**THE PARLlAMENT OF MAN . . . THE FEDERATION OF THE WORLD**

By Professor Jacobus tenBroek   
An Address delivered at the Banquet of the Annual Convention   
of the National Federation of the Blind,   
Phoenix, Arizona, July 2, 1964.

One score and four years ago, a little group of willful men from fewer than thirteen states met in a convention hall in Pennsylvania in order to form a more perfect union. If you find an historic analogy in that, so be it.

The union we formed on that distant day in Wilkes-Barre was far from perfect. It is imperfect still. But it has met the test of time and turmoil, trouble and tribulation; it has not perished from the earth.

The National Federation of the Blind is still standing--but it is not standing still. It is on the move once more, as it was in its first years of wrath and rebellion--more united than ever and more confident of its power, stronger in its faith and richer by its experience--an older movement and a wiser one, now revitalized and recharged by an astonishing vision, an idea even more fantastic than that which lured the handful of founders to the Pennsylvania cradle of federationism.

The vision which moves us now is nothing less than the image of world federation. I propose to you tonight that a new and grand objective be added to our established goals and purposes: namely, the inauguration of a World Federation of the Blind.

And why not? Our own National Federation has blazed the trail and shown the way. We have demonstrated what blind men and women can do in freedom and in concert, through independence and interdependence. We have proved, in the fires of battle, our right to organize, to speak for ourselves, and to be heard. We have established beyond gainsaying our capacity to take the leadership in our own cause. We have slowly and steadily won recognition in the halls of government, in the agencies of welfare, and in the public mind. Through our deeds and programs, by argument and example, in action and philosophy, we have earned respect for ourselves and our fellow blind, the respect of free men and of equals.

All this, and more, federationism has done for blind Americans, All this it can do for others. It is time that we shared these fruits of struggle and victory with our brothers in other lands. Let the word go out from this convention that we of the National Federation stand ready to lend our efforts and energies to the building of world unity among the blind. Let the liberating principle of federation--the spirit of democratic association and collective self-direction--catch fire among the blind people of Asia, of Europe, of Africa, of Latin America, as it caught fire and blazed forth in the hearts of blind American twenty years ago, and still sustains them by its warmth.

What is this peculiar potent spirit which we call federationism? What are its explosive ingredients? What does it have to offer to the blind of all nations which they do not have and cannot obtain from their governments, their private agencies and public corporations?

Federationism is many things to many men. First of all it is an indispensable means of collective self-expression, a megaphone through which the blind may speak their minds and voice their demands--and be assured of a hearing.

Federationism is a source of comradeship, the symbol of a common bond, an invitation to commingling and communion--in a word, to brotherhood among the blind.

Federationism is a tool of political and social action, an anvil on which to hammer out the programs and policies, projects and platforms, that will advance the mutual welfare and security of the blind as a group.

Federationism is the expression of competence and confidence, the sophisticated construction of able men and women--not a retreat for the lost and foundered. It is a home of the brave and a landmark of the free.

Federationism is the synonym of independence--the antonym of custodialism and dependency. It is the blind leading themselves, standing on their own feet, walking in their own paths at their own pace by their own command. It is the restoration of pride, the bestowal of dignity and the achievement of identity.

Federationism is an agency of orientation--a school for the sightless--an incomparable method of personal rehabilitation and adjustment to the unpopular condition of being blind.

Federationism is a dedication--a commitment of the mind and heart, an act of faith and an adventure of the spirit, which issues a call to greatness and a summons to service on the part of all who volunteer to enter its ranks.

Federationism is a spearhead of revolution, bespeaking a rising tide of expectation on the part of the once "helpless blind"--a blunt repudiation of time-dishonored stereotypes and an organized demand for the conferral of rights too long withheld and hopes too long deferred.

These are some--by no means all--of the features and faces of federationism which are a familiar part of the experience of organized blind Americans. There is nothing about them that is exclusive to Americans or prohibited to others. They are not contraband but common currency. They are as universal as the claims of democracy. Federationism, like blindness, is no respecter of persons or peoples. For purposes of democratic self-organization among us there is neither black nor white, Jew nor Greek, Christian nor Brahman--they are all one within the universal community of the blind.

