

Commencement Address, Barton Hall, June 3, 1974

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Members of the Graduating Classes, Parents, Families, Members of the Board of Trustees, Members of the Faculty, and Friends:

In these days of "double digit" inflation, one of the cheapest commodities in the marketplace is still the commencement address. While copper tubing, gasoline, bread, and mortgage costs soar, and cost of living rates of ten, eleven, twelve per cent are quoted without the blink of an eyelash, you can still get a commencement address for free -- particularly in season, during May and June.

There are two reasons why inflation hasn't affected commencement. One is simple economics. There's a great supply -- every commencement must have an address -- and little demand -- commencement addresses only lengthen the ceremonies unnecessarily. The other reason is the law of the captive consumer. Most commencement speakers -- and this is particularly true of university presidents -- seldom get an opportunity to speak to such a large and captive audience. The principle is basically "hold off the degrees until I share with them my wisdom."

At any rate, you are about to hear a commencement address. Please delete your expletives.

We live in a sober era. More and more we hear that the year 1974 is only ten years away from George Orwell's "1984". And more and more, people are inclined to believe that perhaps Orwell was right and that the ugly new world which he set down in fiction might well become a reality.

E. B. White wrote in recent months of his impression of 1974. He said, "Meantime, along comes 1974, with the country headed downhill all the way -- trains not running, tides unharnessed, mails overburdened with duplicate copies of seed catalogues, Nixon suspected of wrongdoing, and movie companies luring youngsters to dirty pictures by putting an X on them. Downhill all the way. You can get your mind off it by building a wheelbarrow, but you can't change the direction without some drastic alterations. I'm not afraid of the human race's running out of energy, but I sometimes despair of its ever doing anything in a sensible manner." That was E. B. White, Cornell Class of 1921.

This day and age cries out for sensibility and for sensitivity. As a nation and as individuals, we must bring order out of the chaos which surrounds us by maintaining our integrity, by displaying our maturity, and by persevering.

The United States is approaching its two hundredth birthday. I hope it will be a happy birthday, but I'm not sure. Emeritus Professor Milton Konvitz tells us that Walt Whitman, writing in 1871, just before the nation's first centennial, surveyed the national conscience and said that "society in these states is cankered, crude, superstitious and rotten." We might take some consolation from the fact, as Konvitz has pointed out, that although much of what Whitman wrote for 1876 can still be read as relevant and true, certain important positive revisions need to be made. There are countervailing forces at work today which give us a basis for optimism as 1976 approaches.

John Henry Cardinal Newman tells us "in our height of hope, ever to be sober; in our depth of desolation, never to despair." Despair we must not and hope we must. But, we must also be realistic. We need a perception of reality which places on individuals the responsibility for social consequences.

To build confidence and hope, a society needs leadership, but it seems that suddenly the world is bereft of leadership. There are few, if any, heroes. Rabbi Arnold Wolf of Yale says that young people today admire most those whom he terms "the virtuosi of suffering". Those who should be the leaders and the heroes, those to whom we should look for examples are not setting the example.

During the October term of the United States Supreme Court in 1927, Associate Justice Louis Brandeis wrote a dissenting opinion in the case of *Olmstead v. United States*. In his dissent, Mr. Justice Brandeis said "Decency, security and liberty alike demand that government officials shall be subjected to the same rules of conduct that are commands to the citizen. In a government of laws, existence of the government will be imperilled (sic) if it fails to observe the law scrupulously. Our Government is the potent, the omnipresent teacher. For good or for ill, it teaches the whole people by example. Crime is contagious. If the Government becomes a lawbreaker, it breeds contempt for law; it invites every man to become a law unto himself; it invites anarchy."

Ironically, the *Olmstead* case involved, in 1927, the tapping of telephones by the Federal Government in an attempt to gain evidence in a case of alleged conspiracy to violate the National Prohibition Act.

Another Brandeis statement is of particular note today. He said, "The greatest dangers to liberty lurk in insidious encroachment by men of zeal, well-meaning but without understanding." It's the mission of universities such as Cornell to foster in the individuals whom they have educated the understanding and values necessary to the preservation of our society.

