

Southwestern Louisiana Institute Commencement

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May 29, 1939
Lafayette La

President Frazar, Members of the Faculty, Members of the Graduating Class, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I deem it a great but undeserved honor to have the opportunity and the privilege of addressing the 1939 graduating class of Southwestern Louisiana Institute. For me it is also a keen personal pleasure to visit your beautiful campus, to view with pride the obvious physical evidences of the growth that this splendid educational institution is experiencing, and to bring you, on this happy occasion of your commencement, greetings from your sister institution - the Louisiana State University. In the life of a State or of a Nation thirty-nine years (the period of your academic history) is a comparatively short time, yet it is sufficiently long to permit appraisal of the value of any institution dedicated to the cause of higher education. Measured by its splendid record of accomplishment this Institute has more than justified the fondest expectations of those interested in its foundation. Yearly throughout its history, young men and young women have emerged from Southwestern to assume positions of leadership and responsibility, not only in this section of our beloved Southwest Louisiana, but throughout the entire State and even beyond its borders. Louisiana indeed has received an annual intellectual dividend upon the investment in education made in this institution. Under the leadership of your esteemed late President Stephens, Southwestern Louisiana Institute blossomed forth into a full measure of maturity. Under the leadership of your able and vigorous young President Frazar, my very good friend, your expansion program has been pushed forward with vision and with enthusiasm. Congratulations for the rapid progress that this institution is making are due, therefore, to President Frazar, to his competent and diligent Faculty and to you - the members of the graduating

class of 1939 - as the beneficiaries of this development. The growth of Southwestern is in admirable harmony with the spirit of the time - a time in which there is an increased demand for diffusion of and equality of educational opportunity, and this growth is likewise in keeping with the history of higher education in the United States during the past fifty years. During this period we have witnessed, throughout America, a rapid growth in the stature and importance of the publicly supported institutions of higher learning - tremendous increases in student enrollment, in faculties and in physical facilities. We have seen the state supported institutions develop as centers for scholarly and professional study of the highest order. In the growth of Southwestern - a most important link in our educational system - Louisiana is to be congratulated at the prospect that this institution which, in the past, has rendered such great educational service can with confidence be counted upon for even a greater measure of service in the future.

Recently a writer in the Nation penned the following words:

"Commencement addresses," he wrote, "are an uninspired phase of campus folklore, as conventional as their authors, as inevitable as the academic procession." The same author continues: "Throughout these ceremonies one detects a stubborn nostalgia, a reaffirmation of values which were supreme in the boom years, an exhortation to hold firm until there is room for one more at the top. The orators mourn the present; they also exalt the past with fond backward glances." Apparently, if we may sum the matter up, it was this anonymous author's fervent conclusion (a deduction which I fear may be justified in your own minds when I have finished) - that if all commencement orators were laid head to foot from one end of the country to another - it would be a good thing to leave them there.

But if commencement addresses do represent a phase of campus folklore, in the opinions of some they would today find their justification in the fact that we have so recently been told that we are living in an age in which folklore is rampant. To Mr. Thurmon Arnold, Assistant Attorney-General of the United States, who has written a best seller on the subject, the dominant folklore in the contemporary scene is "The Folklore of Capitalism". On the other hand, certain capitalists - those whom the President of the United States would doubtlessly include under the dubious appellation of "economic royalists" - with equal ardor and vehemence would denounce that which, from their viewpoint, they describe as the "folklore of New Dealism". No one would deny that, at the present time there is, from the standpoint of the Democracies "a folklore of dictatorships" existing to lull the inhabitants of fascistic and communistic countries with dreams of a pleasant Utopia. And with all the dictators cite our economic ills, accuse us of naivety, and deride what they are pleased to consider "the folklore of the democracies". So if, in an age in which folklore is so universally said to exist, those of us engaged in education are inclined to perpetuate a folklore of our own, I trust that it will not be too heavily charged against us.

