

ADDRESS BY THE VICE PRESIDENT -SPIRO T. AGNEW
OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY COMMENCEMENT

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Plutarch once quoted a rational appeal by Augustus Caesar at the outset of an address to a young and impatient audience:

"Young men," said Caesar, "Hear an old man to whom old men hearkened when he was young."

The quotation is powerful, if for no other reason than its recognition that there is a time to speak and a time to listen -- for both youth and age.

Today your kind invitation brings me here as a speaker -- not a "know it all," but a frank advocate of the American system, who seeks only your thoughtful appraisal of his case.

Your generation is not the first youth who ever questioned the efficacy of a custodial generation. You are not the first to aggressively challenge the fundamental values of a society. Such challenges are normal, proper, and the basis of human improvement.

We are not in turmoil because of your testing. We are in trouble because my generation has apparently failed to define and defend either its achievements or its inheritance from past generations of Americans.

A society which comes to fear its children is effete. A snivelling, hand-wringing power structure deserves the violent rebellion it encourages. If my generation doesn't stop cringing, yours will inherit a lawless society where emotion and muscle displace reason.

A society which looks calmly into the logic or illogic of its youths' anger and ambition, accepting the rational and rejecting the immature, is alive. Ask yourselves which kind of society you want for tomorrow -- tomorrow when you are the establishment.

My purpose is not to castigate youth nor discuss why the generations differ. They differ mainly because they develop consecutively, not concurrently. My purpose is to point out the case for American democracy and to challenge you to determine whether the advantages all Americans enjoy would have developed outside our free and enterprising system.

This nation was founded upon two great concepts -- liberty and equality of opportunity. Our total political system has been structured to secure these precepts.

Our Constitution -- the world's oldest enduring document designed to create a free and open society -- guarantees a government by laws, not men. The individual is protected by its dimorphic thrust, extending civil rights on one hand and exacting civil responsibilities on the other.

The history of this nation is a lesson in the advantages of political freedom. A government formed with lofty purpose and the overall constitutional objective of human dignity has not run from the revelation of its hypocrisies but struggled ever upward to match deed with word. Hard changes have been made

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because right is more important to us than convenience. We know that real liberty means not just an equal opportunity to be equal, but an equal opportunity to be superior if one possesses the stuff of which superiority is made.

The record shows that human progress marks our history. We have not cowered before great contests. We have lost some, won many. Over the past centuries, slave labor and child labor and unfair labor practices have been outlawed. Discriminatory laws and invidious discriminatory practices have been repealed, overruled or abandoned.

All is not perfect. The purpose of our Constitution is not to promise perfection, but to establish a more perfect union. Happiness is not a universal condition among us. Our Constitution does not guarantee happiness. But ours is the only Constitution pledged to "the pursuit" of it. Our Constitution does not guarantee perpetual equality but only the vigilant maintenance of the opportunity to be equal or to excel.

Two centuries of a people's high dedication did not result from rhetoric but recognition that this country does offer the best way of life.

Democracy is above all a highly pragmatic system. It assumes truth is neither revealed nor absolute but arrived at through experience and open debate. It assumes all men have equal rights to publish their views and to affect their destinies. It assumes the more education society gives to its citizens the better the chance that they will hold enlightened views, pursue truth more perfectly and make individual and collective choices more intelligently. Enlightened views, truth and intelligent choices breed progress.

Admittedly, no political system is perfect. Democracy's greatest flaw rests in its intransigent commitment to individual freedom. When social change depends on persuasion, rather than coercion, it comes slowly.

Totalitarian systems might deserve a higher mark if efficiency -- not liberty -- is considered the purpose of government.

The meteoric rise of Nazi Germany is an example of sometime totalitarian efficiency. Yet its success was short-lived. For one fact about tyranny is inescapable -- as long as men serve masters not of their choosing they will struggle by any means to unseat them. If they succeed through force, chaos will ensue. There is neither progress nor civilization in chaos.

Winston Churchill has said it well: "Democracy is the worst form of government, except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time."

Even democracy is shaded by variances. American political democracy has retained its economic counterpart -- a free enterprise system. Some successful democracies have opted for differing degrees of socialism.

The free enterprise system is perhaps the most arduous route, for it demands the greatest initiative from the individual. In my judgement, our results reveal rewards which justify that effort.

