

Society and the Graduate

WILL SECURITY BE SUBSTITUTED FOR OPPORTUNITY?

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COMMENCEMENT season is traditionally a time for casting up accounts between society and the graduate. This year some unusual items throw the account out of its normal balance. For many years American youth at this high moment of life took its place in a society that was regarded as collectively secure under national institutions that were safe from external attack. The individual might have had some worries about his own success and security within this society, but he has not usually been troubled about the stability and permanence of the whole. Today no such assurance is yours. The entire social and political organization within which you live is under attack. Before you can turn to winning your own places in American life you must attend to reestablishing the place of American life itself in the world. The choice of kinds and places of work is not yours. Grim events have set grim tasks for many of you.

Facing such a prospect, one feels that the ends of a society are sometimes served at a high and perhaps a ruinous cost to the individual. A war machine does things, and not all of them to the enemy. It must be almost as regardless of will and wish of individuals who compose it as it is ruthless towards those whom it fights. This does not mean, however, that the individual ceases to be of prime importance or that if you have something useful in your make-up it will not be earnestly and quickly sought for and your competence recognized. Indeed, your chance for advancement may be even greater than in more static and less troubled times.

You have invested four of the most impressionable and energetic years of your life in college education. Society has invested in you four years of training that is denied to many. Four years' experience in the world teaches many lessons, wherever spent. As you come in competition with those who have not enjoyed a college education you will be

unwise to underestimate the advantages that men of the same age have been able to gain from their four years spent in other ways.

There was, indeed, a time when it could well be doubted whether to go to the world's tasks at once was not a preparation for life equal except in certain cultural elements to college. Certainly the man who started right out of high school on his job or professional preparation had for a number of years certain advantages over the book-bred college man.

By technological improvements and scientific advances have subdivided each one's job or profession, and one cannot now depend upon the course of life accidentally to throw all needful knowledge in his way. No longer can one grasp the meaning even of his own work by spending an apprenticeship immersed in a particular job. Some time to stand back from life, to view it as a whole and to bring it all into proper perspective is necessary to the well-rounded man. He must have a working familiarity with the whole structure of society and some knowledge of all its arts and sciences, if he is steadily to accommodate himself to the continuous and rapid change that constitutes modern life. Once there were many to say that college education tended to take a boy or girl's feet off the ground. In the complicated modern world of today, college education is perhaps the best practical method of getting one's feet on the ground. There is much more ground to get under one's feet.

I suppose it will be twenty years before the men and women of your generation will be at the height of their power and influence. Until in his forties the average man is finding his place in a profession or in business life, establishing his family, acquiring practical competence in some particular field, and cultivating a reputation for ability and integrity which will win him expanding opportunities. And these, as truly as college years, are years of preparation for the ultimate tasks of one's life, whatever they may be.

Henry Adams, I believe it was, complained that he was educated in one century and lived in another. In so far as that was true of him there is danger that it may become the misfortune of all of us. But it can be true only of those who cease to be teachable after the period of formal schooling that ends with Commencement. Instruction of events is always available, and education should be a life-long process, the formal period serving as a foundation on which life's structure may rest and rise. This brings the educational process to its maturity in a truly wise and understanding person.

I think the increase in the proportion, not of the merely literate, but of truly comprehending persons among the populations of the earth is the indispensable condition and the measure of progression toward a really civilized world. Would a truly educated people, after a world war had curbed the power of an hereditary Kaiser, use their new freedom to elect to power a Hitler? Would a truly educated people who had won a world war to make democracy safe employ its processes to throw away the security and in twenty years face the same danger again? I do not for one moment disparage democracy, but I do say that it takes something more than the democratic process; it takes capacity to make wise use of that process to lead us to a peaceful international world. To provide this needed wisdom we look so anxiously to the institutions of higher education.

American public sentiment in the last decade has made a series of ghastly misjudgments of our world environment. We failed in timely realization of the significance of Hitler's program, of the extent of his preparation and strength, of the meaning of his foreign policy in Spain and toward his smaller neighbors. Then we underestimated disastrously the

fanaticism, the preparedness, and the ability of the Japanese. In addition we completely failed to comprehend the might of Russia, of whose cohesion, industrial capacity and military power we had a wholly wrong idea. We overestimated the power and solidity of France and we relied mistakenly on the invulnerability of the outposts of the British Empire. These miscalculations have been disastrous and might have been fatally so. How can a democratically controlled foreign policy be a wise or even a safe one if our common understanding is so wrong as to so many factors vital to our own decisions? In each instance I am afraid we have no better excuse for our misunderstanding than that our minds were closed. We lacked, not so much information as willingness to face facts that we did not like. They were disturbing, and we did not want to be disturbed. These people were Nazis or Communists or Japs, and we did not like Nazis or Communists or Japs, and we were not going to be told that there was any strength or importance in them or their works. Or we did like the British and the French, so we were not to be told of any weakness in their situation. And most of all we liked ourselves, so we were above peril, even above shortages of food or rubber or gas. There might be people who did not like us as well as we liked ourselves, but we could finish them off on a week end if they really bothered us. This is not a caricature; unfortunately, it is not even an exaggeration of the general state of the American mind in the days preceding the Pearl Harbor attack. Such was the talk not merely of the man in the street but of many men of broad opportunity and heavy responsibility.