That there may be considerable folklore connected with education is attested by the fact that there is abroad today in the minds of most educators, a widespread spirit of inquiry regarding educational values, methods and functions. In the words of Dr. Robert Gordon Sproul, President of the University of California: "American higher education is under scrutiny from within and from without, a scrutiny more searching than it has ever experienced before - and with good reason." There has gradually crept into education a clearer perception of the responsibility for devising ways of discovering the varied intellectual resources of the individual students and of adapting the curriculum to their needs. True it is that we still find

professors of the type who are inclined to feel like the professor who said: "What a glorious place a college would be if it were not for the students," just as we still have a number of students who would apply the same sentiment in reverse order to the professors. But one of the unmistakable tendencies of the time is the trend toward a type of education that will do more to train a student for a particular job. There is, of course, not complete harmony on the subject. President Hutchins of the University of Chicago, for example, has expressed the view: "If we once admit that the object of education is to help students make money, or indeed, that education has anything to do with making money we are lost." On the other hand, the United States Commissioner of Education states: ". . . the college must recognize that even though 'making a life' is the primary purpose of the college, no college can succeed which turns out students who are unable to make a living. Making a living is the sine qua non of making a life. The college which stands aloof from the responsibility of equipping its students to make a living is not performing its most important obligation." The truth, it seems to me, lies in a recognition of the function of education as the preparation for the four main phases of life - preparation for the earning of a livelihood, preparation for the duties of citizenship, preparation for an adequate and happy home life and preparation for the profitable employment of leisure time.

Looming large before this year's graduating classes are the familiar unpleasant facts regarding the present high degree of economic insecurity, the so-called lack of opportunity, and the uncertainty that lies ahead. It has been estimated that one-third of all young people available for work are without work, with the number of unemployed persons between the ages of 16 and 24 fixed at approximately four and one-third million. Medical science has so

increased the normal life span of human beings that despite an alarming decline in the birth rate, competition between the younger age group and the older age group in the quest for personal security must inevitably loom large as one of the chief problems of contemporary life. We find the obvious expression of this in the conflict between social security and individual economic self-sufficiency - a problem which your generation and mine must solve.

It is impossible for a commencement speaker to minimize the gravity of the numerous problems with which the graduates of American universities and colleges will be confronted. Problems of a political character; problems of a social and economic character; problems of unemployment, of social security, of housing, of labor. You should, however, cultivate an abiding faith in your power as the coming generation of leaders to solve these problems. Faith can often make sense out of the chaotic. This is well illustrated in the story of the old near-sighted clergyman who once made the mistake of telling some boys of the Bible lesson he was going to read the next morning. The mischievous boys, anxious to conserve as much of their Sunday morning as possible for their marble games, found the place and glued the connecting pages together. The clergyman began his reading at the bottom of the page: "When Noah was one hundred and twenty years old he took unto himself a wife, who was" - then turning the page he continued - "one hundred and forty cubits long, forty cubits wide, built of gopherwood and covered with pitch inside and out." He was naturally very puzzled at this. He read it again, verified it and then said: "My friends, this is the first time I ever met this in the Bible, but I accept it as evidence of the assertion that we are fearfully and wonderfully made."

At a time when skepticism as to the future is the accepted order of the day there is need in the younger generation - you graduates of 1939 - to cultivate a renewed faith in the responsibility of an equitable society

consistent with the ideals of the economic freedom characteristic of democracy. The solution of a pressing problem may be lurking around the corner unknown to us but soon to be discovered. The story is told of a ship approaching the coast of South America that was without food or water. It chanced to pass near to another vessel. The distress signal was given with a message - "We are in need of water." The unintelligible answer came back from the passing vessel, "Dip down your buckets where you are." The crew of the ship in distress did not understand the significance of the message and requested its repetition. The answer came back, "Dip down your buckets where you are." The master of the vessel dipped down his water buckets as instructed. To his surprise he obtained fresh water instead of the salt water he had expected. The explanation was that unknown to those on board the ship they had entered the mouth of the Amazon river.

