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"The Office of Citizen" by Kent G. Alm, Summer Commencement: August 11, 1979

Kent G. Alm

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COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS
UNIVERSITY OF NORTH DAKOTA
AUGUST 1979

PRESIDENT CLIFFORD, PLATFORM GUESTS, GRADUATES OF THIS SUMMER 1979
COMMENCEMENT, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN:

I WANT YOU TO KNOW, IN THE BEGINNING, THAT IT IS VERY MEANINGFUL TO ME TO BE ASKED TO COME HERE TODAY AS YOUR COMMENCEMENT SPEAKER. IT HAS BEEN NEARLY A YEAR NOW SINCE I RETURNED TO NORTH DAKOTA AS COMMISSIONER OF HIGHER EDUCATION. THOSE MONTHS HAVE BEEN GOOD ONES. PROFESSIONALLY SATISFYING, EXCITING, AND REWARDING. I AM GLAD I AM HERE AND I AM GRATEFUL.

AS I THOUGHT ABOUT WHAT I MIGHT SAY HERE TODAY THE THOUGHT OCCURRED TO ME AS IT HAS SO OFTEN THAT THERE IS VERY LITTLE NEW TO BE SAID UNDER THE SUN. ABOUT ALL THAT ONE CAN DO IS TAKE AN OLD IDEA AND ATTEMPT TO COUCH IT IN A NEW RHETORIC SO THAT THE IDEA ITSELF MIGHT EVEN SEEM NEW, AND SO THAT IS WHAT I AM GOING TO TRY TO DO TODAY. TO TAKE AN OLD IDEA AND COUCH IT IN A NEW RHETORIC.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, THERE ARE MANY, MANY PEOPLE IN OUR LAND WHO BELIEVE FERVENTLY THAT WE ARE RUSHING HEADLONG DOWN THE ROAD TOWARD A WORLD THAT NO ONE WANTS. THOSE PEOPLE WHO BELIEVE THAT POINT TO SEVERAL THINGS TO SUPPORT THEIR CONTENTION. AND THEY BEGIN WITH OUR SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS. THE FIRST OF THESE IS GOVERNMENT ITSELF. THEY BELIEVE GOVERNMENT TO BE AN UNWIELDY, UNRESPONSIVE, ARROGANT, AND EXPENSIVE BUREAUCRACY AND THEY FURTHER BELIEVE THAT IT WILL BECOME MORE SO. THEY POINT TO THE LACK OF PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN THAT GOVERNMENT AND THE FACT THAT GOVERNMENT MORE AND MORE INTERVENES IN AN EVER INCREASING WAY IN OUR DAILY LIVES. THE POLLS SHOW THE AMERICAN PEOPLES' CONFIDENCE IN GOVERNMENT AT A VERY LOW EBB.

THESE PEOPLE WHO SAY THAT WE ARE RUSHING DOWN THE ROAD TOWARD A WORLD THAT NO ONE WANTS POINT TO OUR SCHOOLS, NOT ONLY ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS WHERE THE LONG LITANY OF DISSATISFACTION HAS BECOME ALL TOO FAMILIAR, JOHNNY CAN'T READ AND HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS CAN'T SPELL, AND THE TEST SCORES ARE BECOMING INCREASINGLY LOWER AND GRADES BECOME EASIER TO ACHIEVE - BUT ALSO THEIR CRITICISM EXTENDS TO THE COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES WHERE WHY GO TO COLLEGE BECOMES A PERSISTENT QUESTION. COLLEGES ARE TOO EASY,

COLLEGES ARE TOO EXPENSIVE, COLLEGES DON'T PREPARE STUDENTS FOR ANYTHING, YOU DON'T NEED A COLLEGE EDUCATION ANYWAY. YOU ARE FAMILIAR WITH ALL OF THESE CRITICISMS.

