

# TAKE A MODEST STEP

An Oration

by  
Gianluigi Gabetti



## Wetmore Declamation Bureau

Box 2695  
Sioux City, IA 51106

[www.wetmoredeclamation.com](http://www.wetmoredeclamation.com)  
Email: [speeches@wetmoredeclamation.com](mailto:speeches@wetmoredeclamation.com)

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An Oration

Gianluigi Gabetti  
President, Olivetti Underwood Corporation

From a speech delivered before the President's Club, San Juan, Puerto Rico, April, 1969.  
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...I would like you to bear with me for a few minutes on a new undertaking that is related to our present life and times as Americans. We are calling this new program "Take a Modest Step."...

So tonight, with your permission, with your support, and with the hope of your future leadership in it, I am announcing that people everywhere will be asked to take a modest step--their own modest step--in performing some continuing, self-inspired form of service to people who need it most. Those people are the underprivileged, the minorities, the lost, the lonely who make up the human element in what has come to be called the urban crisis in America...

But I want something more. I want it, as one of you, speaking as one of you, who believes that the personal effort of a concerned, qualified human being can be the catalyst in helping bridge the gap between white and black, between rich and poor, between the educated and the non-educated, between people who awaken every morning knowing that they can control and manage their destiny that day, and those who awaken every morning with the feeling that their destiny on this planet is out of their hands.

If this were only a personal feeling--the feeling that thousands of concerned Americans must take their own modest step into the human problems that are tearing away at our democratic system--I simply could not advocate it to you. But the most eloquent voices this country has had, or has, are speaking to the same point. Is there any of us who did not respond, emotionally and intellectually, to that call of John F. Kennedy on the snowy inaugural morning in Washington when he said, "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country." And whether we are Republican, or Democrat, or of another political persuasion, I think we must all recognize the sincerity of Richard Nixon when--in discussing the future of this republic--he declares (and I quote), "To match the magnitude of our task, we need the energies of our people--enlisted not only in grand enterprises, but more importantly in those small, splendid efforts that make headlines in the neighborhood newspaper instead of the national journal."

And if any of us doubt the impact any one of us can make through those "small, splendid efforts" President Nixon hopes will happen, listen for a minute to John Gardner, former cabinet head of the Department of Health, Welfare and Education. If anyone knows what money will do to solve the nation's social ills, it is Mr. Gardner. It was he, in the administration of two Presidents, who saw spending in this area rise to attack the enormous problem of what to do about the unemployed who cannot get jobs, or cannot hold jobs, or believe they do not want to hold jobs. All that money, all that power--and yet Mr. Gardner stresses a need that money alone cannot solve when he says, "We are producing the most educated, articulate and brilliant sidewalk superintendents the world has ever seen. We have a limitless supply of people with the intelligence and expertise to analyze the society's problems, but very very few with the motivation and stamina to leap in and help save them."

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