

Remarks of James Russell Wiggins  
at the Commencement Exercises at  
University of New England

May 23, 1982

Mr. President, members of the faculty, friends of the graduates, members of the graduating class of 1982:

We gather here today for a celebration. We meet in an atmosphere of rejoicing. We who are not members of the graduating class of 1982 are here to congratulate those of you who are members of that class. You have completed some 16 years of consistent application to the purpose you today achieve. Few of you, in your lifetime, will apply your talents, your gifts, your energies to a single purpose over a longer period of time. It is not what you have done of course but what you will do that gives this occasion the title of a commencement. So we look back on what you have done with praise but also look forward to what you will do with confidence.

What you will do and can do may be much influenced by the world in which you are going to work. And only a veritable pollyanna would dare tell you, "all's well with the world". But it may help you a bit to recall that this isn't the first time a generation has faced an uncertain world.

The gloomiest contemporary today could hardly exceed the pessimism of Tacitus who wrote of the reign of Galba: "We now

(2)

enter the history of a period, rich in disaster, gloomy with wars, rent by sedition, and savage in its very hours of peace. Slaves betray their masters, freed men their patrons, and he who has no enemy is destroyed by his friends".

The Nuremberg Chronicle, that Fifteenth Century summary of things past and things to come, professed to contain: "events most worthy of notice from the beginning of the world to the calamity of our time", and it divided all history into six ages. When it came out on July 12, 1483, it left only six unfilled pages on which to record events from the date of printing to the Day of Judgment. They were confident the wretched world of the Fifteenth Century was about to end.

There is an astonishing, almost a depressing contemporary note in the gloomy Eighteenth Century statements of Reverend Samuel Williams, of Salem, Massachusetts, who wrote in his Discourse on the Love of Our Country in 1775: "Throughout the whole continent of Asia people are reduced to such a degree of abusement and degradation that the very idea of liberty is unknown to them. In Africa, scarce any human beings are to be found but barbarians, tyrants, and slaves: all equally remote from the true dignity of human nature and from a well regulated state of society. Nor is Europe free from the curse. Most of her nations are forced to drink deep of the bitter cup. And in those in which freedom seems to have been established, the vital flame is going out. Two kingdoms, those of Sweden and Poland, have been betrayed and enslaved in the course of one year. The free towns of Germany

(3)

can remain free no longer than their potent neighbors shall please to let them. Holland has got the forms if she has lost the spirit of a free country. Switzerland alone is in the full and safe possession of her freedom".

Successive generations of mankind have each emerged in a world where danger prevailed. George Antrobus, the indomitable hero of Thornton Wilder's SKIN OF OUR TEETH, summed it all up. He emerged from the ruins of civilization to cry: "I know that every good and beautiful thing in the world stands moment by moment on the razor edge of danger, and must be fought for whether it is a field, a farm, or a country".

The world of today, like the world of George Antrobus, is a world of trouble and terror, where every good thing must be fought for if it is to survive.

One of the things that must be fought for is democratic government. The fight for democracy, in your time, in my opinion, is going to be a fight to keep it from destroying itself by its improvidence. Franklin Delano Roosevelt once said that every liberal government in history had been wrecked on the rocks of loose fiscal policy. That is a menace that the decades since he came to office have multiplied. Kingman Brewster, longtime president of Yale and ambassador to Great Britain, a few years ago warned that democratic governments everywhere are menaced by the power of elected representatives and officials to spend the public funds for direct benefits to voters. There seems to be no way to stop politicians from promising benefits that exceed the amount

(4)

that can be raised by taxes. The result, everywhere, is debt and inflation — more than a hundred percent inflation a year in some countries.

In the last decade, members of Congress have literally drained the U.S. Treasury to make payments directly to citizens in a hundred entitlement programs. Social Security payments in ten years have risen from 26 billion dollars to 119 billion dollars. Medicare has risen from 6.7 billion to 38 billion. Civil service pensions are up from 2.7 billion to 17 billion. Many people blame our trillion dollar debt on defense spending, but defense spending gets only 5 percent of the gross national product while non defense spending has risen from 10 percent to 18 percent.

The Social Security Program is one illustration of the typical behaviour of politicians. The Old Age and Survivors program presents a history of steadily rising benefits. This country can afford a system to ameliorate the hardships of the indigent or disabled aged; but it is doubtful that it can or should subsidize premature retirement of the able bodied, or distribute to the well-to-do aged subsidies paid for by the working young people and middle aged. Any suggestion that such subsidies be diminished brings floods of crocodile tears from the political office seekers, even though they know their reckless votes are bankrupting the system. Sooner or later, some of these benefits are going to have to be cut — even if the cuts mean that some of us old duffers are going to have to give up our second yachts or our annual trip to Florida.

(5)

President John F. Kennedy stood on the podium at the East Front of the United States Capitol at his inauguration on Jan. 20, 1961 to call for a more unselfish citizenship. I can hear him now on that bitter cold January day, crying out to his countrymen in that speaking cadence that became so much admired and so well known: "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country". We who were there all heard him and applauded; but in the years since we have not responded. We have continued to ask what the country can do for each of us. And our congressmen and senators have responded by piling subsidy on subsidy and grant on grant until they produced double digit inflation and a trillion dollar debt. That it seems to me is your generation's chief domestic problem.

We all know what our chief foreign problem is. It is constantly on the mind of every thinking person. It is the threat of nuclear war. A few weeks ago I flew from St. Paul to Boston and looked down upon the great heartland of America where reside the continent's greatest industrial production, some of its most beautiful plains and hills and valleys, its mighty cities with their soaring towers of commerce, its great factories, and its fertile farms. As I looked down upon this veritable garden, with the lazy cumulus clouds drifting in the sky, I could not put from my mind the thought that one day, the clouds might be very different clouds - towering mushroom like clouds of nuclear explosions. In the wake of those explosions there would remain only a sterile, radioactive desert. Few would live and the few who lived would envy the dead.

(6)

It is to avoid that dire calamity, threatening the very survival of man as a species that we must exert our intelligence and ingenuity. It is not going to be easy to chain the beast that science has loosed upon the world. We cannot buy our immunity by the sacrifice or surrender of all our ethical, social and political values, any more than Carthage bought peace with Rome by its supine submission. If we were reckless enough to choose to be red rather than dead we might yet find ourselves both red and dead, as the Cambodians have. We must somehow avoid turning the planet into either a radioactive cinder or a world-wide Gulag Archipelego.

Since 1947, the only significant progress we have made in controlling nuclear weapons has been the air test-ban treaty. But now, hope rises again with the prospect of the upcoming negotiations between the Soviet Union and the United States on nuclear arms reductions. Somehow or other, we must look to the banning of the manufacture, possession or deployment of nuclear weapons. A reduction of one-third in nuclear warheads, proposed by the President would be at least a start toward that end.

People in this country are overwhelmingly agreed that we must put an end to nuclear war. We are not agreed on how to do it, and there is a danger that we may become so divided over the means to that end that the danger might be even increased. Your generation must guard against that kind of dissension. You must be warned against the quick fixes, sharp technical tricks, and compromises and evasions of political rhetoric. Quick fixes will not do. This will be the major issue of your generation — and

(7)

one of which the survival of mankind may depend.

There are some other little problems lying around. We will deal with them at another time and another place. It is sufficient for today to say that you will not lack for problems. It is comforting to know that you are of all American generations, the most educated, the best educated, the most expensively educated. Now you go forth to use that education in behalf of yourselves to be sure, but more, we trust, in behalf of your country.