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Commencement address

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COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

By OTIS A. SINGLETARY

This might well have been a more enjoyable occasion for all concerned had events made it possible for me to stand before you this afternoon and repeat once more the general pleasantries and bland reassurances that have become the traditional stuff of the Commencement speech. In an earlier and less complicated time, your speaker might have satisfactorily fulfilled his obligations by congratulating you on your past achievements, by welcoming you into that vague and undefined realm which you have come to look upon as "real life," and by reminding you just how fortunate you are to live in the best of all possible worlds where day by day in every way things are getting better.

Unfortunately for both of us, the times simply do not permit such easy and comfortable formalities, and it would be an act of hypocrisy to utter again the old, soothing slogans. The fact is that you here today are completing your formal education and moving out to take your places in that larger world beyond the campus at a most peculiar time in our history — a time when this richest, most powerful, and most fortunate nation on earth is undergoing what a number of observers believe to be a crisis of confidence.

This loss of confidence is pervasive and has an unsettling effect upon us all. It permeates the vast middle class and grows out of our seeming inability to deal effectively with a large number of problems, both foreign and domestic. We are uneasy about the rising cost of living and annoyed by smog, traffic, and overcrowding. We are frightened by the ominous state of race relations, by crime in the streets, and by the specter of inflation. We are disgusted at each new disclosure of corruption in public places, fearful of the growing tendency toward centralization of power, and appalled by the blunders of the bureaucracy. Above all else, we are troubled, confused, and divided over the issue of Vietnam. From all sides one hears expressions of anguish and

doubt about our foreign policy, our military policy, our educational system, the poverty program, the future of the two-party system, and just about everything else. Everything seems to be wrong or wasteful or venal. One national magazine debates the question "Is God Dead?" Another, not to be outdone, asks "Is Dodd Dead?" We read in the national press that the American automobile is unsafe, that the American bathroom is out-of-date, and that American universities are in open revolt. And all the while the stock market flutters and fluctuates as though the country is on the verge of going broke. While a stranger coming among us for the first time might think we were insane, the truth is that we are living in an age of intense self-criticism — an age of contrast and paradox. It is not an easy time to live, but it is an interesting time to be here.

Amidst all this uncertainty and confusion, it is perhaps inevitable that when national attention turns toward the contemporary college student the same kind of lack of focus, the same kind of distortion that occurs in so many other instances operates here. And, indeed, it does; for the unflattering image that has won widespread public acceptance is that of a generally unkempt, bearded, long-haired, sandal-wearing rebel who, when there is nothing in particular to demonstrate against, concentrates his energies and interests primarily on sex, dope, and burning his draft card. That this image is a distorted one, that it is inaccurate, that it is in fact a caricature, that it is by no means representative is a matter of concern to a number of persons, myself included. Out of this concern came my decision to use this occasion to say some things that need to be said to this society about you.

First of all, I would like to emphasize the point that image reading is at best a risky business. This is so not only because images are essentially superficial but also because they change with unsettling rapidity. Not very long ago, for example, college students were being described as "the silent generation," "the found generation," "the careful generation," "the generation without heroes." You were described as being preeminently concerned with and interested in success, prestige, money, power, and security. You were thought to be self-confident, assured, and relatively content with things as they were. You were said to be unabashedly self-centered and, because of this egocentrism, remarkably ignorant of the world in which you

lived. There were complaints that you were job seekers rather than wisdom seekers, and that you were interested in grades rather than in intellectual development. You were uninterested in organized activities of any kind, had positively rejected the Joe College image of an earlier era, and could be counted upon to meet your obligations even though you would occasionally (repeat occasionally) rebel against established authority.

Now, I ask you, does anyone here recognize today's student in this portrait that is less than ten years old? I most certainly do not, and the reason is clear. For whatever else has happened in this past decade, the American student has undergone a transformation. He has passed from a more or less static pose to what has been described by a contemporary as "involvementism." In this transition, the old desire to withdraw from society, epitomized by the rather pitiful beatnik movement, has been replaced by a much more aggressive desire to become reconnected with society and to participate freely in shaping the future of that society. I believe this is the basic and fundamental change that has taken place, and we must understand it if we wish to understand this generation of students.

