

THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

Commencement Address

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Time Magazine

St. John Arena

COLUMBUS, OHIO

August 29, 1975

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Members of the faculty and distinguished guests, trustees, long-enduring and long-paying parents who are here, and of course finally the two thousand or so graduates, most of whom are here this morning:

It's a great honor to come on this August and talk to you. You graduate under the baleful light of Sirius, which is known as the Dog Star, which gives us the name of "dog days." The Egyptians thought that that star was responsible for flooding the Nile. As you know, perhaps, the Romans said that dogs went mad in the streets during this season, in their civilization. In our times wars have begun in August, and September. "The Guns of August" by Barbara Tuchman is a book about the stupidities and the folly of men back in August of 1914 that plunged the world into that apocalypse. In my time, Hitler mobilized these armies to march when indeed the ground was dry and the weather fortuitous for panzer warfare. And last year, not all that long ago, I wandered in

Lafayette Park and on the front lawn of the White House and watched one of the most dramatic changes of power that the world has ever known, indeed the most dramatic that this nation has ever undergone, in which a president resigned, gave up the most powerful office that man has ever created.

This August the stock market is down 50 points, and even as I speak, Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz is loose in Columbus, Ohio.

And you, with your newly acquired wisdom and soon-to-be-acquired diplomas, are going out on August 29th. You must be quite special. At least you must be quite brave to have chosen this time to graduate, but I assume that you also have quite a sense of humor, and that is really my message this morning. I would like to talk to you about that.

It has been traditional for commencement speakers like myself to challenge each new class that comes along. My brief research into the history of the three or four thousand years of organized education is that there is no recorded incident wherein a graduating class ever followed that advice fully. I see no reason, however, to deny you that tradition, so I will indeed make some suggestions.

We need many things in this world certainly--you know that almost as well as I do, or your parents have wasted the money thus far. But I suspect that we need nothing so much as to recover our national sense of humor. And I would like to suggest to this class that you go in search of it.

There's no greater service, really, than to regain the American capacity to laugh. We did that all through our history.

I was reading just last night about some men who tried to define humor, and America, and the Experiment. In the Civil War, which perhaps remains our greatest trauma, there was a great well of humor. When brother fought against brother, people still somehow could encourage and nurture those small moments of human contact when there was laughter, good feeling and joy.

I remember my father, who went to World War I as perhaps many of your uncles or grandfathers or fathers did, and he said the mark of the American GI in France was that they laughed still.

World War II was filled with Bill Mauldin's cartoons--GI Joe and the ironies of war and how ludicrous the human situation could be and the necessity--if you were to survive in that environment--to laugh.

It has been my observation in these last twenty years of watching and writing about the men and women of power, that those who could laugh--those who had a sense of humor--were usually the most successful.

I detect in the writings about Thomas Jefferson, and in his own writing, a wry sense of humor and observation of the world around him. It induces a chuckle now and then. I read not long ago a little book called "The Crossing" in which George Washington was credited with turning the tide in the battle of Trenton. You all remember this picture

that was painted of Washington in the prow of the boat going through the icebergs on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day over the Delaware. Some historians credit that moment with saving this foundling republic. This historian suggested that the turning point came when General Gates, a rotund man, sat on one side of the boat and as George Washington looked down at his plump compatriot and saw the list, he said, "General, move your rear end or you'll swamp the boat." It is recorded, apparently, that this began a wave of laughter through the discouraged GI's. They figured if their commander had such a human touch, that maybe it wasn't all that bad.

I know the stories of Lincoln--some people didn't like them--but in the great trauma, the Civil War, he found this reservoir of compassion and feeling about his fellow humans and the suffering, and he could still laugh and tell stories.

And Theodore Roosevelt--Alice Roosevelt Longworth, his daughter is still around Washington. I remember the story of when somebody asked him about this irrepressible daughter of his and he said, "I can't manage the country and Alice at the same time."

And Franklin Roosevelt--many men in Washington still remember the booming laughter of Franklin Roosevelt. James David Barber, of Duke, points out that Roosevelt's predecessor, Herbert Hoover, could not smile in the White House. And that the White House usher in those days of tragedy never saw Herbert Hoover smile--the inability somehow to communicate with his fellow man through laughter, through a sense

of humor.

Truman is legendary for his good humor.

I liked John Kennedy. He was the second president that I knew, and I liked him, for among other reasons, his sense of humor. I remember the day that he announced that Robert Kennedy would be his attorney general, a controversial appointment, and he said, "I see nothing wrong with giving Robert some legal experience before he goes out to practice law." That endeared him to me. And I always remember the time that I wrote the little bit about Robert Kennedy becoming the second most powerful man in the United States. It happened to be that morning when the magazine came out that I went over to see President Kennedy. I'd been granted an interview, and when I walked in his office, he was on the phone. He put his hand up over the receiver, looked at me kind of scornfully and said, "It's Bobby. The second most powerful man in the world is on the line." He listened a bit more to the telephone call, put his hand over it again, looked up at me and said, "Bobby wants to know who No. 1 is."

Robert McNamara will tell you today that in the tension of the Cuban missile crisis, when these people did not know just what would happen, whether we would be engaged in nuclear exchange or not, that in these tense moments around the Cabinet Room, it was John Kennedy who somehow could come in and sit down among these men and make a small joke or cheer them with a laugh. That gave them the energy to go on in that time.

