



Robert F. Kennedy



Martin Collier

## Information

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### Video of Robert F. Kennedy's speech:

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=e51JnJPPY0E](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e51JnJPPY0E)

## Measuring what matters

**By Martin Collier**  
*Special to The Times*

Forty years ago, Robert F. Kennedy launched his ill-fated bid to become president of the United States. On March 18, 1968, at one of his first campaign appearances, before an audience of 20,000 at the University of Kansas, Kennedy delivered a moving and powerful indictment of our misplaced reliance on the gross national product (now called gross domestic product) as a measure of our nation's progress:

"Too much and for too long, we seemed to have surrendered personal excellence and community values in the mere accumulation of material things. Our gross national product, now, is over \$800 billion a year, but that gross national product — if we judge the United States of America by that — that gross national product counts air pollution and cigarette advertising and ambulances to clear our highways of carnage. It counts special locks for our doors and the jails for the people who break them. It counts the destruction of the redwood and the loss of our natural wonder in chaotic sprawl. It counts napalm and counts nuclear warheads and armored cars for the police to fight the riots in our cities. It counts Whitman's rifle and Speck's knife and the television programs, which glorify violence in order to sell toys to our children.

"Yet the gross national product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages, the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials. It measures neither our wit nor our courage, neither our wisdom nor our learning, neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country; it measures everything, in short, except that which makes life worthwhile. And it can tell us everything about America except why we are proud that we are Americans."

The audience was dead quiet as Sen. Kennedy delivered these eloquent words and, when he was done, there was long, slow, deep applause that some thought would never end.

We are a society that loves to measure things. But what a society chooses to measure reveals its values and defines its goals. What does it say about our society that our favorite metric, the GDP, is driven up by war, natural and man-made disasters, illness, crime and divorce, but doesn't account for the time we spend with our children or our elderly, or volunteering to enrich the community? If we truly are a nation of values, then shouldn't we try to do a better job of measuring what matters most to us?

The media should not blindly report on GDP without noting its limited value as a measure of national well-being. We should embark on a "Manhattan Project" to expand and modernize the GDP so that it better measures the impacts of pollution and global warming, the depletion of our natural resources and the value of household labor and volunteer activity. And we should work to build and promote better measurements of poverty and economic inequality in this country. These steps would pay far greater tribute to Sen. Kennedy's eloquent words than simply remembering them 40 years later.

It's time for our nation to put its money where its heart is. It's time to measure what we value rather than simply valuing what we measure.

*Martin Collier is the executive director of the Glaser Progress Foundation, headquartered in Seattle.*

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