

Spring 1953

## 35th Commencement Address

Earl J. McGrath

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.conncoll.edu/commence>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

McGrath, Earl J., "35th Commencement Address" (1953). *Commencement Addresses*. 49.  
<https://digitalcommons.conncoll.edu/commence/49>

This Speech is brought to you for free and open access by the Office of Communications at Digital Commons @ Connecticut College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Commencement Addresses by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Connecticut College. For more information, please contact [bpancier@conncoll.edu](mailto:bpancier@conncoll.edu).

The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author.

## THE FREE MIND IN THE FREE WORLD\* \*

Commencement Day is a day of fresh beginning. It should be a happy occasion. To be sure, that happiness is mixed with an element of regret, even of sadness, as the graduate leaves Alma Mater and commences a new life. Friendships knit through four years of close association are severed, and it is highly improbable that all the members of this class will ever appear at a single reunion. Nevertheless, in a few hours, as you scatter, you will take with you rich memories of your associations here as the most deeply rewarding prize of college life.

At the same time the achievements which this day represents give it a special and richly satisfying meaning. Each of you knows well the effort you have put into your academic life here, and the progress toward maturity which is now to be marked by the conferring of a degree. You have enjoyed a rich experience here at Connecticut College, both in the classroom and elsewhere on the campus. The high hopes of parents who have sacrificed to see their daughters finish college will be fulfilled as they go forward to assume their responsibilities. But the real accomplishments of students and parents in their common effort to reach this day successfully will, in large part, be measured not by the honors and degrees conferred today but by the verdict of the years ahead. It is to those years that I turn.

When they look into the future there are some who see no rosy promise. Indeed, it has been the custom in recent years for commencement speakers to paint with somber colors. For my part, I do not share the gloomy outlook of the Jeremiahs of our day who mournfully declaim the declining future and see only darkening clouds on the horizon. To be sure, there is little justification for a happy-go-lucky optimism; but there is a middle ground of

---

\*Address by Earl James McGrath, former U.S. Commissioner of Education, Washington, D.C. at 1953 Commencement, Connecticut College, New London, Connecticut, June 7, 1953.

of realistic hope which is as far from Jeremiah as it is from Pollyanna. Let us look realistically for the hope of this world into which the Class of 1953 goes.

In the first place, we ought to recognize the rich opportunities of life which await college graduates this year. In terms of material rewards and the comforts of life, the graduate of the American college in 1953 will enjoy benefits, and will look into a potential future, quite beyond the dreams of any generation of men and women anywhere in the history of mankind. Life in the United States today is full, rich, and ample, judged by a standard of comparison chosen from any earlier period in our history, or from conditions in other lands. For example, graduates who are reasonably well equipped will have no difficulty in finding gainful work, and on the average they can be much more choosy than their fathers or mothers. There are limitless possibilities in vocational choice and advancement. A large percentage of men will have to serve in the armed forces. But even they will find, as a Secretary of the Army has pointed out, that for the college graduate there is a great variety of specialities within the Army that prepare a man for the same type of occupation he hopes to follow when he returns to civilian life. And though it is too early to be sure, we all hope that the recent encouraging signs of a change of policy in the Kremlin with regard to a truce and eventual peace are genuine. If so, in the years ahead let us hope that most young men will not have to give up years of their lives in military activities, and that they may be able to enter upon the normal activities of civilian life soon after graduating.

But for the average American citizen our potential for better living is great. Because of advances in business and industry, scientific developments, and the productive capacity of the individual, the material comforts of life in America, when all the people of the nation

are considered, surpass anything in the world today, or in history. In spite of the fact that too many Americans still do not have many of the things necessary for the elementary satisfactions of life, we have better health, more education, more comfortable and attractive homes, more food, and more entertainment than any other people. To appreciate how well off we are in this respect one has to travel in the so-called underdeveloped areas of the world, or read a book like "Behind Iron Walls," a description of life in India. Here millions live in danger of starvation, in humble quarters, often a whole large family in one room; their work is often hard, dreary, and unrewarding; they have little chance for education with its many benefits, and many spend their lives in recurrent sickness and die young. Our nation has only one-tenth of the population of the free world -- outside the Soviet orbit; yet this one-tenth of the population produces one-half of the goods of life. Materially speaking, the life which the 1953 graduate enters upon is not a gloomy one.