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Socialism consciously creates economic equality by leveling the peaks rather than raising the valleys. A relatively equal income distribution may be artificially achieved. But in all too many cases, individuality is sacrificed and mediocrity becomes the standard. The right to excell is quashed by destroying the reason to excell. When security supplants excellence as the principal target, the goal of social planning is reduced to the lowest common denominator. In the absence of high goals and great dreams life becomes frustratingly drab and preoccupation with self gradually destroys the moral fibre of a country.

The free enterprise system is not without conscience. Its social goals envisage elevation of the valleys -- bringing all to higher levels. Competition, not legislation, must be the principal instrument of achievement. Individual success is considered the foundation of social progress.

We believe that, just as truth and wisdom are the products of freely competing ideas, higher living standards for all result from competing economic forces.

The facts give confidence to our convictions. America discovers more, produces more, earns more, possesses more and invests more than any nation in the world. Our young people are better educated, our elderly better cared for, and our impoverished better served.

This has not been the result of a single volcanic revolution. It has evolved through the perpetual orderly revolution which is embodied in the routine functioning of our political system.

I have lived half a century. Perhaps our accomplishments during my lifetime furnish a reasonable test of progress.

The breaching of scientific barriers has been phenomenal. I can remember when Charles Lindbergh landed his single engined "Spirit of St. Louis" in Paris. Now I look forward to America's lunar landing next month.

The computer, the transistor, television, jet planes, radio astronomy, the laser, and nuclear energy were developments of the past fifty years.

In the last twenty-five years alone, mankind has acquired more scientific knowledge than in all of previous history. Ninety per cent of all the scientists that have ever lived and worked are alive at work today.

Life expectancy has increased; infant mortality decreased. The dread diseases of polio, typhus, malaria, measles, small pox, pellagra and rabies have been virtually eradicated.

America's ideas on social progress have made dynamic advances. In the year of my birth, the overwhelming majority of Americans thought that government had no business in business; that government could not prevent abysmal depressions or sky-rocketing inflations; that government might protect its people from war but not from poverty in their old age, ill health or inadvertent unemployment.

Today, we take for granted social security, unemployment insurance and medical assistance programs. We use the federal monetary system to stabilize the national economy. We have a Security and Exchange Commission to safeguard investments and a National Labor Relations Board to protect the rights of labor and management.

This year, this state alone will confer thirty-four thousand undergraduate degrees. This approximates three-quarters of all undergraduate degrees conferred in the United States fifty years ago.

Changes did not occur overnight, but progress that in the past took generations has been telescoped into decades and years. Reform in most cases has come peacefully and legally.

There is no reason to believe that this pattern of persistent and ever accelerating progress will not continue . . . no reason unless the vision of America changes.

There is great danger in confusing growing up with growing old. As America matures she need not grow old. Her vision need not become dim, nor her focus myopic.

I am reminded of a saying of Cicero:

"For as I like a young man in whom there is something of the old, so I like an old man in whom there is something of the young; and he who follows this maxim, in body will possibly be an old man, but he will never be an old man in mind."

I see no end to progress so long as there is freedom for every voice to be heard and every idea to compete.

I see no end to progress so long as successive generations test new leadership, new ideas, new purpose in the arena of free choice.

I see no end to progress so long as Americans refuse to accept either physical or spiritual barriers in this country, world and universe.

Right now we have a choice. Will we treat all that is wrong with America as a challenge . . . or an indictment? Will we attack these problems or just weep over them? Will we condemn our institutions or correct them? Will we repudiate democracy because it moves slowly or revitalize it so its pace quickens?

The answers are far from self-evident. The jury is still out. I trust that the ultimate response will be positive. I trust that Americans understand history well enough to see in our imperfect past the promise of a more perfect future.

I trust we will not permit selfishness to narrow our vision or fear to corrode our confidence.

Today, we must decide anew whether to be bound by the illusory barriers of the past or to explore the potential of limitless boundaries in space, under the sea, and in human understanding.

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This nation, I assure you, is not too poor in resources to meet this challenge. The question remains whether this nation is too poor and timid in spirit to test itself against all the perils of majestic undertakings.

The question remains as to whether the summation of a recent British study of the United States is right or wrong . . . it said: "The American people have lost the will to be world leaders."

The answer rests with all the American people and particularly with the new Americans represented by the Class of 1969. I pray your answer will be affirmative and your response strong.

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