Nevertheless it would be untrue to the facts, and unfair to the delegates here tonight, to deny that there have been unique and distinctive elements in the organizational experience of American Federationists through the past quarter century. What we have wrought in this land can be paralleled elsewhere. It may even be improved upon. It can never be exactly duplicated.

What we have built in our National Federation is a monument to the character of blind Americans who refuse to "lie down and play blind," who are imbued with the old-fashioned pioneer virtues of self-reliance and rugged individuality. It is well that they have been. For against these handicapped Americans and their dream of federation have been ranged the powerful forces of a smothering, mothering custodialism which exhibits what I pointed to twenty-four years ago as the peculiar tyranny of kindness. The blind in our democratic country have rarely been the victims of deliberate malevolence; but they have uniformly been the victims of organized benevolence suffocating the will to break out of traditional blind alleys into the competitive mainstream of community life. One of the greatest and most irrational handicaps we have faced on our journey into freedom has been the massive opposition to our vital aims of welfare agencies and bureaus supposedly dedicated to the service of the blind. This tragic paradox springs from the peculiar history of charity organization and social welfare in America and ancestral England--a history remarkable for its philanthropy and humane concern, but remarkable also for its furious resistance to the claims of the impoverished and disabled to the normal rights of opportunity and equality.

If our organizational history has had special liabilities, it has also had assets not likely to be encountered in other lands and cultures. The most important of these, of course, is the heritage of democracy itself. Our movement of federationism could not have occurred, let along have prospered, in a civilization less deeply committed to the great values of personal freedom, economic opportunity and social equality. Indeed we can only hold these truths to be self-evident, and these rights unalienable, because previous generations of Americans have fought to make them so. We blind Americans stand on our own feet; but we also stand on the shoulders of our forefathers. We have been blessed with a climate of tolerance and a tradition of civility. We address a society ravaged by misinformation but susceptible to change. Not all of the world's blind populations can feel a similar assurance .

But there is a compensating factor in this special achievement of American and European democracy, which the flourishing movement of the National Federation reflects. It has not only changed the map of the world; it has also radically altered its states of mind and ways of life. It is, I am sure, no news to you that the nonwestern world is now well embarked upon that twofold revolution which we ourselves undertook at least a century ago: the social revolution of industrialization and the political revolution of democracy. In this exportation and distribution of the fruits of our great accomplishment--including our concepts of public welfare and social security--we Federationists are obliged to take an active role of guidance and counsel. We are obligated as Americans, and we are obligated as blind persons. We owe it not only to the blind of less favored lands, we owe it also to ourselves, to complete the mission of collective self-liberation--the revolutionary movement of federationism--which the National Federation has so effectively begun.

I have listed a few of the assets and liabilities of our American experiment in federationism. It goes without saying that these will be different for other nations, both for those which have some history of organization among the blind and those which do not. And they Will be different in another and greater way for a world federation in which the efforts of the blind of all nations are joined.

Let us recognize that for some countries, notably the newly developing nations of Asia and Africa, the assets may even appear invisible and the liabilities overpowering. But that should not dismay us--for that is exactly how they first appear in the life of every newly blinded person. And that, I may add, is how they first appear in the career of every fledgling organization of the blind.

That is how they must have appeared to the blind people of Pakistan as recently as 1958--before a frail and not very young Scotts-woman named Isabelle Grant arrived to start a social revolution. Today there is a flourishing independent federation of the blind in Pakistan--whose assets already outnumber its liabilities, and whose courage and hope far outweigh its handicaps.

Let us grant the full measure of differences among the blind peoples of the world--differences of cultural pattern and tradition, of education and literacy and language, of governmental responsibility and responsiveness, of industrial development and job opportunity. Let us assess these differences and difficulties in all their immensity.

And having done so, let us weigh against them the common needs and mutual aspirations which link the blind of all the nations. But let us not stop at listing our needs--let us post our demands. Let us formulate and proclaim a Universal Declaration of the Rights of Blind People--and then let us work together to put it across throughout the world. That is a purpose which alone overrides all the differences among us--and that is a purpose which will one day vanquish them.