AND THEN THESE PEOPLE POINT TO OUR HOSPITALS AS ANOTHER SOCIAL INSTITUTION WHICH, IN THEIR JUDGMENT, IS GOING DOWN HILL. TOO COSTLY HOSPITAL CARE, INADEQUATE QUALITY OF THAT CARE, MEDICAL COSTS ARE GENERALLY OUT OF HAND, AND SO ON. AND THEN THEY POINT TO OUR PRISONS AND THEY REFLECT ON THE DEPLORABLE CONDITIONS WITHIN THEM. THEY REFLECT ON THE BAD REHABILITATION RECORD, THE REPEATERS, AND THE HIGH COSTS OF MAINTAINING THOSE INSTITUTIONS OF INCARCERATION.

AND THEN THESE FOLKS WHO BELIEVE THAT WE ARE RUSHING DOWN THE ROAD TOWARD A WORLD THAT NO ONE WANTS POINT TO THE STRIKES IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR, STRIKES OF POLICEMEN, STRIKES OF FIREMEN, STRIKES OF TEACHERS, STRIKES OF GARBAGE COLLECTORS, STRIKES WHICH THREATEN THE VERY LIVES, THE VERY EXISTENCE OF HUMAN BEINGS, AND THEY SAY WE ARE RUSHING DOWN A VERY DANGEROUS ROAD.

AND THEN THEY TURN, IF THAT IS NOT ENOUGH, TO THE CHANGING LIFE STYLE OF OUR PEOPLE, AND THEY POINT TO THE BREAKDOWN OF THE FAMILY AS THE BASIC UNIT OF OUR SOCIETY. THEY POINT TO HIGHER DIVORCE RATES AND SMALLER FAMILIES, COUPLES LIVING TOGETHER IN INCREASING NUMBERS WITHOUT MAKING THE COMMITMENT OF MARRIAGE.

THEY SEE INCREASES IN CRIME AND DELINQUENCY - IN THE USE OF DRUGS AND ALCOHOL - AND BY AN EVER YOUNGER GROUP OF OUR CHILDREN, JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOLERS, AND EVEN CHILDREN YOUNGER THAN THAT.

ONE COULD GO ON AT CONSIDERABLE LENGTH WITH A LISTING OF TRENDS AND FORECASTS PERTAINING TO THE FUTURE, PERTAINING TO A FUTURE THAT NO ONE WANTS.

NOW I DON'T KNOW HOW YOU SEE THE KINDS OF THINGS THAT I HAVE JUST BEEN DISCUSSING. I DON'T KNOW IF YOU SEE THEM AS EXAGGERATIONS OF THE STATUS QUO, I DON'T KNOW IF YOU SEE THEM AS PRECISE DESCRIPTIONS OF THE CONDITIONS THAT WE FACE AND THAT WE ARE GOING TO FACE IN THE FUTURE.

I AM CERTAINLY NOT HERE TO CONVINCING YOU THAT THESE THINGS ARE TRUE OR ARE NOT TRUE, OR THAT THEY WILL HAPPEN OR THAT THEY WON'T HAPPEN.

RATHER, I'D LIKE TO SAY THAT THOSE CONDITIONS, WHATEVER THEIR DIMENSION, ARE NOT CAUSED BY THE RUSSIANS, THEY ARE NOT CAUSED BY THE

CHINESE, NOR BY SOME INVADING BACTERIA FROM ANOTHER PLANET. IN FACT, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, TO WHATEVER EXTENT THEY EXIST, THEY ARE CAUSED BY US - EITHER BY OUR ACTION OR BY OUR INACTION. THEY REPRESENT IN A MAJOR WAY THE THINGS THAT WE AS A PEOPLE EITHER WANT TO HAPPEN OR ARE UNWILLING TO MAKE AN EFFORT TO TRY TO CHANGE.

YOU KNOW, WE HAVE A SAYING IN BISMARCK THAT GOES LIKE THIS, "THAT WHICH THE LEGISLATURE GIVETH, THE LEGISLATURE CAN TAKETH AWAY - LONG LIVE THE LEGISLATURE." THE SAME PRINCIPLE APPLIES HERE - THAT WHICH THE PEOPLE CAUSE, THE PEOPLE CAN CORRECT!

