



American Rhetoric

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Bono

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[AUTHENTICITY CERTIFIED: Text version below transcribed directly from audio. (2)]

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you for that introduction. First, I should say a few -- a few words about who I am and what on earth I'm doing up here.

My name is Bono, and I am a rock star. I tell you this not as a boast but more as a kind of confession. Because in my view the only thing worse than a rock star is a rock star with a conscience, a celebrity with a cause -- oh, dear; oh, dear. But worse yet is a singer with a conscience, a placard-waving, knee-jerking, fellow-traveling activist with a Lexus and a swimming pool shaped like his head. I'm a singer. You know what a singer is. A singer is someone with a hole in his heart almost as big as the size of his ego. When you need 20,000 people screaming your name in order to feel good about your day, you know

you're a singer.

I'm a singer. I'm a songwriter. I'm also a father four times over -- just last week. I am a friend to God, a sworn enemy of the saccharine and a believer in grace over karma. I talk too much when I'm drunk and sometimes even when I am not. I am not drunk right now. These are not sunglasses; these are protection. But I must tell you that I owe more than my spoiled lifestyle to rock music -- I owe my worldview. Music was like an alarm clock for me as a teenager and still keeps me awake from falling asleep in the comforts of my freedom.

Rock music to me is rebel music. But rebelling against what? In the 50's it was sexual mores and double standards. In the 60's it was the Vietnam War and racial and social inequality. What are we rebelling against now? If I am honest, I'm rebelling against my own indifference. I am rebelling against the idea that the world is the way the world is and there's not a damned thing I can do about it. So I'm trying to do a damned thing. But fighting my indifference is my own problem.

What's your problem? What's the hole in your heart? I need the noise, the applause. You needed the grades. Why are you here in Harvard Square? Why do you have to listen to me? What have you given up to get here? Is success your drug of choice? Or are you driven by another curiosity? Your potential. The potential of a given situation. Is missing the moment unacceptable to you? Is wasting inspiration a crime to you? It is for the musician. If this is where we find our lives rhyme, if this is our common ground, well, then, I can be inspired as well as humbled to be on this great campus because that's where I come from - - music.

But I've seen the other side of music -- the business. I've seen success as a drug of choice. I've seen great minds and prolific imaginations disappear up their own ass, strung-out on their own self-importance. I'm one of them. I've seen the misery of having it all your own way, the loneliness of sitting at a table where everybody works for you; the emptiness of arriving at Aspen on a Gulf stream to stay in your winter -- oh, hold on; that's a different speech.

You know what I'm talking about. But you've got to keep asking yourself, "Why are you doing this?" You've gotta keep checking your motives. Success for my group, U2, has been a lot easier to conjure than, say, relevance -- relevance in the world, relevance in the culture. That's difficult. And, of course, failure is not such a bad thing. It's not a word that many of you know. I'm sure it's what you fear the most, actually. But from an artist's point of view, failure is going to get your best material.

Let me tell you a few things you haven't heard about me, even on the Internet. Let me tell you how I enrolled at Harvard and slept with an Economics professor. That's right. I became a student at Harvard recently, and I came to work with Professor Jeffrey Sachs at CID [Center for International Development] to study the lack of development -- the *lack* of development in third-world economies due to the crushing weight of old debts those economies were carrying for generations.

You see it turns out that the normal rules of bankruptcy don't apply to sovereign states. It would be harder for you to get a student loan than it was for the likes of President Mobutu to stream billions of dollars into his Swiss bank account while his [Congolese] people starved on the side of the road. Two generations later, the Congolese are still paying. The debts of the fathers are now the debts of the sons and the daughters.

So here I was, representing a group that believed all such debts should be cancelled in the year 2000. We called it Jubilee 2000. A fresh start for a new millennium.

It was headed up by Anne Pettifor based out of London -- with huge support from Africa and the [unintelligible]. With Muhammad Ali, Sir Bob Geldof, and myself acting, at first, just as mouthpieces. It was taking off. But we were way behind in the U.S.

We had the melody line, so to speak. But in order to get it on the radio over here, we needed a lot of help. My friend Bobby Shriver suggested I knock on the good professor's door. And a funny thing happened. Jeffrey Sachs not only let me into his office, he let me into his Rolodex, his head, and his life for the last few years. So in a sense he let me into your life, here at Harvard. A student, Bono, again -- I was three weeks in a college before this, all right?

