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President Ames' 68th Commencement Address

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Connecticut College

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

Long ago, it was traditional for every college president to give a course in moral philosophy for the senior class. All that seems to have survived of that tradition is the baccalaureate sermon, in which a year's work of moral philosophy is supposed to be compressed into one address. When I sat down to try to do this, my word processor gave me an error signal.

Your senior year has coincided with a very special one for the College. We've had the opening of the Humanities Center, the attainment of our \$30 million campaign goal almost six months ahead of schedule, and the celebration of the College's 75th Anniversary. This year we paid more attention than usual to Connecticut's history and, as one usually does in studying history, found some important messages. One that stands out for me can be summarized in a single word, commitment.

I have reflected often this year about the commitment of those individuals whose vision and hard work have brought the College to where it is today. Think back, for example, to Mr. George S. Palmer, Chairman of the College's Board of Trustees in the early 1920s, whose involvement and generosity gave us the old Palmer Library. And now the Blaustein family's commitment to the College has given the building its new life. The College's history is about volunteers and donors, about trustees, alumni, friends. It is also about faculty members, administrators, and staff, many of whom probably saw their work here not as a job, or even a career, but as a calling. And it is very much about students, including yourselves, whose involvement in the College community has strengthened it over the years.

What we have been celebrating, then, are the contributions of vision, support, and work that have made the College grow.

I suspect that during the last week, you have been looking back over your Connecticut College experience. I've been thinking about that too and about the education of earlier classes at the College. One common theme, ever since the first class, that of 1919, is that preparation of students for lives of involvement in their communities and in public affairs has been among the College's highest educational goals. People here have always believed that a liberal education is the best preparation for a life of service to society, and I think Connecticut College does this especially well.

Such an education takes place not only in the classroom, but outside it as well, through participation in the life of the College community, and in the life of the larger community of which we are a part. We see in the history of the College that this has been a tradition from the very earliest years. The Anna Lord Strauss Medal, awarded each year at Commencement for service to the local or college communities, is one way we have of saying that such commitment is highly-valued at Connecticut. The active role of student government is a fine example of involvement, and so is the work of those who serve as volunteers in community agencies. The list should include housefellows, and those seniors who work in the Admissions Office, and those who worked on Telefund over the past two years to raise over \$2 million for the College; the list goes on.

In the last few years, you and other students have become more involved in various social issues. I think of the work of society organized against racism, of your concern about South

African investments, of "School to Escuela," of the great hunger clean-up, of the letters on Nicaragua by some students and faculty, which were published in The New York Times. All of this and more has been an important part of your education.

In 1968, social activism in America was far more intense than it is today. In his Pulitzer prize-winning book, Common Ground, J. Anthony Lukas writes about three American families in the period following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. A member of one of them, Colin Diver, was a third-year student at Harvard Law School and a member of the Law Review. He had an offer from a prestigious Washington, D.C. law firm, but was so affected by the loss of Dr. King that he turned down the job and took one instead at a much lower salary working for an assistant to Boston's Mayor Kevin White to help achieve racial integration in the City.

Such decisions were made often in those years, but after the Vietnam War ended, we didn't hear about them so often. The attitudes of students entering college reflected the change. You may remember a questionnaire you filled out at the start of your freshman year. All over the country each fall entering freshmen complete those questionnaires. Some of the questions probe the values they hold and ask about their life goals. Since 1974, the values which have grown most in importance are: being very well-off financially, being an authority, having administrative responsibility for others, and obtaining recognition. Those values which have declined most in importance in this period are: developing a philosophy of life, participating in community affairs, cleaning up the environment, and promoting racial understanding.

Not long after reading about these trends, I discovered a remarkable book called Habits of the Heart. Written by the sociologist Robert Bellah and four colleagues, and published last year, it explores the theme "individualism and commitment in American life." The authors' concern is that while individualism has always been a part of the American ideal, and has been a driving force in the nation's growth, it may now be too strong a feature in our national character. What society needs in greater measure is civic involvement and commitment to its communities.

This concern has its roots much further back in history. In the 1830s, the French social philosopher, Alexis de Tocqueville, published Democracy in America, a study of our society in which he noted that family and religious life, and involvement in local politics all combined to make our democracy work. But he also recognized the special role of individualism in American life, and he warned that our freedoms might not survive if people were not held together by traditions and communities. In speaking of the mores of our people he sometimes used the phrase "habits of the heart."