NOW I STARTED THIS PRESENTATION BY SAYING THAT I HOPED TO TAKE AN OLD IDEA AND CLOTHE IT IN A NEW RHETORIC. THE OLD IDEA, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, IS THAT OF CITIZENSHIP, AND THE NEW RHETORIC I WOULD LIKE TO CALL THE OFFICE OF CITIZEN. YOU KNOW, WE USED TO BELIEVE THAT OUR RESPONSIBILITY AS A CITIZEN WAS TO VOTE AND THEN, TO LET THOSE WHOM WE ELECTED TAKE CARE OF US. THAT DAY IS PASSED! THE CITIZEN OF TODAY AND OF TOMORROW WILL HAVE A MUCH GREATER RESPONSIBILITY THAN THAT. HE OR SHE WILL HAVE THE RESPONSIBILITY TO HOLD THE OFFICE OF CITIZEN WITH ALL THAT IT IMPLIES. NOW, OF COURSE, THE KEY ELEMENT IN THE OFFICE OF CITIZEN IS THAT OF CITIZENS PARTICIPATION. AND CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IS A LOADED CONCEPT. IT CONJURS UP AS MANY DIFFERENT IMAGES AND EMOTIONS IN PEOPLES' MINDS AS DOES THE IDEA OF "OPEN MARRIAGE." IT EVOKES CYNICAL CHUCKLES FROM THE BATTLE-SCARRED NEIGHBORHOOD PLANNER, BLANK STARES FROM A PUBLIC ADMINISTRATOR, A VENGEFUL GLEAM IN THE EYES OF AN ORGANIZED GROUP OF CITIZENS, AND DOWN-RIGHT SHIVERS OF FEAR FROM A LOCAL ELECTED OFFICIAL. IT IS LOATHED AND LOVED, MANDATED AND DISREGARDED, ANALYZED AND EULOGIZED, AND NOT VERY WELL UNDERSTOOD. NEVERTHELESS, CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IS CURRENTLY BEING MANDATED AS PART OF THE DECISION MAKING PROCESS IN MOST FEDERAL AGENCIES AND PROGRAMS, AND MANY STATE AND LOCAL AGENCIES. STATES HAVE PASSED SUNSHINE LAWS REQUIRING THAT PUBLIC POLICY MAKING TAKE PLACE IN THE SUNSHINE, NOT BEHIND CLOSED DOORS. AND WHILE THERE IS STILL SOME STURDY RESISTANCE FROM THOSE WHO HAVE BASICALLY IGNORED THE WHOLE IDEA AS A PASSING FAD AND EXPECTED THE COMMOTION TO DIE DOWN AND FADE AWAY ANY YEAR NOW, FOR MOST THERE IS AT LEAST AN ADMISSION THAT CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN DECISION MAKING AND IN PUBLIC POLICY IS HERE TO STAY - DIFFICULT, FRUSTRATING, CONFUSING, AND NECESSARY. AND FOR SOME, THERE IS A GROWING RECOGNITION

THAT PERHAPS THIS WHOLE BUSINESS OF CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IS MORE THAN A NEW REQUIREMENT IN THE GOVERNMENTAL PROCESS FOR PLANNING AND DECISION MAKING, BUT IS, IN FACT, A NECESSARY ELEMENT IN THE ADAPTATION OF DEMOCRATIC DECISION MAKING TO A LARGER, MORE DIVERSE, AND BETTER EDUCATED POPULATION THAN EVER HAS EXISTED IN AN EXTREMELY COMPLEX, TECHNOLOGICAL SOCIETY.