So then Sachs and I, with my friend Bobby Shriver, hit the road like some sort of surreal crossover act. A rock star, a Kennedy, a noted economist crisscrossing the globe like the Partridge Family on psychotropic drugs. We had the Pope acting as our kind of agent. We had the blessing of various rabbis, evangelists, mothers unions, trade unions and PTAs.

It was a new level of "unhip" for me, but it was very cool. It was in that capacity that I slept with Jeff Sachs, each of us in our own seat on an economy flight to somewhere, passed out like a couple of drunks, but from sheer exhaustion. It was confusing for everyone. I looked up with one eye to see your hero, stubble in all the wrong places, his tie looking like a headband. An airhostess asked if he were a member of the Grateful Dead. (It's more of a mop-top situation today.)

Anyway, I have enormous respect for Jeff Sachs, but it's really true what they say: "Students should never sleep with their professors." So while I'm handing out trade secrets, I also want to tell you that Larry Summers, your incoming President, the man whose signature is on every American dollar -- well, he too is a nutcase -- and a freak.

U2 made it big out of Boston -- not New York, not LA. So I thought if anyone would know about our existence it would be a Treasury Secretary from Harvard. No. When I said I was from U2 he had a flashback from Cuba, 1962. How can I put this? And don't hold it against him -- Mr. Summers is, as former President Clinton confirmed to me last week in Dublin, "culturally challenged."

But when I asked him to look up from "the numbers" to see what we were talking about, he did more than that. He did the hardest thing of all for an Economist; he saw through the numbers. And if it was hard for me to enlist

Larry Summers in our efforts, imagine how hard it was for Larry Summers to get the rest of Washington to cough up the cash -- to really make a difference for the third of the world that lives on less than a dollar a day. Well he more than tried. He was passionate. He turned up in the offices of his adversaries. He turned up in restaurants with me, a rock star, to meet the concerns of his Republican counterparts...counterparts...contra-parts...?

There is a posh restaurant in Washington where they will not let us in now. Such was the heat of his debate -- blood on the walls, wine in the vinegar.

If you're called up before the new President of Harvard and he gives you a hairy eyeball, drums his fingers, and generally acts disinterested, let me tell you it could be the beginning of a great adventure for you. (It's a good thing I got here before President Rudenstine hands over the -- uh, anyway....)

It is at this point I have to ask -- if your families haven't already -- why am I telling you these stories? It's certainly not because I'm running for role model. I'm telling you these stories because all the fun I had with Jeffrey Sachs and Larry Summers was in the service of something deadly serious. When people around the world hear about the burden of debt that crushes the poorest countries, when they hear that for every dollar of government aid we send to developing nations, nine dollars comes back to us in debt service payments -- did you hear that? For every one dollar in government aid we send to these nations, we receive nine in debt service payments -- when people hear that, they get angry.

In fact, they more than got angry. They took to the streets in what was without doubt the largest grass roots movement since the campaign to end apartheid. Politics, as you know, is normally the art of the possible but this was something more interesting. This was becoming the art of the impossible. We had priests going into pulpits; we had pop stars going into parliaments. The Pope put on my sunglasses for a photo session -- never released, by the way. The Vatican didn't have the same sense of humor as the Pontiff. But he was cool.

Yeah, we had the Pope putting on sun glasses; we had the religious right acting like student protesters. And finally, after a floor fight in the House of Representatives, we got the money -- 4-3-5 million. And more importantly -- 'cause this is starting to add up to a lot of money -- more importantly, this leveraged billions of dollars from other rich countries.

So, where did that money go? Well, so far, 23 of the poorest countries on the planet have managed to meet the sometimes over-stringent conditions to get their debt payments reduced -- and to spend the money on the people who need it most. In Uganda, twice as many kids are now going to school. That's good. In Mozambique, debt payments are down 42 percent, allowing health spending to increase by 14 million dollars. That's good -- 14 million dollars goes a long way in Mozambique.