We must educate our collective understanding to include appreciation of the services of all races, nations, and peoples—not merely our own—to our civilization and our culture. It must include accurate and dispassionate appraisals of those we dislike and of those we like. Such education cultivates the habit of deliberation and inquiry, the instinct to appraise current movements and proposals against the whole background of principle and experience available through acquaintance with the past. A habit of steadiness and moderation characterizes an educated person or a mature society. There is no stampede to authoritarianism in response to appeals to racial hates or to fear of some foreign economic experiment. There is fearlessness in facing new problems and unwelcome conditions. So many men I have met, even in high position or preferred economic position, are terrified at any significant change anywhere. They fear change anywhere in the world as the beginning of an upset that may affect them. They feel confident of being able to hold their own so long only as the set of circumstances in which they have lived is preserved to the last detail. They subconsciously are doubtful of the stability of their own positions and distrust their own survival value if a shake-up comes. They are almost superstitiously afraid to make new judgments, to depart from old ways, to scrap old attitudes or policies, no matter what the signs of the times may be.

Such men are condemned to be confused and miserable themselves and to darken the counsels of society. What we need and what we get from the truly educated man is a calm confidence that he is sufficiently useful to any society so that he can survive any upset, that neither his interests nor his emotions require that his mind be closed to the lessons of a changing world. If we have the fortitude to face problems when they begin to unfold, we may not need to face wars to roll back dangers such as we now face.

Never was a transfusion of intellectual courage from the youth of our universities to our society as a whole more needed. Your elders are today laboring under a paralyzing fear that they may be caught "between two worlds—one dead, the other powerless to be born."

We have good reason to believe that one world, the one in which the older of us are anchored by sentiment, by our possessions and by our positions is in for pretty thorough overhauling. Unprecedented measures, ominously resembling those employed by our enemies, seem necessary to consolidate our efforts in the war. To fall into the habit of them affects our psychological attitudes, subtly affects our legal concepts, and influences our institutions. How far we ever will dismantle these emergency controls, how far we will muster out our war-formed habits, how far we will demobilize these agencies for management of our daily lives, we do not know. Some would make adjustment to war and the coming readjustments to peace the occasion to push our whole social and political system either to the so-called "right" or "left." But from the point of view of free government as conceived and practiced on this continent these are not direct movements toward opposite poles. These forces move in arcs of a circle starting off in apparently almost opposite directions, only to meet finally in completely arbitrary and totalitarian government. Either a "rightist" or a "leftist" movement carried far enough will destroy the representative government and free society that we have known. The upheavals of war create a probability that we will move faster and a possibility that we may move farther than we have done before in our history. Only if the masses of our people as well as statesmen are wise and public opinion steadily upholds measures to keep such disintegrating forces as inflation in hand can we avoid changes of possible revolutionary proportions. It is important that we recognize and stand up against trends that are fundamentally destructive to the things we wish ultimately to preserve, and equally so that we do not get unduly excited or antagonistic to superficial changes or discomforts which are necessary to the war.

One of the latter temporarily, and to some degree perhaps permanently, affects what we were pleased to call the American high standard of living. By that we generally mean enjoyment of a margin of comfort and luxury greater than that available to most of the world's populations. It represented a surplus of capacity to produce over the necessity to consume. One reason we could enjoy these living comforts was that our geographical and political relations did not require any significant part of our productive energies to be diverted to militarization. For the first time we now begin to feel the weight of a really vast armament and to know how it skims from the table and the kitchen, from our service and the markets, even from culture and education, all but the bare essentials of existence. We will need to maintain a vast military machine for a considerable but uncertain time. The hope that we shall be able, or as a nation even willing to try, to so organize the world as to avoid competition in armaments and repetition of conflict is still not assured. Meanwhile, accumulating burdens bear down heavily on living standards and threaten to do so for years to come.

