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The Better Angels of Our Nature

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“THE BETTER ANGELS OF OUR NATURE”

MATRICULATION CONVOCATION ADDRESS
SEPTEMBER 27, 2001

As we gather together to launch the 2001-2002 academic year, our minds are preoccupied with other things. Let me say at the outset, that the speech you are about to hear is not the speech I had been intending to give. My thoughts about features of how we engage each other in a residential liberal arts community—or at least what would have been this year’s version of such thoughts—will have to wait for another day. We have other things, other people, on our minds. We are preoccupied with the events of two weeks ago, events that have shaken not only our nation, but our world. I ask that we pause for a moment now to offer our thoughts and prayers for those who have lost their lives and lost loved ones, friends, and colleagues in the tragedy that befell our nation.

That tragedy has, as well, filled us with a kind of looming uncertainty about the future, a future that it seems will be changed fundamentally not only by the terrorist attack of September 11, but by our individual and collective responses to that event. How could it have happened? Who is to blame? Are we at war? If so, against whom? Someone is going to pay, we’ve heard, whether that someone is an individual, an organization, and/or a nation-state. But how will we make them pay? What are we to do to them? Arrest bin Laden? Launch surgical strikes? Deploy ground forces? Whatever we do, will we eliminate or exacerbate the threat? The answers to these questions are unfolding even now, and it would be surprising if we did not anticipate them with dread.

September 11, 2001 now stands with December 7, 1941 as another Day of Infamy, though the death toll from two weeks ago is more than double what it was in Hawaii. In addition, how we will respond militarily is far less evident today than it was sixty years ago. What we confront is not another video-game war like Desert Storm. We face prospects wholly new and unknown, for which the President and others are seeking to prepare us. Lincoln’s words during the Civil War resonate today: “The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves, and then we shall save our country.”

We all know, expect, and accept that we will face tighter security measures at airports and other centers of travel and public gathering. Convenience will be sacrificed to safety. We must certainly disenthrall ourselves of the good old days of airline travel, which, to be honest, had not been so good to begin with. But that may only be the tip of the proverbial iceberg. President Bush has declared war on terrorism and on the countries that harbor and support terrorists. Indeed, he has referred to this effort as a crusade, hinting at our own holy war against those who have presumably waged holy war on us, not to mention hinting as well at the deep roots of a conflict between the “West” and the “Middle East.” As the rhetoric escalates, the dangers increase. We can expect life to change as we support the deployment of our armed

forces. But life has already changed in other respects. Our sense of vulnerability has increased; our security from the kinds of mindless violence we have witnessed in other parts of the world has been breached.

As we seek protection from the sort of horror we experienced two weeks ago, we may retreat into a kind of fortress mentality, seeking scapegoats for our fears, closing ranks against others different from ourselves, isolating ourselves from the inhabitants of other parts of the global society in which we live, even demonizing those who share national or religious affiliation with those we suspect of this horror. It is not merely that we may return to a kind of collective isolationism as a nation, but that we will embrace a kind of personal isolation as individuals. Our response may involve not only physical safety, but also psychic safety. We may well return to the kind of mindless Nativism that typifies some of the least attractive and most vicious traits of our national experience. “America for Americans.” “No hyphenated Americans.” “America: Love it or Leave it.”

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such views were directed against African-Americans, Catholics, Jews, Eastern Europeans, Asians, Hispanics, and others. Those deemed different were deemed dangerous. Foreigners were frightening. Aliens were anathema. We have, or so we like to think, moved beyond these earlier manifestations of xenophobic thinking. But the temptation today is to revert to such thinking, to respond to the evil that has been perpetrated on us by resorting to a vengeful, vitriolic assault on others, in this case Arabs and followers of Islam.

Callers have harassed Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, accusing it of “training terrorists” and demanding that the university expel Middle Eastern students. We have witnessed assaults on Arab-Americans, rocks thrown through the windows of Arab-American businesses, attempts to set fire to mosques, vilification of Muslims, the mindless search for someone or some group to serve as the focus of our anger. One caller on a national public radio show two weeks ago advised all Arab Americans to report to the FBI to have their loyalty tested. These assaults have affected not only Muslims, but Sikhs and others who are being persecuted because they “look Middle Eastern.” And so we revert, or some few of us revert, to the thinking that prompted the internment of Japanese Americans in World War II, or that fed the fears exploited by Senator Joe McCarthy in the Red Scare days of the early 1950s, or that have led to racial profiling by police officers. In this we must stand with the President, who stated clearly that our enemy is not our many Muslim or Arab friends, but “a radical network of terrorists,” who are, he said “traitors to their own faith.”

