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# Faith of Our Fathers Living Still, delivered for the Economic Club on September 27, 1993

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ECONOMIC CLUB SPEECH - 9-27-93

AREND D. LUBBERS

"FAITH OF OUR FATHERS, LIVING STILL"

The title of my comments today, "Faith of Our Fathers Living Still," probably sounds more like a sermon to the brethren than a speech to the Economics Club of Grand Rapids! And, in some ways, perhaps it is. Because I don't think you can separate a community's business life from its spiritual or religious life. At least it's my thesis that in Grand Rapids and West Michigan, you cannot.

By spiritual I don't mean the Reformed faith of the Dutch settlers, or the Roman Catholicism of the early Polish, or the Lutheranism of the first Germans, or the Congregationalism of the pioneering English, or the Judaism of the early Jewish community. I mean all of the above as well as their free-thinking spiritual descendants who make their way to Fountain Street every Sunday. For while the different nationalities of immigrants who came here maintained their separate ethnic groups and own societies, as a community they shared a common set of values.

I have come to my hypothesis on the interconnectedness of our area's business and Biblical traditions not in an idle academic quest, as we university types are wont to do. Rather I have come to this conclusion for the most hard-headed and practical of reasons. It is the only explanation I can come up with that answers the question.

And my question, my friends, is what is it about the people of West Michigan that makes us different?

Hang on for a few dry statistics. But as you're listening, please do me a favor and search your own mind and experience for a perhaps better explanation of the numbers phenomena I'm going to

recite.

But since "inquiring minds want to know," according to the think tank at the National Inquirer, I needed to figure out some whys for myself.

Why did West Michigan's population grow six and a half percent in the last decade when the Great Lakes states as a total grew less than one percent? And compounding that most recent growth spurt, why do experts now project West Michigan will grow another 6.4% before the end of the century, almost twice the rate of Ohio's expected growth and outrunning projections for Indiana, Wisconsin, and the state of Michigan as a whole?

Even more significant to this audience of business leaders and employers is the question we must ask while we continue to read the headlines of massive cutbacks and layoffs--couched in the euphemistic terms of "downsizing" and streamlining." What is it in our greater community that explains why West Michigan is hiring more people? In the decade of the 1980's, for instance, the state as a whole increased employment 14.3% while West Michigan's rate of employment went up almost twice that high.

And a stunning statistic in the manufacturing sector of the 1980's is that while employment nationwide DROPPED 6%, in West Michigan over the same period, we hired 9.1% MORE people. Bringing in those new employees and improving productivity saw West Michigan's gross regional product climb over 120% between 1979 and 1989. That 120% growth compares to 74% for the whole state of Michigan, 80% in Ohio and Indiana, and 86% and 87% for Illinois and Wisconsin.

I'd say it was something in the water, but we're talking about

states that all drink out of the Great Lakes!

Certainly diversity of industry is a factor in our healthy economic climate. Maybe we learned from the east side of our state the risk of a single-industry economy. What is our good Dutch warning about how "Ve should not grow too old dumb and too late smart?" In any case, we in Kent, Ottawa, Muskegon, and Allegan Counties must have paid attention to Wayne County's dependency on the auto companies because we are diversified into office furniture, food products, soaps and pharmaceuticals, automotive, paper, appliances, plastics, aerospace, computers and instruments.

And at the risk of self-serving, I might insert here that this robust West Michigan economy defying not only national trends but also our own state's pattern has not been hurt a bit by our public higher-education resources. West Michigan is graced by three major universities with Grand Valley in Grand Rapids, Western Michigan in Kalamazoo, and Ferris in Big Rapids, as well as eight community colleges. And even though your hard-earned tax dollars support all eight of those two-year colleges in Western Michigan, I won't give you a drop quiz on naming them. But I would wager a bet that alumni of Grand Valley, Western Michigan and Ferris, plus graduates from all eight of those two-year colleges are in the employ of somebody in this room and therefore contributing to your bottom line.

But citing the impressive figures of this area's economic present strength and promising future to this luncheon crowd is a bit like preaching to the choir. And if we thought we were the only ones who knew about the economic muscle and agility of our community, we were wrong. Last fall Fortune Magazine called Grand Rapids the best-kept secret in America.

So if our "secret" is not in the water, then I have to believe West Michigan's economic success story is a direct product of the kind of people who settled here and why they did. The early West Michiganders who came packed Bibles and a faith in Divine Providence. They believed that life has meaning and purpose. They came in search of freedom, both economic and political. And they arrived on the shores of the Grand River with the strong work ethic that promises if you toil earnestly and diligently, you will be rewarded.

Charles E. Belknap, for whom the park is named and whose statue stands at the intersection of Fulton and Lake Drive, wrote his personal reminiscences about growing up in Grand Rapids during the middle of the last century. The decorated Civil War Captain, Mayor of Grand Rapids, and two-term Congressman, called his 1922 book, The Yesterdays of Grand Rapids.

