

SPEECH ON 12 APRIL, 2007 (THURSDAY) ON THE OCCASION OF THE RELEASE OF RAM JETHMALANI'S BOOK BY THE HON'BLE PRIME MINISTER SHRI MANMOHAN SINGH

Present : Shri Shivraj Patil, Home Minister

Shri Lalu Prasad Yadav, Railway Minister, Minister of State for Environment.

The Hon'ble Prime Minister, the Hon'ble Ministers Eminent Speakers on the dais distinguished dignitaries, my old friend Ram.

I must thank the organizers for this opportunity to address you on this occasion.

Last week when Lataa Krishnamurthy requested me to speak on the occasion - - I inquired whether there were any do's or don'ts – she responded Ram loves freedom of speech - speak what you like.

I recall Oliver Cromwell's famous remarks to his portrait Painter, Sir, Peter Lely, - He said "Paint me as I am, do not leave the scars and wrinkles".

I will paint Ram as I know him, wrinkles and scars.

Ram is fearless and forthright on occasions too forthright.

He is irrepressibly audacious with a sense of the dramatic. He has a penchant for hitting the headlines but he has a warm and golden heart. In politics he has gravitated through the whole spectrum - - He believes in what Oliver Goldsmith wrote "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds".

He wears his heart on his sleeve. He will confront openly and attack directly. He will not stab anyone in the back.

But these strengths and virtues are handicaps in Indian Politics. As a result he is a potent force in the opposition, but uncomfortable on the treasury benches - - and many of his colleagues on the treasury benches would be still more uncomfortable. Charles, De Gaulle the Great French President and war hero said :

"A good politician never believes what he says and he is very distressed when others believe him."

Ram believes what he says and says it passionately and emphatically. But above all Ram is an incomparable and matchless defense lawyer in criminal cases. In the Indira Gandhi Assassination Case he won an acquittal for Balbir Singh who had suffered a death sentence.

In the recent case arising from a terrorist attack on Parliament, Ram won an acquittal for Syed Geelani both from the High Court and confirmed by the Supreme Court. when the accused was awarded a death sentence by the Trial Court.

Ram fought these cases against the tide of popular opinion. It was a battle in the heroic mould.

There is nothing more rewarding for a lawyer than saving a client's life.

Today Ram's services as a defense lawyer are sought by all powerful political leaders, cutting across party lines. That is his strength and forte.

Today the practice of criminal law is the road to fame and fortune and occasionally a seat in the Rajya Sabha.

Mr. Prime Minister, your Government has empowered the Indian citizen with the Right to Information Act. – It is universally acclaimed. May I recall that Ram, as the Union Minister of Urban Affairs in 1998 opened for public scrutiny the files of his department. The bureaucracy was stunned and ultimately scuttled it.

Ram has always unwaveringly supported freedom of speech and expression, Liberty of the Media the Rule of law and the Independence of the judiciary. His articles in the book to be released bear testimony to this unfailing commitment.

Freedom of Speech is our priceless heritage. We must all endeavor to preserve it and nourish it.

Let me repeat my favorite story on freedom of speech.

We are in the mid 60's – the cold war is on. Dr. Christian Bernard has performed recently, the first human heart transplant. There is an international medical conference. Great surgeons have come from England, America, South Africa and Soviet Russia. A question is asked to the English surgeon, what do you consider the most difficult operation. He says in England brain surgery. The American doctor is asked the same question and he answers heart transplant surgery we have difficulties in that operation. Dr. Christian Bernard answered 'heart surgery we have mastered but we find intestinal surgery very difficult'. Finally the Russian Doctor is asked the same question He hesitates for a while and answers in Russia the most difficult operation is 'Tonsillitis'. The audience is stunned. The Russian Doctor continues because in Russia no one opens his mouth so we have to perform the operation from the other end". So much for the freedom of speech.

I recently read a report that Ram, applied to the Supreme Court to take up his case early because his astrologer has told him that he may not be available after July. My advice to Ram is not to believe astrologers.

Thank you Ladies and Gentlemen.