Lyndon Johnson was a funny man. Your sides ached after a couple of hours of his stories. But one of the tragedies

of Mr. Johnson was that he could not laugh at himself, which is an essential part of humor. I remember the time that he drove on the ranch ninety miles an hour and threw the beer can outside the window. He was president and we wrote a story about it. He was furious. I thought it was hilarious. He didn't. I remember when he graphically described his bull's sex life. We thought that was funny, apparently others didn't. I remember the time that he had his portrait painted by Peter Hurd, a noted artist, and when he walked in to view it, the president looked at Mr. Hurd and said, "It's the ugliest thing I've ever seen." Neither of those men thought that was funny but it occurred to me that there was some laughter in that.

Lyndon Johnson could make others laugh. How many stories? Someday perhaps, they'll be compiled. I always remember the time that we were discussing something, and he said, "Hugh, it's just like that fellow down in my old town of Johnson City. He said that he was going to join the army. And so he went to the recruiting officer, and the recruiting officer had one test. And he said, 'If you are out beside a railroad track and you looked up and one train was coming from one direction at seventy miles an hour, and another train from the other direction at eighty miles an hour, what would you do?' And the fellow said, 'I'd run and get my brother.' The recruiting officer said, 'How come?' He said, 'He's never seen a train wreck before.'"

Well, that helps sometimes.

The last tragedy of Watergate was that there was no ability to laugh, no humor, really in the White House.

It was a grim existence of men who were consumed by hate and fear, and somehow when things should have normally brought a joyous response, they could not laugh at them, or they could not find fulfillment in them--Mr. Nixon and his men. Indeed the only successful man--and I recognize there are different opinions on that--of this last era is Henry Kissinger. Sometime maybe you'll be able to read about his devices in diplomacy and how he used humor in an effort to establish contact with the men he negotiated with--Brezhnev, Podgorny, Le Duc Tho, it didn't matter.

When he saw that these men were grimly working themselves into a corner, probably where they would be unable to extract themselves in these negotiations, he would try to change the subject. He tells the story about sitting across the table in Moscow from Marshal Grechko, a huge, towering man, six foot four, who is the defense minister of the Soviet Union. They were discussing a complicated formula of missiles and submarines and nuclear warheads. It was getting quite tense, and Dr. Kissinger thought he would change the subject--somehow bring them around and mellow things up--so he tried humor. He said, "Marshal Grechko, I have a good idea. Why don't you take your SS9 missiles--which, incidentally, are about as big as this building--why don't you take those missiles and put them on your submarines and then when you fire the missiles you'll sink the submarines and you can build new ones...ha, ha, ha."

Dr. Kissinger looked up at Marshal Grechko. There was a thin blue line where the smile should have been, and there was no more comment. Kissinger changed the subject. Two

days later he was standing on the airport ramp beside Marshal Grechko and suddenly he felt a big elbow in his side. Marshal Grechko leaned down and said, "Dr. Kissinger, we are going to put those SS9 missiles on our submarines...ha, ha, ha."

Apparently, says Dr. Kissinger, the Politburo voted to laugh. Humor has even penetrated to the internal mechanism of the Kremlin these days.

But what is humor? Charles Chaplin, a master at it, said, "It is a kind of gentle and benevolent custodian of the mind, which prevents us from being overwhelmed by the apparent seriousness of life."

I talk about humor and laughter, and you know as well as I do that it rests on something else--it's only possible if you have those other things. It comes from knowing. It comes from knowledge and understanding the absurdities in life that are there (and there isn't much we can do about some of them.) It comes from humility. Dean Acheson, the former Secretary of State, once said, "Men should take their jobs seriously but not themselves." Public men, that is.

Laughter, the ability to laugh, comes from wisdom. Some writer has said that laughter comes from a balanced mind and the courage of truth.

Clifton Fadiman said humor proceeds from a wistful affection for the human race. William Shawn, of the New Yorker, worried a few years ago that the young people have no time for laughter now--it takes time, it takes thought. The ability to laugh comes from confidence in one's self, from love of life, from hope.

Finally, you could say that humor comes from depth of character. In other words, it boils down to the same qualities that we have sought for all of these years. But somehow we lapsed.

One of the things that impresses me from my vantage point of being able to see men of power in big events is that finally it all leads back to the small human increments that we all know, whether it be in Vienna, where Kennedy negotiated, or Helsinki, where Ford was, or Peking, or any place. Men, women--others in power--make decisions based on what they know and what they are, so that the search for a national sense of humor finally comes back to you.

I frequently tell the story about standing on the Great Wall of China and being kind of overwhelmed along with Mr. Nixon by the sense of history and antiquity that that represented. And we gazed across the mountains with that wall marching over there. And then when we were done, we came down, and there was Walter Cronkite with his microphone. He thrust it in front of Mr. Nixon and said, "What do you think?" And Mr. Nixon looked up and said, "Well, a Great Wall is a great wall." I guess anybody is apt to do that. But there it was, one man kind of overwhelmed and these were the words that he had, and maybe they weren't memorable, but that's what happens finally in many instances in all events.

So, the search for laughter is rooted in knowledge, and intelligence, work and compassion, forbearance, and courage.

I wish you long life and much laughter. Thank you.