But along with these matters of money and homes, of food and clothing, of recreation and leisure, of health and the happiness which comes from doing your job well -- along with these material satisfactions of life there are others. No nation more than the United States needs to realize the simple but everlasting truth that a man can gain the whole world and lose his soul. If I may be permitted to speak of a nation having a soul I can focus your attention for a few moments on several matters which I think the graduates of this class will have to be aware of, if we as a nation, and the other free nations, are not to lose our soul.

I spoke a moment ago of the free world -- of the peoples who have not been embraced by the grasping tentacles of Communism. These people, even those who do not share the material satisfactions that are ours, are blessed with the rewards of life in a free society. By contrast with the compulsions

of life under the Soviets, the freedoms which we enjoy are rich, full, and satisfying. None of us needs to fear, as he lays his head on his pillow tonight, that before sunrise there may be a rude pounding on the door, an officer of the state to hurry him off without explanation into some concentration camp. Every one of today's graduates is free to choose his own line of work and to find employment to his own liking and talent ---without the necessity of a pass or permit from some commissar. The door of no church has been closed by government edict, and clergymen may speak as their consciences dictate. No newspaper has yet felt the tightening strictures of a state censorship which in totalitarian countries today selects, distorts, and suppresses the news in order that the peoples' minds may be shaped to the purposes of the governing few. No padlocks now bar the doors of our meeting halls. No accused person is denied the right of a trial by his peers. These freedoms, dearly bought by our ancestors in other lands, and by our fathers here on this soil, are ours to enjoy as naturally as breathing and walking.

For that reason I fear we have come to take them for granted, not stopping to consider their priceless value and how unbearable life would be without them. These are the things without which no amount of good food and fine clothing and big houses and full bank accounts would suffice.

These satisfactions cannot be enjoyed except by free people in a free world. And free people are only those who can think freely. This is amply demonstrated by the behavior of suddenly freed peoples who have long been subjugated. Under restraint or slavery the mind becomes incapable of discriminating judgment, and the will incapable of decisive action. Liberation then brings not freedom but chaotic disorganization.

An interesting example of this inability to enjoy political freedom was related to me by one of our officers who, soon after the close of World War II, attempted to establish democratic practices in the American Zone in Germany. One officer told how a German national complained about being asked to vote for the local Burgomeister, or mayor, because he said he was just a simple man who didn't know about such things and shouldn't be making decisions about the qualifications of the mayor of his town. Such an official, said he, should be appointed by his superiors. In the same vein the Rector of Gottingen University in Germany told me that when students, after the close of the war in 1945, were invited to discuss public issues and university policies, few cared to do so. They had lost, or more likely, had never acquired the art of democratic discussion and freedom of thought. Their minds were not free. Their Nazi teachers, and even those of the Kaiser's day, had not attempted to cultivate free minds to live in a free society.

Now what is a free mind? To explore this question fully would require a book, but for the purposes of this discussion I would describe it as a mind which seeks new intellectual, emotional, and spiritual experiences, and when confronted with these experiences examines them critically and rationally. Instead of retreating from new ~~experiential~~ problems or avoiding decisions, a person with a free mind welcomes each new experience with eagerness, and with a sense of the importance of understanding as fully as possible the events of each succeeding day. Such a person explores, reflects, and reasons. He reorganizes his thoughts and reaches conclusions. As he goes about this intellectual activity he recognizes the limitations of his own mind and experience. He is therefore restrained and humble in his judgments, seeking always greater understandings and fuller truth concerning the nature of the world and of man.

He recognizes preconceptions, prejudices, and emotional disturbances as enemies of sound thinking. From these too he must be free. He views a new idea, even though he doesn't think well of it, with a certain detachment and suspended judgment until its merits or limitations may be rationally explored. The founding fathers of this Republic were certain that the thoughtful consideration of national and personal problems in a democracy was the only sure basis of our free way of life.

Those who have had the advantages of higher education are under the obligation to be intellectually honest and self-disciplined. Especially are college graduates under obligation to protect the rights of free speech, press, and inquiry on which their own independence rests. And most especially, the college graduate has a moral duty to protect the rights of others to these same freedoms.

There is a sense today in which the protection of these rights and freedoms is the most important duty of the patriot. I believe the threat to our democratic freedoms, to the society which they sustain, and to the national well-being which they nourish, is very much greater from ideological assault from outside the country and from needless restrictions on our liberties at home, than from a military attack by the totalitarian powers.