One kind of individualism we read about in Habits of the Heart is that of people who, above all, want to get to the top, to compete successfully, to do better in their work than anyone else. Their satisfactions come more from winning than from the intrinsic value of what they do. Often things go sour for these individualists; they wake up one day asking themselves about the meaning of their work.

The authors aren't advocating that we take it easy, though. Let me quote from a section of the book:

"Undoubtedly, the satisfaction of work well done, indeed 'the pursuit of excellence,' is a permanent and positive human motive. Where its reward is the approbation of one's fellows more than the accumulation of great private wealth, it can contribute to what the founders of our republic called civic virtue."

The book speaks of "autonomous individuals," those who make choices without guidance from a set of beliefs and values that are widely shared. It points to the major role of the therapist in society, and suggests that therapy, in addition to the good it does, may also contribute to our autonomy, our isolation. Why? Because so many people conclude from therapy that right is what makes them feel right. There is no reference to a higher moral order for them, no sense that they should find direction in their lives from religion or the traditions of our nation and communities.

One of the great traditions that the book reminds us of is the "republican tradition," the gift, especially, of Thomas Jefferson. He told us that for democracy to work, the people would have to be involved. He said: "I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves..."

Jefferson, if he were alive today, would be urging us to learn as much as we could about such issues as arms control, environmental protection, or the problems of underdeveloped nations, and then to find ways of doing something about these issues. Basic to his philosophy was the idea that the people must be committed to making democracy work.

Now commitment of this kind is not something that limits our freedom; it should not be seen as a duty in the negative sense of the word, but rather as a way of enriching one's life. And by the same token, commitment to some organization, or to one's community doesn't tie one down; it brings the very highest form of reward. To say that a sense of duty is why Colin Diver, the third-year law student, chose the lower-paying job helping to achieve racial integration in Boston, misses the point that this was the job that gave the greatest meaning to his life. His sense of social responsibility led him to a calling - not just a job - that set him free as no other work could.

The liberal education you have gained at Connecticut College has been a preparation for following in the tradition that Thomas Jefferson gave us, and for using your talents for the common good. I have mentioned some of the ways in which extracurricular life contributes to that education, but it has been your professors, the reading and thinking you have done, the papers you have written, and the discussions you have had with fellow students that have mattered most. You have learned about human nature, about the best in your own culture and in others, and about the institutions of society. You have thought about questions of value. You have learned, through history, how people have improved the conditions of their lives and advanced their societies. In learning how to read and think critically, how to make an argument and how to judge the validity of one, and how to express your ideas, you have gained the freedom to go out into that "real world" and make it a better place for us all.

At the end of Habits of the Heart, the authors write: "We will need to remember that we did not create ourselves, that we owe what we are to the communities that formed us, and to what Paul Tillich called 'the structure of grace in history' that made such communities possible."

Our celebration this year of Connecticut College's 75th anniversary is a celebration of a college community and of all the people who have made it what it is. Each of you will find communities to commit yourselves to, and whether you are involved professionally or as a volunteer, whether you are working as the editor of a paper, or helping a local arts organization, I hope that you will know the tremendous rewards of that work.

Oakes Ames

Message to Graduates
May 26, 1986

Newly elected members of the Connecticut College Alumni Association. As you go forth from this community and into your new adventures, remember what has meant the most to you - the experiences that were most valuable, the people who challenged and supported you. Remember the teachers, deans, and members of the staff whose commitment and dedication to the work of the College makes this a very special place. Remember the satisfactions and rewards of your involvement in the life and growth of the College.

You will soon be focussing much of your attention on starting careers. One of our wishes for you is that you will find meaning and deep satisfaction in what you do, that you will value your work because in some way it is improving the quality of life for others.

As liberally educated men and women you have the very best preparation to be active in public affairs and to contribute to the welfare of your communities. Busy as you will be in advancing your careers, we hope you will find the time to commit yourselves to worthy causes and projects, and that you will find such involvement highly rewarding.

As liberally educated men and women you must continue learning about the major issues of our time and find ways to make your voices heard. Never hold back because you doubt that a single voice will have an effect. If people don't speak out, our democratic way of life is threatened.

Go forth from this lovely place with confidence that what you do will make a difference. Go forth with ideals and with hope. You have much to give, and it is urgently needed.

Stay in touch with us; we want to hear about your progress.

Good luck!