In the second place, I would issue a word of caution to those who tend to indulge in oversimplification when classifying the new student activist. To suggest that all students are alike, or even that all student activists are alike, is to seriously misread the situation. There are, in fact, a number of distinct types of activists whom I will arbitrarily classify under three headings: the alienated, the nihilists, and the reformers. Let us look briefly at each group.

The Alienated. This group of activists is made up of those young people who have grown or are growing apart from their society. They have no particular program or goal, but are not infrequently found in support of causes sponsored by others. It is in this group that most of the "hippies" are found. They generalize and sloganize about such things as Peace, Love, Freedom — and their summum bonum is to be "turned on." They have a contempt for the Establishment which grows naturally out of their contempt for society. They are not organized in any formal sense and are indeed difficult to manage even when they voluntarily support a cause of one of the more aggressive

groups. They are for civil rights and "pot" and are against Vietnam and the draft. Their group lacks cohesiveness, but their unconventional attitudes, dress, and personal appearance receive an inordinate amount of publicity. Obviously, they have had a great deal to do with fixing the image of the current generation.

The Nihilists. At the other end of the spectrum is this smallest of activist groups, the hard-core revolutionaries who are really anarchists at heart. They have a program but it is essentially a negative one: to destroy the existing order, whatever that is. They have little time for fun and games and pursue their purposes with single-minded dedication. They are both tough and smart and are therefore particularly difficult to deal with. Their outlook is basically destructive and is reflected in such goals as "grinding the machine to a halt." They are extremists who are not given to compromise or negotiation and who feel that their destructiveness is justified by the need to clear away existing institutions and attitudes. They see themselves as an elite group — the most "in" of any "in group." They have power and influence on campus far greater than their numbers would indicate. They are a potentially dangerous group, because their aims and objectives are not widely recognized or understood.

The Reformers. In between the two others lies this largest single group of student activists with two distinguishing characteristics. In the first place, they are not necessarily in revolt against "the system" as such. They tend to mount their protests over a specific issue, or combination of issues, including but by no means restricted to civil rights, Vietnam, the underprivileged, or that most ancient of foes, the administration. Secondly, they seek specific reforms and are normally willing to work for these changes by means of discussion, persuasion, and debate. In short, they have limited and identifiable objectives, which they seek to accomplish by means that are generally accepted by society. The reformers are not uncommonly a force in student government and more often than not control the student newspaper. They do not participate in *all* demonstrations but rather tend to be selective about their activities. They are frequently clean-shaven and wear conventional clothing. But they, too, regard the Establishment as less than perfect, are militantly opposed to the concept of *in loco parentis*, and are deeply concerned about student participation in the educational

process. They have wider and more diverse interests than either the alienated or the nihilists.

My guess is that the public seriously overestimates the number of students in each group. In one of the earliest studies of student unrest (Petersen, ETS, 1964-65), it was estimated that activists constituted a very small minority of student bodies (ranging from eight or nine per cent protesting campus regulations down to about four per cent expressing concern over questions of academic freedom and tenure for faculty members). A 1966 study, sponsored by the American Council on Education and involving approximately a quarter of a million students in over 300 institutions, found that only fifteen per cent had ever participated in a demonstration of *any* kind. There is fairly general agreement that the hard-core group, the nihilists, comprise no more than one or two per cent of the student population. Whatever else these figures mean, they clearly point out that the current public image of the college student has been projected by a relatively small group of students.

My third general point has to do with student behavior. Just as there are different kinds of students, so are there different kinds of behavior and these, too, need to be sorted out. We might do well to remember Shakespeare's wise words in *King Lear*:

"All's not offence that indiscretion finds
And dotage terms so."

Not all student activity, not even all student protests are necessarily bad or, for that matter, necessarily wrong. Nor are they always capital offenses, with global implications, requiring some form of massive retaliation or retribution. Some discernment is both necessary and desirable if we wish to avoid the kind of overreacting which inevitably takes place when we mistakenly assume that all student protests are unwarranted or that all student activism is intolerable. The truth of the matter is that only some of these activities are intolerable. Some are merely annoying. Some are downright legitimate. And, I would add, there is little excuse for not knowing which is which.

Among the activities which I would classify as intolerable are such things as the corruption of the Free Speech Movement into the Filthy Speech Movement with its limited vocabulary of four-letter

words. Or the big to-do about dope. I think most Americans (including most students) applauded the public stand recently taken by one of our most prestigious institutions that any student on that campus who did not know that the use of narcotics was both illegal and dangerous was too stupid (yes, that was the word) to be allowed to continue to waste a space which many another deserving (and presumably less stupid) student would like to have. These, and the other activities which are offensive to it, society simply will not tolerate. The same rule applies, I think, to disruption for the sake of disruption. Such activities are antisocial. They should, are, and I predict will continue to be dealt with firmly and decisively.