I am one who believes that the danger of subversion by Communists within the nation is very real -- not merely subversion which is a prelude to military victory, but subversion of the basic freedoms which are the essence of our democratic life. Known Communists ought, therefore, to be excluded from government, industry, education, and other positions of responsibility. I would exclude them especially from teaching because of all occupations in a free society, the most essential in enabling each successive generation to possess its own mind in freedom is the teacher. This the closed mind cannot do; and no man or woman who has accepted<sup>as</sup> his own the dictates of the Communist dogma can lay claim to freedom of the mind.

Having said this, I want to add most emphatically that we must not permit our legitimate concern over the possibilities of Communist subversion to make us a nation of informers and witch hunters, suspicious of every unconventional thought or word we detect in a neighbor. We must not let suspicion poison our minds or undermine our confidence in our fellow Americans. Loyalty is not necessarily measured by conformity - not among free men.

We should be concerned about the fears which have begun to dominate the thinking and the actions of our people, especially those in academic circles. One who senses the pulse of the nation's educational system knows that many a teacher who formerly spoke his mind freely now holds his tongue lest someone misinterpret his innocent remarks.

Teachers especially, and I know there are some in this class, have a great responsibility to help our young people to learn to think-- to analyze what they see and hear. There is an increasing habit among our people to use cliches, epithets, and outright bad names about their fellow citizens. Usually these attacks are thoughtless; sometimes they are vicious. It is becoming the habit, instead of listening to a fellow citizen and trying to understand and reason with him, to dismiss his point of view by calling him a name, by giving him an unsavory label.

This custom is practiced by liberals and conservatives alike. If a person proposes a plan for improving our social order well within the American tradition, he is often called, by Conservatives, a Communist, a pink, or a subversive, though he may understand Communism better and detest it more thoroughly than his accuser. Likewise, some liberals look upon every person who wishes to reduce government spending and bring our taxes within the limits of our ability to pay as a selfish, heartless materialist. Education should prepare the minds of students to reject this name-calling technique which involves no thinking, but instead its very opposite --prejudice and obscurantism. Let us teach our



youth to appraise ideas and issues on their merits and in the light of the best knowledge available in the interest of the general good. In so doing we will gain in wisdom as a people, and we will ~~reserve~~ mutual respect in our citizenry. This is the American way and the way of free men everywhere.

Given a generation, or even a few years, when the teacher and the student are unable to seek and to learn the truth as they see it, and this nation will lose its freedom and its soul. This is only one example. Likewise, if the other means of maintaining the free mind such as freedom of worship, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, are seriously impaired or destroyed, the United States we have known will have gone. The Communists will have won their victory. They will have transformed us into good totalitarians. It is the duty of all of you to act the parts of free men and women defending our basic freedoms and exemplifying them in your lives.

Only as we all strive to exemplify the free mind in our daily lives, trying to think seriously and honestly about our domestic and international problems, can we hope to have the kind of free life that our fathers have enjoyed in this land. Only as we continue to stand as the symbol of freedom to the many nations of the world in a less favored position than we, can we expect them to rally to our banner and join their material and their spiritual resources with ours in the present conflict. We can gain more world support by our example of the practice and defense of liberty than by our economic and military assistance, necessary as these may be.

Contrary to a common impression, foreigners and many Americans, too, who come into the Port of New York are not so overwhelmed by the skyline of huge buildings which stand as the symbol of our material success and our physical power. No, as one comes up the Bay into the harbor the object which makes the breath come faster, the heart pound, chills the spine, makes a lump rise in the throat --this is the Statue of Liberty which symbolizes our dedication to truth

and to liberty and to the freedom of men whatever class, color, creed to think their own thoughts, express their own ideas, worship their own God, earn their own bread without arbitrary interferences from their fellow citizens or their government.

Whether this kind of society can be preserved at home and inspired abroad in the quarters of the earth where it does not now exist largely depends on you and your contemporaries now graduating from colleges and universities. You have been given the intellectual equipment which the free mind needs to understand these things and if this generation stands firm in the defense of these freedoms at home and abroad, a golden age will be in the making. This responsibility takes priority over all others for -- let me return to my original theme --if you do not do these things, but occupy yourselves with the solely material things of life you will not only lose your freedoms but your comforts as well. Our people have in the past chosen the right values. I am sure this generation will follow in the great American tradition.