In formulating our Universal Declaration of Rights, we could do worse than begin with the grand design of our own American movement--the three great goals which are engraved upon the seal of the National Federation, and in the hearts of all Federationists. They are: Security, Opportunity, Equality. Until those objectives have become realities in the daily lives of blind men and women everywhere in the world, our task will remain unfinished and our mission unaccomplished.

These three goals are of course not identical, although they are related. Nor do they have the same order of priority or urgency in all parts of the world. In many lands, where poverty is the norm and industry is the exception, the goal of Security alone is such a far-off divine event that Opportunity and Equality must seem pure fancy. In still other lands the order of priority may be reversed: for many blind Europeans it is not Security but Opportunity which has yet to come knocking.

Once again our own special experience is instructive. For in the course of our national history--from the Declaration of Independence to the Social Security Act and beyond to the Suprenne Court decision in Brown v. Board of Education--these three great themes have had a curiously shifting and alternating career. At first it was Opportunity which held the center of attention, during the halcyon days of free land and open frontiers. In that period of our national adolescence, the goal of Security was commonly regarded as the cry of cowards and the enemy of adventure. But then the frontiers closed down; the free land trickled away from the public domain, and finally, as a capping blow, the great depression struck the nation. Security suddenly took on both urgency and respectability--and an historic act of federal legislation was passed to give it public sanction.

Few Americans today of either party would wish to undo the welfare programs of social security. Their basic purpose of providing a floor of protection against the accidents of fortune and misfortune has become a permanent part of the American creed. But we know now--as we have always known--that the goal of Security, once affirmed and accomplished, is not enough. Man cannot live by charitable bread alone; he demands the right to earn his own daily bread. He is not content to be cared for and supported by custodians; the free man demands the opportunity for self-care and self-support. In the year 1956, when precisely these rights were written into the purposes of public assistance, the Social Security Act revolutionized itself. It became in principle, though not yet in administration, a Social Opportunity Act. Since that date it has embodied the recognition of society that the goal of security is only fulfilled in opportunity, and that opportunity in turn is a hope deferred until it is grounded on a firm foundation of security.

And now, in the 1960's, we are confirming another self-evident truth: that even these grand objectives of security and opportunity together are not enough to meet the needs of free men. For the age we are entering is an Age of Equality. Everywhere in our land, with all deliberate speed (sometimes with more deliberation than speed), the barriers to equal treatment, equal protection and equal access are falling. Not only are they falling as between the races; they are falling as between the rich and poor--and they are falling as between the sighted and the sightless. We who are blind are caught up in a broader social movement aimed at erasing all arbitrary divisions, arbitrary discriminations and arbitrary distinctions between man and man wherever they exist. Let me amend that statement; we are not "caught up" in this movement toward equality; we are in its front ranks. For the blind know as few others can the high personal costs of inequality; their lives are lived in the shadow of its stigma--and in the shelter of its blind alleys.

But today the blind are emerging from the shadows; and they are emerging in force. By the strength of their own organization, by the power of their collective will, blind Federationists are rewriting the terms of their contract with society. In their union there is strength--and in their strength is a renewal of self-confidence and a rehabilitation of pride, Federationism not only aims at Equality: it creates it.

A few years before the outbreak of World War II, Franklin Delanor Roosevelt declared prophetically that his generation of Americans had a rendezvous with destiny. They did indeed. They kept that rendezvous--and all mankind is thankful that they arrived on time for the appointment. I am convinced that this generation of blind Americans now has a rendezvous with destiny: that we are the advance guard of a movement destined in time to transform the lives and fortunes of the blind people of the world. That transformation will not be accomplished in the first year, or in the first decade, or even in the first generation. But, in the well-remembered words of another President, let us begin. Let us reason together--to compare our experiences, to pool our resources and to combine our strengths. Let us act together, to build our common foundations and to erect our platforms. Let us march together, against the ubiquitous foes of ignorance and folly, prejudice and pride, which stand across our paths the world over.

Above all, let us begin.

[back to top](https://nfb.org/Images/nfb/Publications/convent/banque64.html#top)