A second type of behavior is annoying rather than intolerable. A recent survey provided some statistics on one kind of conduct which is unsettling to the older generation: 53 per cent drink beer (only 48 per cent admitted they prayed); four out of ten gamble; one in five admitted to having cheated on an examination; more than half claimed to have attended all-night parties.

Still another kind of conduct is annoying in its triviality. Let us briefly review some of these publicized undergraduate activities which have occurred in the past few years:

Student competition in setting records for the maximum number of persons to be packed in a telephone booth or in a small foreign car;

the establishment at Union College of a new world record of 83 minutes and 30 seconds for keeping a cigarette lighter aflame;

a telephone talkathon that lasted 504 hours by nearly a hundred students at California Polytechnic;

the swallowing of 57 goldfish by four Fordham students, reviving a popular campus cultural activity of the thirties;

an endurance contest in seesawing by some 80 students at Miami University (Ohio) that lasted 144 hours;

the completion of a 168-mile basketball dribble by students at Wayne State University;

the first intercollegiate elephant race, participated in by students from 16 institutions of higher education on a California oatfield suitably named Dumbo Downs and won by Sonita, a four and a half ton entry carrying a young man decked out in the crimson of Dear Old Harvard!

Now the trouble with these activities is not that they are illegal but that they are so overwhelmingly trivial. And the danger involved is not the threat of arrest and jail so much as it is the threat of forfeiting the respect of thoughtful persons everywhere.

In addition to those activities which are either intolerable or merely frivolous, there is another category that ought to be mentioned: those protests which are clothed in legitimacy. When students demand

that their educational experience be made more relevant and meaningful to the modern world, in general, and to the social and human concerns of their generation, in particular;

that there be a more authentic and more personal relationship between the teacher and the taught;

that the social regulations governing their conduct be reexamined and liberalized and that they be given responsible freedom in the area of their personal lives;

that they be allowed *some* voice in determining policy within the institutions where they live and work;

when students demand these things, they are voicing legitimate demands about legitimate concerns in our society.

What I am saying here is that at its most serious level, student unrest and discontent reflect a failure of the academic community to meet the needs and expectations of some very good, very bright, very serious students. And I predict that in this area their protests will in all likelihood produce some results, particularly improved undergraduate teaching and revision of the undergraduate curriculum. In short, I am saying that some student protests are not only legitimate; they are also likely to bring about some changes long overdue.

Let me emphasize here that I am saying *some* protests and *some* changes. Certainly not all that is being demanded by students reflects either wisdom or maturity. Let's face it: your generation has its quota of exhibitionists, fanatics, and just plain fools. Every generation does. I am not arguing for deference to nuts and cranks. I am arguing for a balanced view of today's college student. This balanced view would point up the following facts: More than half expect to run their own businesses; one in four wants to be a community leader; nearly half plan to obtain graduate or professional degrees; one in five wants to join the Peace Corps or Vista; the most important single objective voiced is the laudable one of "helping others who are in difficulty."

To these facts I would add my personal, admittedly subjective observations. Although you are in revolt against the irrelevance, anonymity, and impersonality of campus life, you are more keenly aware of the complexities of modern mass society and the limitation of the human condition than college students used to be. It is not just a coincidence that the symbol of the Berkeley troubles has become a photograph of a young man wearing a placard saying: "I am a student. Do not fold, spindle, or mutilate."

Although you appear to be casual in speech, dress, manners, and conduct, you have been serious in your search for self and meaning and you have properly asked yourselves the difficult questions: Who am I? Where am I? How did I get here? Where am I going?

And although you have had something less than absolute respect for your seniors and their society, you have at the same time been better informed, more aware, more serious-minded about yourselves and your education than any other generation I know anything about. You have, for all your antics, been *more deeply concerned* about serious matters than my generation ever thought of being, and I think it ought to be made a part of the public record.