The national mood for revenge is, of course, understandable. The sense of vulnerability and fright prompts the need to fight back, to assert our power, to exact punishing retribution. You’ve undoubtedly seen or heard the expressions of outrage. We have been called upon to Strike Back, with some arguing that we can do so by investing in the stock and bond markets, a message that was at least initially ineffectual. We have been urged to have “Resolve.” One of the earliest responses that I saw, by Leonard Pitts in the *Miami Herald*—since reprinted in *The Appleton Post Crescent*—said that “in this moment of airless shock when hot tears sting disbelieving eyes, the only thing I can find to say, the only words that seem to fit, must be addressed to the unknown author of this suffering. “You monster. You beast. You unspeakable

bastard." We have been bloodied, Pitts wrote, "as we have never been bloodied before. But there's a gulf of difference between making us bloody and making us fall.... When roused, we are righteous in our outrage, terrible in our force. When provoked by this level of barbarism, we will bear any suffering, pay any cost, go to any length, in the pursuit of justice."

In some form or fashion, we identify with the seething anger that prompted that article. We rally to that sense of a proud and good people who will be avenged. We've heard it before. We've sung it together, and it was sung at the National Cathedral on September 14: "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord; He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored. He hath loosed the fateful lightening of his terrible swift sword; His truth is marching on." Julia Ward Howe's Civil War hymn expressed and spoke to the religious and patriotic sentiments of the northern states in the 1860s; but how will it speak to us today? One can only hope that it will not speak to us in the voice of Jerry Falwell, who, though he has since apologized, used the occasion of the tragedy to lash out at those he accused of secularizing America and came mighty close to identifying the terrorist attack with the judgment of God against a wayward nation. Surely, we must reject the sentiments behind that outrageous statement, just as we must have the forbearance and foresight to distinguish between calls for justice and cries for vengeance in our national response. As Shibley Telhami put it in last week's *New York Times*, our "hearts must never be so hardened as to forget that what is at stake is much bigger than mere retaliation or that one cannot defend one's values by subverting them."

Above all, it seems to me, this is a time when we should harken to the words of Abraham Lincoln, uttered at the outset of our Civil War, when he invoked "the better angels of our nature" in an effort to rally the nation to prevent the conflict. And what are the better angels of our nature? Well, they are expressed in part by the ways in which Americans have, in the main, responded to the tragedy that befell us. Physicians, firemen, rescue workers, ordinary citizens have come to the scenes of these disasters to lend their assistance, others to raise funds to support the relief effort, others to give blood to save the injured. We have gathered in prayer vigils, in churches and synagogues and mosques, to express our grief, and to acknowledge our fellow suffering with those who have suffered most directly. We have lit candles, all across this broad land, and stood in sad and silent unity with our neighbors.

In many ways, life is a matter of defining moments. For Oliver Wendell Holmes, the Civil War was the defining experience of his generation. "Through our great good fortune," he said in 1884, "in our youth our hearts were touched with fire." Those of you who know or have known your grandparents or great-grandparents may have heard talk of Pearl Harbor and how the nation responded to fight and win what has been called the last "good war," how that event touched them, and why Tom Brokaw called them "the greatest generation." Your parents may have spoken to you about the assassinations of President Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and Bobby Kennedy, and how those tragic events affected us all. They may have shared with you their reflections about Viet Nam, and how it tore this country asunder. For good or ill, these moments in our national life have shaped and informed the generations who experienced them.

Your generation now has, suddenly and terribly, its defining moment. Like your parents and forebears, you will bond with each other because of this tragedy in ways we cannot yet foretell. President Bush has said that the central mission of his administration will be to fight

and exterminate terrorism. If it is to be his mission, it will perforce become ours as well, in ways we cannot yet understand or describe. But, today, you have yet another mission—and in many ways one that is more enduring and important, as it will inform and sharpen that bonding. Today you embark on or resume a journey that will equip you to be productive and proactive participants in our common life. For the moment, that common life may be dominated by present circumstance, but it will inevitably involve more issues and opportunities than fighting to end terrorism, which itself will be no easy task.