Just as the ship was advised to rely upon the power of nature for the succor so vitally needed - native ability must be utilized in the quest for success. In its youth, America has an ample supply of such native ability. It is still true today as expressed by Disraeli that "the youth of a nation are the trustees of posterity." If college and university graduates - this year numbering some 175,000 - the vanguard of a total college and university enrollment of 1,350,000 students - combine with native ability the old fashioned virtues of honesty, courage, intellectual integrity, industry, fairness, sympathy and a sense of honor, there is every reason to believe that, for those that do, a useful place in society can be found. Remember well - success is not necessarily measured by the white collared job or epitomized by membership in a country club. He who leads a cultured well rounded life has achieved success.

As you leave this institution of learning you necessarily bear the mark of cultured persons. It may be fairly assumed that you possess an intellectual curiosity - an awareness that your own calling and interests are only a small phase of the whole pattern of life which can be a fascinating study if we will only broaden our horizon. Too many college graduates fit into Will Rogers's description when he said: "There is nothing so stupid as an educated man, if you get off the thing that he was educated in." The same idea has been expressed by saying that in reality, we are all ignorant only on different subjects and in different fields.

A geologist viewing a hillside exclaims: "What a marvelous stratigraphic evidence of the neolithic period."

An engineering scanning the same scene may say: "Probably five million kilowatts of electrical energy are being wasted by not utilizing the water power of that stream coming through the hillside."

The poet or artist might exclaim: "What a marvelous sunrise," while the farmer would say: "I'd hate to have to raise cotton on that hill."

So each of us, absorbed in our own particular interests, should strive for the cultivation of our intellectual curiosity to the end that we may have a broader conception of the heterogeneous interests of the society in which we live and an open-mindedness towards the problems of each interest.

If you keep your intellectual curiosity burning your lives will never be dull and life will be one continuous process of self-education, for verily education is never done. It is related that the great Michelangelo at the height of his fame was found by the Cardinal Farnese walking in solitude amid the ruins of the Coliseum, and when the Cardinal expressed his surprise, the great artist answered, "I go yet to school that I may

continue to learn." After this who among us can talk of finishing his education?

At this point I am mindful of the fact that a commencement speaker should be like a railroad: he must have terminal facilities. I cannot, however, conclude without some observations on the obligation imposed upon you as educated persons to be constantly vigilant in working for the preservation of the democratic ideals that have made America great. Democratic peoples today face an unprecedented crisis. We witness militantly anti-democratic social orders established in powerful nations using the pervasive agency of universal education not for the purpose of enlightenment but its virtues prostituted to the propagation of deliberately distorted facts which attempt to justify the elimination of that degree of liberty and equality which all human beings should possess. Agencies from without and from within in insidious fashion are at work seeking to undermine the stability of American institutions. If the situation with reference to communist and fascist propaganda on the American continent were not so serious we might regale ourselves with some of the amusing stories leveled at these anti-democratic political philosophies. There is, for example, the story of the candidate for the Communist Party who was undergoing an oral examination.

"Comrade," he was asked, "what would you do if you were left two million rubles?"

"I would give one million to the party and keep the other million myself," he answered.

"Very good, and if you had two houses?"

"I'd give one to the party and keep the other myself."

"Excellent. Now tell me what you would do if you had two pairs of trousers."

There was a long pause, and then the candidate said, "Comrade, I don't know."

"Why not?"

"Well, you see, Comrade, I have two pairs of trousers."

May we Americans continue to experience that state of affairs in which we are not required to give away either our shirts or our trousers except willingly in a spirit of charity and good will toward our fellow men. And may you young graduates be mindful of the recent words of President Roosevelt that ". . . when the clock of civilization can be turned back by burning libraries, by exiling scientists, artists, musicians, writers and teachers, by dispersing universities and by censoring news on literature and art, an added burden is placed upon those countries where the torch of free thought and free learning still burns bright." Yours is the burden of perpetuating America's ideals, religious freedom and equality under God. Yours is the task, in solving the problems of your generation, of building a society, based on good will, justice and peace. To that cause in whatever paths your lives may be lead dedicate yourselves. No lesser performance can in a democracy today be expected of those sons and daughters whom democracy has educated.