Now having said these things about you to your society, I want to reverse the situation and say a brief word to you about your society. My comments might come under the general heading of "a word to the wise." If I read the signs correctly, patience is stretching very

thin and the feeling is growing perceptibly that if you want and expect to be taken seriously, then you must begin to act more responsibly than you have of late. Even your friendliest critics feel that the time has come to call a halt to much of the nonsense on campus, and demands are becoming more insistent that hoodlumism, boorishness, obstructionism, and anarchy must go.

You are guilty of many of the sins you protest. The denial of free speech to others does not materially strengthen your claim to sincerity or consistency. The right to free expression is as much a right of Secretary McNamara or General Hershey or Governor Wallace as it is of a college student. Rudeness and heckling to prevent someone from speaking are acts that give credence to the caricature of one critic who puts these words into a student's mouth: "But we're not for free speech for the speaker. We're for free speech for ourselves. ... This is still a democratic country and we have a right to prevent anyone we want from speaking."

Another story making the rounds has to do with a successful protest movement in which the students overthrew the administration and took over the job of running the institution. Within a very short time the newcomers tendered their resignations, complaining that they couldn't stand dealing with students.

There is a feeling abroad that you might well reexamine some of the sweeping generalizations which have become part of your gospel. There are real and difficult problems loose in this world, and not many of them are likely to be solved by slogans such as "Abolish the Board" or "You can't trust anyone over thirty" which are, in reality, substitutes for thought rather than examples of thinking.

Most of all, thoughtful persons have a gnawing concern about the growing disrespect for law and order. They sense a danger to the social fabric in the "scofflaw doctrine" — that an individual has the right to pick and choose among those laws he will obey and those he will disregard. Civilized society has always required individuals to subordinate personal preferences and desires to the common good, and there is no defensible reason to exempt college students from these necessities.

As for your campus life, it is generally conceded that you are, and should be, entitled to the best education that the institution can provide, but there are several points you might bear in mind. First of all, students have no inalienable right to dictate the terms of their participation in the academic community. Secondly, while freedom of thought is absolutely essential to liberal education, freedom of personal behavior is not. Rules and regulations can and should be altered as the occasion demands, but it does not follow that rules and regulations have no place on campus any more than it is true that the academic community consists *only* of its student members. Thirdly, you might make some effort to understand this complex thing of which you are a part — the modern university. You should understand its unique place in society, have some appreciation for its mission and function, and develop a clearer picture of your own relationship to it. You should be aware of the fact that you are privileged to participate in the affairs of an institution which is engaged not only in the dissemination of knowledge but also in the application of knowledge and, indeed, the creation of new knowledge. Get to know something about a university and you will discover that it is, in reality, many things. It is a *moral* enterprise in the sense that one of its aims is to strengthen and improve society. It is an *intellectual* enterprise in the sense that it is an agency for the discovery and transmission of knowledge. It is a *human* enterprise in the sense that it is, at its very best, a community of teachers and learners. As has been observed before, the university is not a perfect institution; it is only the best that we have. And it deserves better from some of you than it has been getting.

But enough of this. Let me conclude my remarks this afternoon by returning to the earlier theme of confusion and paradox in our time. I would suggest that the critics of American society may be overdoing things a bit; for while their vision is accurate, it is also limited. What the critics fail to see is that we live in a time of very real accomplishment. If there is more pessimism in print today, it is no less true that there is more optimism in person than in any other country in the world. If there is news of cruelty and indifference, there is also ample evidence of goodwill and kindness. If there is more talk of materialism and cynicism, there is also much evidence of idealism. If there has, indeed, been a Watts and a Harlem, there is also a transformation in race relations going on.

What I am suggesting to you is that, despite the clamor and confusion, we *must* be doing some things right. More is being done about schools and slums and farms than at any other time in our past. We, as a people, have never been more prosperous or, for that matter, more generous with that prosperity. We have never been more concerned than we are today about education or social justice or civil rights. We have never been more seriously engaged in trying to bring some kind of decency and order into the world.

What is really happening is that we are attempting more and, I would argue, achieving more. But we sometimes fail and concentrate, as if it were a national characteristic, on what is wrong to the exclusion of what is right. My point is that national images are no more reliable than student images.

Now it becomes my pleasant duty to extend to each of you the congratulations and best wishes of those of us who are considerably over thirty. Please know that it is our hope that, as you leave this campus and take your places in this increasingly complex society, you will look at it as it deserves to be looked at — critically, responsibly, and with perspective. You might even discover that you are indeed “a citizen of no mean country.”