



2009

Acceptance Speech, Tikkun Olam Award Ceremony, November 27, 2007

Michael J. Copps

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Cover Page Footnote

Commissioner Michael J. Copps has been a member of the United States Federal Communications Commission since 2001. He was honored by the Center for Christian-Jewish Understanding of Sacred Heart University with the Tikkun Olam Award at the Nostra Aetate Awards Ceremony on November 27, 2007, for his humanitarian leadership to promote universal access to the benefits of communication for all Americans and his advocacy for media education among our nation's school children.

MICHAEL J. COPPS

Acceptance Speech
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Chairman Roberti, Dr. Cernera, Rabbi Ehrenkranz, Rabbi Korn, members of the CCJU Board, distinguished guests all: This is really one of the nicest things that has ever happened to me. And, I must add, one of the most moving. To be chosen for this distinction by people whose life work goes to the fundamentals of our human condition, whose understanding of things human and divine gives purpose and direction to so many millions of lives, is—to use a word my kids often use without understanding how deep it goes — awesome. Totally awesome. And sharing an awards evening with His Holiness, Pope Benedict : well, it's a little more than I thought would ever happen when I entered first grade at Saint Monica's School in Milwaukee back in the mid-1940s. So I thank the Center for this high honor and for the path-breaking work it does to foster the mission of respect, cooperation, and peace between Christians and Jews. Your work is a shining example of how education,

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collaboration, and trust are the standard by which we can all live better lives together.

I have to tell you this award has some immediate practical effects, too. My lovely wife Beth, sitting right there, is parish secretary at St. Mary's Catholic Church in Old Town Alexandria, Virginia. I think when her pastor and boss sees the copy of tonight's program that I'm going to make sure he sees, listing the pope's name and mine as awardees, that will translate into an even better work environment for her. So thanks for that, too.

We are all surely honored tonight to have three of our nation's foremost Congressional leaders come here. Thank you Speaker Pelosi, Senator Schumer, and Chairman Markey for the vision and leadership you give our nation and for the support you give the Center tonight.

I am also proud to share this stage with my colleague and friend, Jonathan Adelstein. As soon as Jonathan joined the Commission in 2002, we found an amazing confluence of agreement on many issues. When the FCC headed down the road of loosening the rules that require our broadcast media to serve the public interest, Jonathan and I began to travel the country far and wide together to listen to and learn from the American people about how they felt about it. We have shared scores of stages since then, given speeches together, sat through hearings lasting up to ten or twelve hours at a time together, broken bread together, and strategized together about how we can do our part to ensure a better media environment for our country's future. We have grown so close together that I think he is seriously thinking about starting to eat fish on Fridays during Lent, and I'm looking into what's involved in keeping kosher. Seriously though, Jonathan is smart, dedicated, and courageous, and I am proud to have him as both friend and colleague.

The communications issues that Jonathan and I work on are very important. Bringing the wonders of broadband and the Internet to all our people is make-or-break for America. Underline the word "all" there, because each citizen in this land, whether they

are rich or poor, living on a remote farm or in the inner city, healthy or part of a disabilities community, is entitled to access the tools of advanced telecommunications, both as an economic matter and, I believe, as a civil right. Other nations are ahead of ours in accomplishing this access, and that translates into not just an embarrassing number fifteen or twenty in the global broadband rankings. It translates into lost opportunities for millions of American kids and whole chunks of our country that won't be able to compete in the modern world.

Then there are the media, my number one priority at the FCC. The media are so precious, so fundamental, so central to our interactions as a society, and so powerful. No other industry comes close to matching media's power to shape our future. It touches every aspect of our lives. When used positively, media can enlighten minds, convey powerful ideas, educate, and lay the foundation for human and economic development. But when employed to mislead, misinform or under-inform, media can, and, sadly, often do great harm. No one knows this better than leaders of our religious communities.

I believe that people of faith are drawn together by many common interests when it comes to the media. They want a media environment that recognizes their presence, covers their spiritual and temporal issues, and provides them ample opportunity for expression. They want local media that cover the thousands of good works done in their communities every day. They want media that serve the needs of all our citizens, and that certainly includes the poor, the disadvantaged, and the disabled. They want a media that truly reflect the diverse threads that hold together this great tapestry that is America. They want those who operate the airwaves to understand that in return for the privilege of using the people's spectrum, the people expect a return that goes beyond anyone's corporate bottom line.

On January 24, 2005, I read the most powerful statement on all this that I had ever seen. It was Pope John Paul's *Apostolic Letter to Those Responsible for Communications*. John Paul wrote this: "The

positive development of the media at the service of the common good is a responsibility of each and every one.” He went on, “If the communications media are a good destined for all humanity, then ever-new means must be found—including recourse to opportune legislative measures—to make possible a true participation in their management by all. The culture of co-responsibility must be nurtured.” As citizens, then, we have a responsibility to demand and to secure a media environment that informs, reflects, and nourishes us. As John Paul so eloquently put it, “The positive development of the media at the service of the common good is a responsibility of each and every one.” And it was inspiring to hear Pope Benedict, on the occasion of the 40th World Communication Day, place the same emphasis on “cultivating co-responsibility” in the media.

What a wonderful word—co-responsibility. It’s not a new theological term or some new social science jargon. It’s another word for working together, pulling together for the common good. It’s that “public interest” term that appears some 112 times in the Communications Act that is supposed to guide everything the Federal Communications Commission does. Co-responsibility. Isn’t that how we built this land of ours?

I don’t believe we built America with the “everyone for himself” attitude that seems to divide rather than unite people today. I don’t think we built America by sweeping difficult challenges under the rug and pretending that our political and civic destiny should be determined by the outcome of a mindless debate about whether our ideas for the future must only be judged through the prism of whether they are “regulatory” or “deregulatory.” How much energy have we squandered, how much progress have we forgone, because of that one over the past quarter century?

I don’t think we built America by putting a mythical hyper-individualism ahead of the things we can overcome by working together. We all glory in that wonderful Declaration of Independence that trumpeted America’s determination to be free. But what won that independence for us was our Declaration of

Interdependence, our determination to work together and sacrifice together and fight together to be free.

And that's how we have made our greatest progress ever since. We built our physical infrastructures—from turnpikes, roads, and canals through transcontinental railroads and interstate highways—by people, communities, and their government working together for the common good. Isn't that how we should spread our broadband infrastructure and our information highways now? We built our schools and churches by pulling together because we knew we were all responsible. Co-responsibility. And, at long last, we finally tackled, and began to overcome, discrimination and inequality in our midst, although we still have many doors to open for many Americans.

I'm preaching to a united flock here tonight, I know, but this wonderful evening is an opportunity to rededicate ourselves to these ideals and to recommit ourselves to put them back in the vanguard of our goals as a people. Let's not just restate them. Let's communicate them. Let's shout them from the roof tops. Let's give a clarion call, because if the sound of the trumpet is uncertain, who will respond to the call to battle?

As I travel across this land, I sense a new spirit just beginning to dawn in America, a budding determination to tackle our problems, reassert core values, rebuild our country, and fill in the still daunting gaps of our democracy. We're not on auto-pilot to that future—not by any means—and it could still fall victim to those who peddle the silly bromides of our recent past. So it's up to you and me to sound the call, to nurture understanding, to foster cooperation, the common good, and co-responsibility. You at the Center do this every day. I follow you in reaffirming that dedication tonight, thanking you for all you do, and expressing the heartfelt gratitude that Beth and I feel for this evening which both humbles and inspires us. God bless you all.