In one chapter of Mayor Belknap's book, he describes the burst of immigrants who came to Grand Rapids from New England as a result of the terrible financial panic of 1837. Economic historians in the crowd will remember that the crash of '37 actually led to food riots in the cities of the Northeast. Mayor Belknap's father later told his son that the panic had sent so many New Englanders west to Michigan that a "York" state preacher with more honesty than tact complained from the pulpit. He told his congregation that so much of the brain and muscle of his people had headed west to Michigan, the only people he had left in the pews were "cull timber."

Belknap quotes the song so popular in the late 1830's that every person in New England seemed to be singing it. I think this first verse speaks to the character and values some of our

community's early Pioneers came here with and helps validate my explanation for West Michigan's economic vitality.

"Come all ye Yankee farmers," the verse begins, with Yankee the term for New Englanders.

"Who wish to change your lot,  
 Who've spunk enough to travel  
 Beyond your native spot  
 And leave behind the village  
 Where pa and ma do stay,  
 Come follow me and settle in Michigania,  
 Yea-yea-yea--in Michigania."

Yet if economic necessity was the trigger that brought settlers and immigrants to this area in the last century, I assert the value system they arrived with is behind the ongoing success story as we head into the 21st century. Social Philosopher Wilhelm Ropke could be talking about West Michigan when he describes the human values necessary if the free-market system is to survive.

"Self-discipline, a sense of justice, honesty, fairness, chivalry, moderation, public spirit, respect for human dignity, firm ethical norms--all of these are things which people must possess before they go to the market and compete with each other. These are the indispensable supports which preserve both market and competition from degeneration."

And Ropke's next line on the sources of these "free-market" values could easily summarize what I have concluded about why our area has financially outpaced our neighbors. "Family, church, genuine communities, and tradition," Ropke writes, are the wellspring of those character traits.

The strong West Michigan heritage gave rise to unusually strong leadership after World War II. The second generation of that leadership is winding down, and as they took the mantle from the first generation, so the third generation appears to be assuming the responsibilities of the second. This bodes well for the future of our region, and the values that have sustained us in the past will continue to be our guide as our economy inevitably changes.

The core of economic success for the future, as it has been in the past, is the creativity of the entrepreneur, the vision of the corporate executive, the honesty and dedication of all who work, and the availability of capital. But there are some conditions that will profoundly affect our economy. They require the collective attention of all who want West Michigan to continue to prosper.

First, the center of our cities and towns must be healthy. Europeans do better than Americans on this score, but, we in West Michigan are doing better than most in our country. It seems almost a law of nature that a deteriorated center city will eventually lead to a decline or leveling off of a regional economy. There should be no war between suburbs and the city. All who embrace the suburban life or find their work in newer developments outside the city should know that the outer fortress wall that protects their economic and social life is the center of the inner city. I am proud when I visit the cities and towns of our region. Often I am in Muskegon, Grand Haven, Holland, and Zeeland. More infrequently in Allegan, Fremont, Coopersville, Rockford and Lowell. But in all these cities and towns there is strong evidence of a commitment to the center.

Grand Rapids downtown is the ultimate test of the region's

will to keep its house in order. The tale of two cities, Chicago and Detroit, illustrate what happens when you do and don't. The past thirty years give evidence of the commitment of will and resources to the downtown. What an admirable record. All should express appreciation to capital investors such as Amway, the banks, and enlightened city government that have kept Grand Rapids from the fate of other cities. Yet we see that the battle to preserve health in the central city continues. We must have the stamina and will to win it. The arena, the convention center, Community College expansion, and a Grand Valley Business School-International Trade Center building are all in the making, and can be the next steps we take collectively to preserve the health of downtown and stimulate the economy of the region at the same time.

The second condition that has been developing in the last few years is the internationalization of West Michigan business and industry. For years our larger industries have been involved internationally - Steelcase, SPX, Rapistan and others. It is interesting to note that Amway's phenomenal growth over the last decade has come from success in foreign markets. The Right Place Program, the Grand Rapids Chamber of Commerce, the United States Commerce Department in Grand Rapids have contributed substantially to the internationalization of business in the city and the region. We are on the right track, but we have farther to go along that track.

A few years ago a local manufacturer was competing with a German and Japanese firm for business in Russia. Both foreign firms had a salesperson and engineer who could speak Russian. The local firm had to call our Russian Department for help. We had a former

military intelligence employee majoring in Russian who was best equipped to help in the technical language, but not equal in expertise to the German and Japanese. Even though English is now the international language, U.S. success abroad is enhanced and sometimes depends on our national firms' ability to use the indigenous language.

We at Grand Valley propose as our next major project to build a Business School-International Trade Center adjacent to the Eberhard Center where students in business will be immersed in an international business curriculum, where executive education includes knowledge about foreign cultures and practices, where language training and translation services are provided, and where a library with international data bases is open to all. This is one way your university tax dollars can directly help businessmen and manufacturers improve personnel and their operations, and make West Michigan one of the best places to transact international business.