...To make it more sort of real, just one little story about a remarkable man in rural Uganda -- Dr. Kabira. In 1999, measles -- a disease that's almost unheard of in the U.S. -- killed hundreds of kids in Dr. Kabira's district. Now, thanks to

debt relief, he's got an additional \$6,000 from the state, enough for him to employ two new nurses and buy two new bicycles, so that they can get around the district and immunize the children. Last year, measles was a killer. This year, Dr. Kabira saw less than ten cases. That's good.

I just wanted you to know what we pulled off with the help of Harvard -- with the help of people like Jeffrey Sachs, sitting right there. I'm not here to brag, or to take credit, or even to share it, actually. And not just to say "thanks." I think I've come here for another reason. I think I've come here to ask you for your help because this is a big problem and we need some smart people working on it. I think that this will be the defining moment of our age. When the history books (that some of you will write) make records of this moment in time, we will be remembered for two things: the Internet, probably, and the everyday holocaust that is Africa: 25 million HIV positives who will leave behind 40 million AIDS orphans by 2010 in sub-Saharan Africa alone. This is the biggest health threat since the Bubonic Plague wiped out a third of Europe. And this is happening right now in our time.

It's an unsustainable problem for Africa and, unless we hermetically seal the continent and close our conscience, it's an unsustainable problem for the world. But it's hard to make this a popular cause. It's hard to make it pop, you know? And I guess that's what my job is; 'cause pop is often, sadly often, the oxygen of politics.

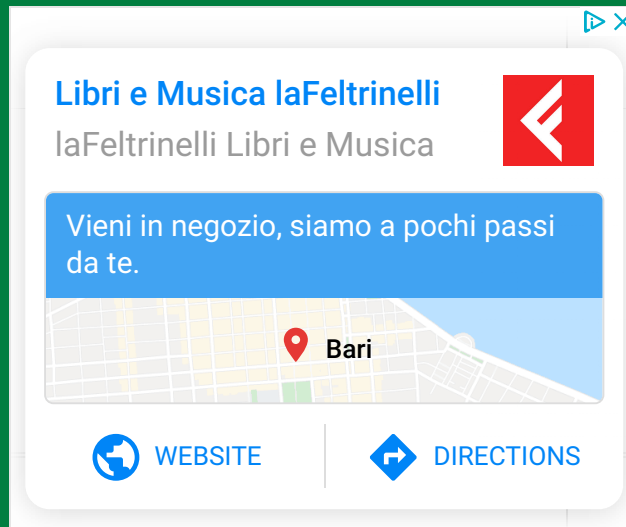
Didn't John and Robert Kennedy come to Harvard? Isn't equality a son of a bitch to follow through on. Isn't "Love thy neighbour" in the global village so inconvenient? God writes us these lines, but we have to sing them -- take them to the top of the charts. But its not what the radio is playing, is it? I know. I know.

But we've got to follow through on our ideals or we betray something at the heart of who we are. Outside these gates, and even within them, the culture of idealism is under siege, beset by materialism and narcissism and all the other "isms" of indifference -- and their defense mechanisms: knowingness, the smirk, the joke. Worse still, idealism is being reduced to a marketing tool. They've got Martin Luther King selling phones now. Have you seen that? [unintelligible]

Civil Rights in America and Europe are bound to human rights in the rest of the world. Human rights: the right to live like a human. But these thoughts are expensive; they're going to cost us. Are we ready to pay the price? Is America still a great idea as well as a great country?

When I was a kid in Dublin, I watched in awe as America put a man on the moon. We though, you know, this is "mad." Nothing is impossible in America. In America, they can do anything over there. Nothing was impossible -- only human nature. And it followed because it was led. Is that still true? Tell me it's true. It's true isn't it? And if it isn't, you of all people can make it true again.

Thank you.



The screenshot shows a mobile application window for 'Libri e Musica laFeltrinelli'. The title bar includes the text 'Libri e Musica laFeltrinelli' and 'laFeltrinelli Libri e Musica' next to a red logo with a white stylized 'F'. Below the title is a blue banner with the text 'Vieni in negozio, siamo a pochi passi da te.' Underneath the banner is a map showing a location in Bari, Italy, with a red location pin. At the bottom of the window are two buttons: 'WEBSITE' with a globe icon and 'DIRECTIONS' with a blue location pin icon.

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