Understanding the socio-political, intellectual, and religious roots of terrorism is no simple task either. Moreover, finding ways to craft a national foreign and domestic policy that addresses the root causes of terrorism is yet more complex, whether in the Middle East, the former Soviet Union, Northern Ireland, Africa, or at home. I do not pretend to know the answers to these dilemmas. But I do believe that liberal education as practiced at Lawrence contains the ingredients of those answers, not by providing them, not by describing what we are to think and do, but by encouraging us to be thoughtful and informed, not glib and ignorant as we think and act. To learn about the peoples for whom terrorism is an expression of ideologies, to understand their beliefs, histories, and conflicts, from beyond and within our borders, to comprehend what aspects of our national identity and foreign policy provoke them, will make us not just knowledgeable but aware, not just smart but sensitive. Above all, liberal education should enable us to develop the qualities of mind and character that are the intellectual and personal prerequisites for informed citizenship in a changing, challenging, and suddenly more dangerous world. Liberal education is education for a free people, and it is in service to our freedom that we should seek that education.

Further, Lawrence has a proud tradition of being an inclusive community. From our founding as a coeducational college, to our hospitality to men and women of different viewpoints, to our openness to individuals of all nations, races, and creeds, our community embraces and celebrates the individual, with all the varying identities and belief systems and values that each individual possesses. But one set of shared values binds us to one another most of all: the belief in free inquiry, the desire to achieve the status of an educated person, the willingness to learn from and live with each other, and most especially to learn with and from those most different from ourselves.

Beyond the enduring purposes of the college, however, the Lawrence community has both the opportunity and the obligation to do more. At one level, we can contribute funds to support the relief efforts, and I am pleased that plans are underway to do just that. One such effort will occur Sunday afternoon, October 7, when the conservatory will hold “A Concert of Healing and Remembrance” at which voluntary contributions to the Red Cross will be collected. At another level, we can support and comfort one another, as indeed we have already begun to do.

In addition, we can and should draw upon our own resources and those of the community to inform ourselves about the issues that confront us as a people, both now and in the foreseeable future. In the weeks ahead, we will sponsor talks and symposia on topics ranging from Islam to national security, drawing on the expertise of faculty and others to engage these matters with and for us. The first of these will occur this evening at 8:00 in Riverview Lounge of the Memorial

Union, when a faculty-student panel will discuss “Reactions to September 11.” The second will occur next Tuesday, October 2, at 11:10 a.m. in Stansbury Theater of the Music-Drama Center, when Assistant Professor of Religious Studies Katherine Kueny will speak on “Islam and America.” And on Wednesday, November 7, we will hear from one of the leading scholars of Islam and Islamic politics, Professor John Esposito, founder and director of The Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University in Washington, who will speak on “The United States, Global Terrorism, and Islam.” Other events will occur during the term and academic year as well.

In the days and months ahead, as we go about the quotidian business of teaching and learning, we will, at times inadvertently, at times willfully, even at times necessarily, shut out the thoughts of the tragedy we have witnessed. We will go about our business, as we should, as we should. You hear people say that these tragic events put everything else in perspective. So they do. But the perspective for you should not be to see your higher education as of little moment, but as of greater importance. Let us, then, remain true to our callings at Lawrence, remember why we are here, and profess together the purposes we hold in common as a learning community.

In 1942, as the nation entered World War II, the president of Wilson College wrote a short piece entitled “Liberal Education and War-Strategy,” in which he said: “The liberal arts college cannot turn out at a moment’s notice quantities of physicians, stenographers, meteorologists, engineers, acetylene welders, steamfitters and shipbuilders [occupations that fit the needs of the time]. But it can turn out men and women thoroughly grounded in the liberal disciplines; men and women who understand what is happening in this world, see its problems in perspective, know what solutions have been tried before with success or failure, know the hopes and fears in men’s hearts and how to foster the one and allay the other. It can turn out men and women who have a vision of the future and trained judgment for the attainment of the vision; who have zeal to pioneer in fields of which we may not yet even guess the existence; who are persons of integrity and honesty and understanding—qualities peculiarly well taught by the disciplines of scholarship; above all, men and women who have a will to *do*, not only to *know*.” Sixty years later, that assertion still has value and force.

Lawrence President Henry Merritt Wriston put the matter more concisely: the college may take pride, he wrote, if it gives the student the “opportunity for the cultivation of powers that will let him meet [the tensions of the world] with alert mind, calm spirit, and courageous heart.” I do hope that we will strive to seize that opportunity. Talk with one another. Listen to one another. Live and learn together. My best wishes to you all for the coming academic year.