But are we not also learning by experience that this "high" standard of living had come to include much that is not needful to good living? There had been for two generations a shifting of activities away from the useful and needful. We had come to live much by figures on a speedometer, to pursue fashionable, rather than useful, ends. Relieved of the tasks related to their own upkeep, many suffered from boredom which drove them from one futile and fatuous amusement to another. Today all are rudely recalled to the task of taking care of themselves in a greater degree. Some make hard work of it. Our ineptitude in simple matters makes us now as never before respect the sheer competence, the fitness to survive of earlier and more sturdy generations.

You will form your own opinions, from what you see in the homes of your own circle, of the worth of the kind of life we no longer find practicable and of the value of the more vigorous self-discipline now necessary. For my part I hope that if we are not forced to do so by taxes and other burdens we shall find other ways to hold fast to the greater simplicity of living that has been thrust upon us. The burdens of war and of the military establishment can and in many countries have encroached so far as to impoverish life and make it sordid. But if we keep our heads, I see little probability that the war burdens will need generally to encroach upon what sensible persons regard as requisite to a good and a wholesome life.

Another prospect feared by some is that your lives are likely to be less motivated by a quest and hope for rapid riches than ours has been. I do not expect that private advantage as an incentive, and with most persons perhaps the chief incentive, will vanish or greatly diminish. But probably it is safe to say that present conditions in the business and industrial world and in the political world combine largely to eliminate windfall fortunes or the accumulation of great wealth, and perhaps to limit even the chance of obtaining what we used to call "independent means."

I am far from sure what the long-range effect of this will be upon our society. While the possibility of large profits has put great drive into our business life for a century, it has also caused great wastage of our resources. We have been prodigal in wasting our forests, we have depleted our oil fields at fearful speed, and even some of our important ore resources will soon be exhausted at the present rate of use. It may be that a greater emphasis on the social utility of activity and less on its material rewards is better adapted to the coming period of our national life. But it will involve considerable reappraisal of our customary prestige values and indices. It will tend to substitute individual security for speculative or hazardous opportunity as the goal of careers. It will undoubtedly take much of the individual drive out of life and raise problems as to the source from which we should obtain the initiative so necessary to a progressive society.

A related prospect that cannot fail to affect your lives is the increase in the functions and size of the government. I shall enter into none of the partisan controversies over this subject; I merely observe that this expansion has, in spite of protests, been an uninterrupted trend during the entire twentieth century and that I have as yet heard no program for meeting the problems of a post-war world that does not assume its continuance. So Government is likely to watch you closer, to require more things of you, to place more regulations about you than any generation of Americans has ever known. If you are wise you will watch your government closer and exact higher standards from it than ever before. A government that governs but little and leaves economic life to its own devices can be pretty mediocre and not too high-minded and still be tolerable. Unpleasant chapters in our own political history and more in those of other countries prove that. But when Government pervades all life, holds the economic system in its hands, becomes the greatest employer, the biggest customer, the largest borrower, and the largest lender of money, neither incompetence or low standards of disinterested conduct can be tolerated. Such a government controls many opportunities for careers, and they must be available to the competent on a non-partisan basis. Those careers do not pay large compensation but are relatively secure, the work is important, the satisfactions many, the opportunity to add to one's experience and competence in any chosen field considerable.

The shifting control of avenues of opportunity from private hands to government, whether regarded as a good or an evil sign, is something you in your time will need to reckon with much more than has any preceding generation.

So you see why I think you fortunate to have been educated to face change and to face it unafraid. The last half of the twentieth century—your half—will be ruled by different faces and to some extent by different forces than have ruled its first half. If mankind is not to record this as one of the darker centuries in its history, you will have to do better with your half than my generation has done with its allotment of time. Any hope that a constructive era lies ahead depends on the results of education as a broadening influence on the policies of the nations of the world.

It is because of this necessity that I sometimes take alarm at the inroads being made by war upon our system and institutions of higher education. One of the most important features of any system of education is its continuity. We must not forget that the transmission of culture and technical competence is not an automatic process. Civilization is not inborn or inheritable. Every generation must acquire it, and if we were to interrupt the process for a generation

it could be caught up again only with great cost and great loss. I do not expect we will interrupt the work of our universities a whole generation, but we are suspending it to a degree that, if continued long, will lower seriously the average educational level of the generation that is now coming on. To do that is to lower its capacity to solve its problems and to increase the probability that it will blunder into war.

This makes even more precious than in normal times the influence you carry away from this institution of liberal education. The call is for youth with strength to do, but also with ability to understand and, most of all, with power to grow. We need leadership with widened horizons and enlarged understanding. From where can such leadership come if not from the universities? Your country has need of your wisdom as well as strength in the days to come, for all that the strong can win the unwise may fritter away. So put a high value on what you have, and on what you have capacity to acquire, as you take your places in one of the few remaining free societies. You will honor and maintain the noble tradition of this University if you help to make that society strong and to keep it free.