1969

Commencement address

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APPLETON, WIS., June 15 ... Earlier in this century
President Butler of Columbia University experienced public
reaction to the liberal comments of some members of his faculty.
Perhaps the most outspoken of these was the famous his-
torian Charles Beard, who reinterpreted American history
in a manner that likened the founding fathers to Ebenezer
Scrooge. After President Butler's patience had been tested,
he was reported to have been asked if he had read Professor
Beard's last book. Explosively he replied, "I hope so."

Today perhaps many of you take comfort in this hour
only with the realization that this is the last time you will
hear me speak! Thus it may only be fair to give the reasons
for my occupation of this place of honor.
Five similar occasions have provided me with some empirical data on what we seek from a Commencement address. Two dangers threaten these proceedings: inclemency on the one hand and posterior fatigue on the other. Heat usually is real rather than potential. A few years ago a distinguished educator managed to convert both possible sources of danger into reality. As he spoke sonorous phrases, the clouds became blacker. Soon the rumble of thunder formed a Wagnerian background. Unfortunately this man misinterpreted the thunder for a rumble of applause, and he girded himself for a new attack on his subject. His delayed termination insured the hasty granting of degrees while the rain fell, and it also necessitated the most heavily populated 100 yard dash in the history of the University.

Thus I guarantee my awareness of the circumstance in which we find ourselves, and I have no ambition to speak definitively. For a few moments I would like to share with you some speculations about the future - yours and mine. Please excuse me for comparing ages to make a more important point. I have now about twice your years: when you reach my age our society will be facing the problems of the 1990's. Between now and then you and I have impressive work to do, related to four critical challenges.
First we must then be well on the road to the control of population, or we must be content with the Malthusian prediction of starvation. Our humanism will not tolerate the latter, and thus we must curb our growing numbers. It is true that increases in food production promises temporarily to limit starvation, but this blessing gives us only short years in which to reduce populations throughout the world.

Furthermore it is too easy to consider the population dilemma as one foreign to our society. But I doubt that one can argue successfully that the quality of American life will be improved through added numbers. Our cities burgeon, we zone our productive soil for residential use, we battle hopelessly against congestion on highways, in the air, in our parks, on our lakes. As we increase the benefits of affluence we find it more difficult to live easily in dense settlements.

If present trends continue, half of the people of our nation will live in three megalopolises by the turn of the century: one from Boston to Washington, a second from here to Pittsburgh, and a third from Sacramento to San Diego. Few can hail this prospect, with its attendant social difficulties, as a blessing.
Secondly, we must learn to live together in peace. The prospects of global war without question are so appalling that we cannot contemplate the resumption of any level of civilized society after full-scale nuclear attacks by major powers. Although we normally consider only the possibility of our nation so involved, we must remember that equally serious ramifications of fallout evolve from such attacks by other powers even if we do not participate directly. Finding peace will require a sophisticated mastery of technology applied to disarmament.

Perhaps also we cannot insure peace until we attain justice within our boundaries. The seeds of disorder more likely will be local than international during our time. It is at home where the real campaign for peace must begin. When it does, it must root out the causes for racial hatred. We may think now of averting the difficulties of a forthcoming hot summer, by no means assured, but it is difficult to see how we can go on this way for a quarter of a century without violent repercussions.
Finally we must learn startling things about education if we are to overcome the problems of congestion, learn to live at peace, and with justice. Despite our efforts thus far, we know surprisingly little about how to encourage learning, or how to motivate one to seek to learn. Yet we must rely upon education to change old attitudes and mould new ones if we are to improve our chances for a decent life.

These challenges you already understand. In convocations we have considered them several times during your four years. Many class discussions have explored fully their implications. The more important question is what any of us can do about meeting these problems of our time.

At this point one can only suggest advice. But if you are to contribute, I suggest that you consider three possibilities. First, do not accept a substandard of achievement. Aim high. Our lives are comfortable and will become more so. It is easy to be deluded into assuming that a lower standard is sufficient. Only you can know your own goals. If they are selfish, then your ambition will be geared to your desire to gain wealth or status, and for some of you these ambitions may not be great. But if you are fortunate enough to derive motivation from service to others, then the higher your aim the less-restricted will be your potential. If we are to overcome problems of poverty, we must summon industry, not indolence.
We need educators, public health doctors and nurses, economists, social workers and many other skilled specialists even to begin a program of population control.

We have been holding reunions during the last few days. These are occasions where it is natural to look backward. When you reach the age where this is a meaningful experience, you realize that some people have bargained away their lives for a return in human service that is too small. Those we admire are the people who have done more than you could have predicted for them.

The second possibility for you is to retain your curiosity for understanding new ideas. Those which have transformed the years since World War II into an age of change will be minified by those yet to come. You wonder why older people cannot understand the present. But the greatest danger for you is that you may not be able to understand the future. No one of us will unless he continues to seek new knowledge.
Your age will be dominated increasingly by technology. You have not yet gained sufficient insight to become leaders so you must continue to inform yourselves for the future. One of the difficulties peace corps volunteers face is that few of them are prepared to undertake tough, practical tasks. Tomorrow's tasks will be more baffling. It is possible, for instance, that lasers, plant genetics, and a variety of new surgical and physiological techniques could cause vast changes in human progress during the next two decades. But few of us are yet aware of these phenomena or how to utilize them constructively. We know enough about technological change to realize that either we control it intelligently or it will oppress us.

Obviously no one now knows how to live reasonably well in the world ten years hence. If you are to survive in a world of change, you must seek knowledge and understanding. Relaxation from the quest may be fatal to another chance, owing to the pace of progress. This will not be an artificial contest with careful supervision and reports of progress. Rather it is a quiet but desperate kind of race between you and the inevitable in life, where maturity emerges as the willingness to be one's own teacher, counsellor and critic.
Finally the world of technology requires those of us who are in the mainstream of life to maintain our humanity. The balance between knowledge and conviction cannot be found by chance or neglect. It requires that one ask why existence is possible and what can give it meaning. Thus we are brought to the question of belief.

The other day I took a rather long trip with a man who insisted upon telling me what he could not believe. He was opposed to virtually every traditional tenet I have ever known, and his discourse was rather astounding if measured in the intensity with which he refuted historic arguments. Finally I had a chance to enter the discussion so I simply asked him what he did believe. He was helpless at first to respond. After a few minutes he did admit with a smile that he had concentrated too much on destroying rather than on building.

It is difficult to construct a life of promise on negation. For some of you the familiar beliefs are satisfying and challenging. They are for me and I continue to seek truth within the framework of traditional religious beliefs.
But for others, these are not acceptable. If this is the case, I urge you to construct your own faith that will be viable in the difficult moments to come. You might try to do as Walter Lippmann did when he wrote *A Preface to Morals*. This gave him hope for a future which otherwise would have promised only discouragement.

Ultimately there come times in life when each of us is like the uninitiated Billy Budd. We yearn for the counsel of a wise captain. The captain is not at hand as a counsellor, and thus we seek a spiritual replacement for his presence. No one can produce that certainty for you, and yet life can hardly be complete without the guidance to determine what is just, reasonable, decent and beautiful.

It is the time for us to depart. Our experiences have been sometimes trying, often fruitful, sometimes inspiring, always for me stimulating. Please remember that Lawrence does not intend to forget us when we take our leave: the fellowship of empathy and concern continues. Rely upon us if you need us.

I am grateful for the chance to have been your President.