University campuses have frequently provided the warning signs of impending social crisis. Events and issues have surfaced on the campuses some years ago and are only now becoming apparent in other segments of society. Since the early '60s our students have been telling us that there is a moral crisis in America. The microcosm of student life foreshadows the macrocosm of society.

Just about a month ago, the Cornell Daily Sun ran an article dealing with the plague of food pilfering from University dining facilities. Apples, oranges, teabags, silverware and cups were pilfered, according to comments quoted by the Sun, "because it's there", or "to get my money's worth."

Does private immorality lead to public immorality? Is Watergate an aberration or is it an appalling symptom of our modern way of life? At the meat counter, the shopper is wary of packaging devices and lights which make the meat deceptively appealing. At the television repair shop, the auto service garage, the hotel or motel, one must be wary of sloppy work, work recorded but not done, or bills which have been padded. On the Cornell campus, one must keep close check on one's wallet, pocketbook, bicycles, books, jackets and on and on

through the litany of items which appear as stolen each day on the Safety Division's morning report.

Have we lowered our personal standards of morality to the point where public morality can result in national traumas such as Watergate? As Norman Cousins asked editorially when writing recently on the topic "Watergate and Main Street", "How can we impeach ourselves?" And Archibald Cox, speaking of the erosion of public confidence in government, has said that "under governmental institutions as democratic as ours the erosion means our loss of confidence in ourselves."

The dimensions of the moral crisis are of such magnitude that we are left with little enthusiasm to tackle anything which requires national unity and determination. The luster, the national drive to achieve, has faded. Not only have we as students, parents, educators, and friends of education suffered, but higher education itself has suffered. For example, the very commodity required to maintain this nation's self-sufficiency in the energy crisis is the development of high quality intellect at the most advanced levels of science, engineering, political science, economics and all the other scholarly disciplines. This intellectual commodity seems not to be valued in Washington. I fear paralysis as far as any kind of national action or national resolve or national ability to deal with hard problems is concerned.

You may be asking yourself, "What right do members of the academic community have to adopt such a 'holier-than-thou' attitude?"

I agree with the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education which said that members of the academic community should keep two things in mind: one is that they are not the only people in society with a right to evaluate society; and second, that they have not necessarily been endowed either with a higher sense of morality or the quality of better generalized judgment than other persons in society. Even with these qualifications in mind, however, the Commission, in its 1973 study of the purposes and performance of American higher education, said, and I agree, that "higher education does have as one of its purposes the defense of the right of, and provision of facilities for, evaluation of society, in its component parts and in its totality by its faculty members and its students in their individual capacities."

Therein lies the hope of the future -- in the University and in its students and in its graduates. From universities like Cornell must come the new visions, the new imagination which must uplift the American spirit.

Let me speak directly now to those of you who will receive degrees today. When Willard Straight -- that's the man, not the building -- founded "The New Republic" Magazine in 1914, he said it was intended "less to inform its readers than to start little insurrections in the realm of their convictions." I hope that your years at Cornell have started little insurrections in the realm of your convictions. For from such insurrections come stronger convictions and this nation needs men and women of the strongest conviction.

You leave Cornell on this beautiful June day at a decisive time, not only for your country and the society in which you live, but also for you personally. James Russell Lowell wrote in that long poem, "The Present Crisis", "Once to every man and nation comes the moment to decide, in the strife of truth with falsehood for the good or evil side..." The hope for the salvation of our society rests with you and the others in your generation. I ask you to make a choice. Do not let that choice, to use Lowell's words, go "by forever 'twixt that darkness and that light."

You must sustain society. Give it all the energy you have. Be understanding and respect others. Be compassionate, not arrogant. Never exploit or coerce. Be guided by both your conscience and your heart. In other words, live a moral life. I am certain you will and that we at Cornell can say of you what Charles Dickens said of Sydney Carton in "The Tale of Two Cities", that you are capable of "good things, great things, even magnanimous things."

Goodbye and good luck.