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The Quest for Excellence

by Wade H. McCree, Jr.
Lewis W. Simes Professor of Law

These remarks were addressed to the Honors Convocation at The University of Michigan last spring. In speaking to those students who have excelled academically, Judge McCree stressed the vital importance of such accomplishments to our nation. Public institutions which foster superior achievements play a crucial role, he said, in America's realization of democratic ideals.

Judge McCree, who served as solicitor general of the United States after having sat on the federal appellate bench, joined the law faculty at Michigan last fall.

John Maynard Keynes once defined education as the "inculcation of the incomprehensible into the ignorant by the incompetent." If we were equally cynical, my wife and I, might have regarded an earlier Honors Convocation, which we attended in order to exult in the achievement of one of our children, as the triumph of experience over expectations.

We are not cynics, however, and this convocation is too important to be dismissed by a few casual or flip-pant remarks. The University conducts this convocation because it recognizes the true significance of the high achievement of the students here assembled and because it wants to call to the attention of the other students here and to the attention of all the people of our state and nation just how important the pursuit of excellence is to our existence as a free and democratic nation.

Five years ago, John Silber, the sometimes controversial and always outspoken president of Boston University, wrote, "The only standard of performance that can sustain a free society is excellence." He continued, "It is increasingly claimed, however, that excellence is at odds with democracy; increasingly we are urged to offer a dangerous embrace to mere adequacy."

This is a familiar refrain, this fear of excellence, and its expositors sometimes brand the quest for excellence as the worship of "elitism," to which they give a pejorative connotation. Curiously, perhaps, many denouncers of academic excellence nevertheless insist on superior performances by our athletes, both amateur and professional. Nor will they tolerate anything less than excellent performance from our automobiles, electronic appliances, or any other goods and services that they might acquire.

Excellence is the only standard that can sustain our free and democratic state because it is our guarantee against the autocracy of birth or wealth. Neither of these purely fortuitous circumstances is a guarantee of excellent performance, and the list of significant contributors to our nation's development in science, the arts, industry, and government who came from humble origins is as long as it is distinguished.

A psychologist can doubtless give a reason for the chronic and sometimes hidden distrust of persons who

excel academically or otherwise in intellectual matters. There is no equivalent and widespread suspicion of outstanding athletes or of entertainers in other areas. Perhaps it is because people know in a profound and secret way that those who can develop and harness their intellects are the true Prometheans who have conceived the great developments that have brought humankind from the cave to our present state of grace.

The fear of excellence is coupled, nevertheless, with a sometimes grudging admiration. In times of crisis our nation turns for succor to the scholar it ignored or neglected in halcyon times. After October 1958, when the Soviet Union flung Sputnik into space and its repetitious beeping as it orbited the earth proclaimed Soviet superiority in space technology, we sought out and recognized our scholars to an extent that I had never witnessed before. American legislators at both state and federal levels vied with one another for primacy in channelling resources to our colleges and universities in an all-out effort to close the gap in space satellite technology.

Research, both pure and applied, was generously funded and we encouraged university attendance by appropriations for scholarships and other forms of academic assistance. These efforts were productive and resulted in our placing the first men on the moon, achieving a soft landing on Mars, launching the Voyager exploration of the outer planets, and deploying communication and weather satellite networks.

Unfortunately, our nation has not sustained that heightened interest in learning, and now, a quarter century later, we are witnessing the revival of the old assault upon education and excellence. Legislators, state and federal, hard pressed to balance budgets in a time of economic distress, have identified the education components of proposed budgets as the likeliest candidates for reduction or outright elimination. Particularly vulnerable are funding requests for pure research, the humanities, and the fine arts. These academic areas suffer from the absence of an organized and vocal constituency, and budget cutters unfortunately find an appreciative response when they refer to a liberal education as an expensive and expendable frill.

Last spring, the now-defunct *Washington Star* reported an account about a recent Wellesley liberal arts graduate who, after months of looking for work in the Capital City, finally obtained a job "just a notch above a secretarial position—offering little prospect of advancement." She complained, "Why didn't someone tell me it would be like this?"

The *Star* went on to observe, "A liberal arts degree is, after all, a luxury, when both men and women are competing for a limited number of careers in a changing world economy. It often costs, after all, more than \$10,000 a year for the pleasure of learning the inner workings of Jean Paul Sartre or the dark, political genius of a Machiavelli," the *Star* continued. Small wonder that legislators believe that they are trimming fat from a budget when they cut back on education's requests for funding.

One of the greatest tragedies of the apparent current Congressional program to curtail aid to education is that its impact will fall disproportionately on able children of families at or near the poverty level—children whose only hope of breaking loose from the poverty cycle is to avail themselves of financial assistance to attend great universities like this one. Instead of promoting democracy, the legislative levelers who denounce the quest of excellence as elitism are frustrating the operation of the one system that has enabled our nation to more closely approximate the goal of a classless society than any other on earth.

What a cruel hoax it will be to tell young men and women, many of whom were identified by affirmative action programs and brought to the very threshold of

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a university experience, that we have decided not to fund their loans or scholarships because money is in short supply and it is more important for us to build up our military establishment despite its existing capacity to destroy our planet and kill its occupants many times over.

In Michigan, as well as in the federal government, such a posture is a betrayal of our heritage. Every expression of our fundamental law from The Northwest Ordinance of 1787, which governed the territory out of which our state was created, to the current Constitution, ratified in 1963, has held that

"Religion, morality and knowledge being necessary to good Government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged."
(Const. of the State of Mich. of 1963. Art. VIII, sec. 1)

Surely, our leaders will not turn their backs now on that part of our past that has made our state a leader in so many significant areas of industry, science, the arts, and education.

We need no more technology that is designed to destroy; we can use new skills to conquer disease and to improve the quality of life. The mention of life

reminds me that Harvard's great biologist, Dr. George Wald, said, in a memorable address in March, 1969, . . . The carbon, nitrogen, and oxygen that make up 99 percent of our living substance were cooked in the deep interiors of earlier generations of dying stars. Gathered up from the ends of the universe, over billions of years, eventually they came to form in part the substance of our sun, its planets and ourselves. Three billion years ago life arose upon the Earth. It is the only life in the solar system. . . .

About two million years ago, man appeared. He has become the dominant species on the earth. All other living things, animal and plant, live by his sufferance. He is the custodian of life on earth and in the solar system. It's a big responsibility. . . . Our

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responsibility is with life, not death. Our challenge is to give what account we can of what becomes of life in the solar system, this corner of the universe that is our home and, most of all, what becomes of men—all men of all nations, colors and creeds. It has become one world, a world for all men. It is only such a world that now can offer us life and the chance to go on.

No truer words have ever been spoken. A French scientist said almost forty years ago that science had taught us to become gods before we have learned to be men.

We have no choice but to pursue excellence because nothing less can enable us to harness for good the forces that, uncontrolled, can destroy us all. We need to learn more about human nature. We need to learn why we behave the way we do as individuals and collectively. We need to be able accurately to forecast our economic behavior and the onsets of our aggressions and our conciliations. We must learn how to make our streets safe, as well as our seas and skies. We must do more than just collect data—we must understand them.

This is the pursuit of knowledge that we must undertake and the talisman that will guide us is excellence. We welcome you to its quest.