the case were the weapon of centralized police control available to those who would seize power.

But a Federal government bent on usurpation and complete centralization of power, finds it annoying to be confronted with law enforcement officers who are loyal to State and local governments instead of to the Federal bureaucracy, and who are beyond reach of the threat of "federalization." We can therefore expect increasing pressure to destroy the independence of the States' police agencies. It has already been seriously suggested by one "liberal" that a special Federal police force, similar to the Canadian Northwest Mounted Police, be set up to enforce the integration of Southern schools.

This brings us to the other outstanding function of State
government -- public education. There is a grave risk that this function of State government will be destroyed, to be replaced by a centrally controlled school system operated by the Federal government.

It is true that the proponents of Federal aid to education assert repeatedly that they are not interested in Federal control. Be that as it may, it can be stated as an absolute fact that Federal control of education will follow Federal aid, as surely as the night follows the day.

The pattern is crystal clear. Once the States have geared their whole educational and revenue systems to Federal aid, the Federal government will impose certain conditions. They will appear harmless, even helpful, at first. Certain minimum standards in school equipment, teacher training and level of teaching will be set up as prerequisites for the receipt of Federal aid. Some substandard schools will be improved.

But is anyone naive enough to think that we can have just a little Federal control? Not a chance. Within a very few years, a bureau in Washington would be drawing up the curriculum and a list of approved textbooks. The history books, the texts on government, and the courses in sociology would be lined out to follow whatever school of thought was, at the moment, most popular in Washington.

From this point, the movement to mass brain-washing and despotism would be ready to begin in earnest, needing only a strong and arrogant President to set it in motion.

We must, then, fight with all our strength to maintain control over our educational systems and our law-enforcement agencies. In addition, we must resist, at all points along the line, any further attempts on the part of the Federal government to encroach on any
right/still held by the States.

It is not enough to put obstructions in the path of Federal encroachment on the rights of the States. Obstruction must be joined with construction, by which I mean constructive efforts on the part of State government to provide the essential services the people demand.

One of the arguments most strongly relied on by advocates of Federal Aid to Education is that the States have failed to meet the educational challenge of a world of science and technology. Figures and statistics designed to support this argument are brandished. To counter this argument, we must be able to point to effective measures taken by the States to meet the problem. Such effective steps will not be forthcoming, unless you, as individual citizens, take an active stand in support of independent State action.

In keeping up a constant struggle to preserve the principles of States' Rights and Separation of Powers, we are not fighting for any mere slogans. We are not interested in States' Rights and Separation of Powers in and of themselves, but our interest in them lies in the fact that these two principles are essential supports of Liberty. And Liberty, as Lord Acton said, "is not a means to a higher political end. It is itself the highest political end."

The arch enemy of Liberty is usurpation of power. It is, therefore, our duty to resist this usurpation, from whatever source it comes. We would all do well to bear in mind the words of our first President, George Washington, who, in his Farewell Address, warned the people of this country to allow no change to be made in their Constitution except by the constitutionally-prescribed amending process. These are his words: and with which I close.
"If, in the opinion of the people, the distribution, or modification of the constitutional powers be in any particular wrong, let it be corrected by an amendment in the way which the Constitution designates. But let there be no change by usurpation; for though this, in one instance, may be the instrument of good, it is the customary weapon by which free governments are destroyed."

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