I HEARD SENATOR JOHN CLUVER SPEAK IN THE KENNEDY CENTER NO TOO LONG AGO AND HE WAS TALKING ABOUT THE PROBLEMS OF PUBLIC POLICY. HE INDICATED THAT THOSE PROBLEMS WERE SO COMPLEX THAT THE PUBLIC POLICY MAKER COULD NOT POSSIBLY UNDERSTAND THEIR MANY FACETED DIMENSIONS. HE INDICATED THAT THE ONLY HOPE THAT WE HAD FOR THE FUTURE WAS IN AN INFORMED CITIZENRY. I WOULD LIKE TO ADD THAT IT TAKES MORE THAN AN INFORMED CITIZENRY - IT TAKES A CITIZENRY ANXIOUS TO PARTICIPATE, WILLING TO PAY THE PRICE, WILLING TO SACRIFICE, WILLING TO STAND UP AND BE COUNTED FOR THOSE THINGS THAT ARE IMPORTANT. ALL OF THOSE CHARACTERISTICS, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, THE CITIZEN WHO HAS THE KNOWLEDGE, WHO HAS THE UNDERSTANDING, WHO HAS THE ABILITY, WHO HAS THE INTEREST, WHO IS WILLING TO PARTICIPATE, IS WILLING TO SHARE, IS WILLING TO CARE, IS WILLING TO BE COUNTED, ALL OF THOSE CONSTITUTE THE QUALIFICATIONS FOR WHAT I CALL THE OFFICE OF CITIZEN.

Now I HAVE CHOSEN TO DISCUSS THE OFFICE OF CITIZEN WITH THIS AUDIENCE TODAY BECAUSE I BELIEVE IT SO DIRECTLY AFFECTS ALL OF US. FOR THOSE OF YOU WHO ARE GRADUATING, YOU ARE GOING OUT NOT ONLY TO MAKE A LIVING, BUT ALSO TO TAKE YOUR PLACE IN THE OFFICE OF CITIZEN. FOR THOSE OF YOU WHO ARE HERE AS GUESTS OF THE UNIVERSITY, FRIENDS AND RELATIVES OF THE GRADUATES, YOU ARE ALREADY PERFORMING TO GREATER OR LESSER DEGREES THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE OFFICE OF CITIZEN. I WOULD ASK YOU TODAY TO EXAMINE AND REEXAMINE YOUR ROLE AND YOUR POSTURE IN THE CARRYING OUT OF THAT TREMENDOUS RESPONSIBILITY. AND, OF COURSE, TO THOSE OF YOU WHO REPRESENT THE UNIVERSITY, ITS FACULTY, AND ITS ADMINISTRATION, I SHOULD LIKE TO SAY TO YOU, THAT YOU ARE IN THE BUSINESS OF PREPARING PEOPLE TO HOLD THE OFFICE OF CITIZEN. AND I AM NOT AT ALL CERTAIN THAT IF YOU TAKE SERIOUSLY THAT RESPONSIBILITY THAT YOU WILL CONTINUE TO DO THE THINGS IN YOUR PROGRAMS, IN YOUR CLASSROOMS WITH YOUR STUDENTS, THAT YOU NOW DO. THE UNIVERSITY HAS THE RESPONSIBILITY NOT ONLY TO HELP ITS FULLTIME STUDENT BODY PREPARE THEMSELVES TO HOLD THE OFFICE OF CITIZEN BUT ALSO TO HELP THOSE OF US WHO ARE NOT FULLTIME STUDENTS, WHO ARE CITIZENS, WHO ARE WAGE EARNERS, WHO ARE MEN AND WOMEN ON THE STREET TRYING TO DO THE JOB. THE UNIVERSITY HAS THE CHALLENGE OF HELPING US TO UNDERSTAND THE ISSUES, THE PROBLEMS, THE ALTERNATIVES, THE RATIONALS FOR THE KINDS OF CIRCUMSTANCES

THAT WE FACE AND WILL FACE IN THE FUTURE.

SO, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, THE CHALLENGE OF THE OFFICE OF CITIZEN IS ONE FOR EACH OF US AND ALL OF US COLLECTIVELY TO SERIOUSLY PONDER. I WOULD ASK THAT YOU DO THAT.

I HAVE ENJOYED VERY MUCH THE OPPORTUNITY TO BE HERE TODAY AND I WANT TO WISH ALL OF YOU WHO ARE GRADUATING HERE THE VERY BEST OF FORTUNE AS YOU GO FORWARD, NOT ONLY TO MAKE A LIVING, NOT ONLY TO RAISE A FAMILY, NOT ONLY TO BE A GOOD FATHER OR MOTHER OR A SON OR A DAUGHTER, BUT ALSO TO PROUDLY TO INVEST YOUR TALENTS IN THE OFFICE OF CITIZEN.

THANK YOU VERY MUCH.