I can understand workers' fears about NAFTA, but its defeat will be a temporary blip on the way to more open international trade, its passage another illustration of America's steady move toward open world markets which has characterized most of our trade policy since the second world war. The industries, the educational institutions, the business associations, the local government, and unions that are alert to foreign markets and the inevitable march toward freer international markets, will be the job providers of tomorrow. I hope we find this to be the case in West Michigan.

There are wonderful, positive initiatives to be taken - initiatives that reflect the vision and hard work that have made our good life through generations, like building our city centers

and keeping our industries ahead of the times. Yet there is a dark condition that we must attend to or it will in the future drag our economy down. There is in our community, in nearly every community, too large a number of people who are nonproductive in the economy, and who are anti-social, often violent, inflicting on innocent people personal loss and physical harm, even death. The problem has touched the feelings and emotions of the public. The reactions have varied. Some have reached into their checkbooks, contributing to those agencies that attempt to save individuals from defeated lives. Some urge more taxes to assist the disadvantaged, while others rail against the large expenditures for undeserved welfare. Many begrudgingly accept expenditures for more prisons, while there are those who say that money would be better spent for education. Whatever the solution, we must find it before our region and certainly our nation is weighted down by a crime-driven, directionless population. I believe that many in this population can find a functional life if given the proper assistance. I also believe that there are some who cannot, and it is that segment our systems and usually optimistic view of life and human nature do not cope with adequately. Their number is growing. Unless we find a better way to deal with them and in the long run reduce their number, our society will be filled with more fear and anger, and our economy will falter.

We need far-reaching discussions of this problem and its possible solutions. It will not yield to established social philosophies. Finding new ones will test our courage and creativity. If they are found, our concept of freedom must be defined, acceptable, and intact, our conscience must be at peace,

and our sense of justice satisfied. To propose a solution will take another speech, more controversial than this one. In the meantime I urge you all to think about it.

The fourth condition that must be positive for an economy to thrive is the quality of education, both in K-12 and higher education. The elimination of property tax as a source of K-12 funding offers Michigan a rare opportunity to begin improving a public school system that needs it. Finding funding sources is not the only solution - the whole issue of quality is at stake. I hope true reform can take place. Merit pay, length of the school year, curriculum requirements, improved quality and delivery of instruction, equity in funding, ratio of teachers to administrators, ratio of teacher to students, are all issues that need the public attention. When the funding sources are settled on (and they must be by December), I hope they will be accompanied by some legislation that leads to reform in the areas I have mentioned. I doubt if the MEA, which acted so cynically during the property tax debate, supporting the elimination of property tax as an education funding source in the Senate then opposing it in the House, will be of any positive assistance. I understand they have appointed ten or eleven lobbyists to push their point of view. Watch out if you want improvements in K-12 education.

Fortunately we have some of the best public schools in the state. Our West Michigan economy is not so endangered by poor education as some areas. Our schools are generally stronger, giving our work force better people, but we are not without blemish to the extent that we can be complacent about reform.

In higher education our heritage is rich. Hope, Calvin, and

Aquinas are institutions of long standing, passing on traditions that came out of their particular ethnic and religious roots. Even as a newer, public, institution, Grand Valley reflects and amplifies the values so long characteristic of the region.

The character and mission of all our higher education institutions support, I believe, my hypothesis that the desire for economic and political freedom, the belief in divine providence, and the ethic of hard work have created West Michigan's economic vigor.

The expansion of Grand Rapids Junior College into a comprehensive community college and the establishment of Grand Valley as the comprehensive state university, along with the fine private institutions in place, the Grand Rapids area has the higher education resources to serve its economy and reinforce its values.

As I reflect on the role of my university, I conclude that a four year public university is not a convenience, but a necessity.

In this health-care mecca of West Michigan, for instance, without GVSU we'd have no place for complete training of nurses or physical therapists. In a society changing needs by the hours, without this indigenous public university we'd have no school to train social workers for our community.

Our schools of business, public administration, and criminal justice educate our own people in the values that have made this community strong. And while 57% of Grand Valley's students come from this Tri-County Area, a more significant 80% of our graduates stay in this community.

I date the increasingly happy marriage between the business and academic worlds of West Michigan from the recession of 1982.

For if the traditional market-place, college-campus mistrust of each other was true before that economic downturn, we quickly learned how much the business and university communities need each other. If this is our 11th anniversary of working together instead of eyeballing each other at a suspicious distance, it is because we recognize we're trying to keep the same freight rolling forward in the same direction.

"Faith of Our Fathers Living Still." Our West Michigan ancestors' values of faith, freedom, and hard work put us in the catbird's seat of economic growth, not just for our state, but for the whole Great Lakes. Between us, the business world and the university campus, we have an obligation to perpetuate that tradition for our community's children and grandchildren.

Thank you and I'm open for comments or questions.