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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION
OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20590

REMARKS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY FOR ALAN S. BOYD, SECRETARY OF TRANSPORTATION, BEFORE THE 81ST COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS DREXEL INSTITUTE AT THE PHILADELPHIA CONVENTION HALL, PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA, ON SATURDAY, JUNE 15, 1968, 10:00 A.M.

I suppose the commencement address has never been an easy ritual. Comparing my situation today with my predicament at my own commencement, I am not even sure whether the ritual imposes a greater burden on the speaker or the listener - although I remember it as something of a draw.

But it certainly must have been less an ordeal then - or even two weeks ago - than it seems today. In those best of long ago worlds, the optimistic elder had only to carry onto the campus his years of accumulated wisdom and the assurance that came with it and let the sheltered youth bask in the glow of that wisdom.

But that was the long ago world before Dealey Plaza and the Embassy Ballroom; before Berkeley and Columbia and Watts.

So that you are no longer sheltered youth any more than your elders are entirely optimistic and assured.

Alfred North Whitehead said: "Those societies which cannot combine reverence for their symbols with freedom for their revision must ultimately decay, either from anarchy or from slow atrophy by useless shadows."

And it is difficult to know whether to say to you today that we have a surplus of freedom to revise; a shortage of reverence for symbols; or a simple case of shock.

It is natural in times like these to try to find some message in parallels with the past even when you know they will be no more precise than conclusions about the future.

You can, for example, take some comfort from the roaring 20's and the lost generation, the high crime rate, the sinful dancing, the poor dropouts in Greenwich Village and the dropouts in Paris. You can say to yourself: At least we survived that.

It is even comforting to look over some of the commencement addresses of 1928 and find one speaker saying the problem was that young people felt that everything worthwhile had been done and they were left with what today's hip generation would call an empty bag. I promise you can say to yourself, I won't have to listen to that today.

Another speaker told the class of 1928: "The blame for whatever is wrong with the youth of the present day does not lie with the younger generation itself but with the civilization surrounding it." We will skip that lecture today, too, no matter what Charlie Brown will think.

What is interesting about looking over those commencement addresses of 1928 is what was not said. Nobody, for example, told the class that year: "Two years from now, many of you will lose your jobs. Your families will lose their homes and savings and, in a decade, there will be a world war. But that war will be followed by advances in science and technology that will make it possible to crack the genetic code, orbit a man around the world, prolong life and bring fabulous levels of prosperity to the nation."

So it would seem that we lost our gift of prophecy long before 1968, if indeed, we ever had it. And it would seem, also, that even the best-informed speculation about the future can never be as productive as honest inspection of the present and of our reverence for symbols and our freedom to revise them.

Rugged individualism and freedom of choice is perhaps the most cherished of America's traditions. But we are beginning to face up to the fact that the choice available to each of us individually depends on how willing we are to make choices in common. Our ability to make any genuine individual choices at all will depend on how sensibly we act in developing our educational and health and recreational facilities; upon our transportation system; upon the quality of the air we breathe and the water we drink; and upon the extent to which all our citizens have ample incentives and opportunities for a decent education, a decent home and a decent job.

I have no doubt we will find these choices difficult to make, for we are used to making most of our choices individually - and only with extreme reluctance have we made choices in common.

We are equally reluctant to recognize that a great many of our private decisions have enormous public consequences - consequences we can no longer avoid or ignore.

No family, for example, considers a move to a suburban home with a two-car garage as having any consequences beyond the benefits it brings them. Yet the effect of a hundred thousand such decisions may be the relative decline of a downtown business district; a radical relocation of industrial and retail firms; the isolation of the poor and the disadvantaged within the central city; the removal of valuable land from city tax rolls as more and more freeways are built; and much more.

In a world where everybody rubs elbows with everybody else; where you can't put your foot down without stepping on somebody's toe, we can no longer refuse responsibility for the public costs and consequences of private decisions - even those decisions as heavily vested with historic authority as the decision to buy a gun.

We hold the symbol of a full day's work for a full day's pay in high esteem - and it has been good to us. It is an engine that has powered America to a level of economic abundance, a standard of living, a technoligical wizardry and a managerial genius that have earned us the envy and admiration of every other nation in the world.

Yet, in the words of one of our most astute social observers: "The teeming, disorganized life of impoverished slums has all but disappeared among the North Atlantic democracies - save only the United States . . ."

In the generation that has passed since the Great Depression we have reached levels of affluence high enough so that we can afford, many times over, to offer to every American ample opportunity for a decent home, a decent school, and a decent job.

But we have yet to measure up to the standard that Franklin Roosevelt set for us over thirty years ago: "The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much, it is whether we provide enough for those who have little."

In a time of increasing productivity, increasing mechanization, there are also increasing numbers of people who must ask: A full day's pay for what full day's work?

A college graduate being romanced by corporate recruiters finds the dignity of a good job with relative ease. But what of the semi-literate product of a second-class education? Are we to apply such a standard impartially? Should we stigmatize the man who can't measure up; take away from him not only his dignity but any feeling he may have of a personal stake in the society in which he lives?

I suggest the answer lies in a revision of that symbol; in a guarantee of work to every man seeking employment at whatever level his qualifications. But the change will have real meaning for us only if at the same time we continue an effort which is already underway in this Administration toward a commitment to quality education for all Americans.

I have no doubt that the increase in attention to education will result - in your time - in a system radically different from what we know today. I believe we see now the beginnings of a system which will extend from pre-school training through the sort of formal schooling we now know to something resembling the sabbatical leave in universities. It will be a system that will include not only formal, academic training, but also vastly expanded vocational training and retraining programs for every age and skill level. For large segments of the population - particularly the disadvantaged - the inadequacy of this type of training has been far more significant than the shortcomings in the academic side of the education system.

Education will become a process covering an individual's entire life, offering periodic opportunities not only to acquire new skills but simply to read and contemplate and refresh the mind and spirit.

And there are signs that this sort of lifelong education may be more than a luxury; it may be a necessity. Because there are signs that the symbol that the good life is an end in itself may, itself, need some revision.

There are those who wonder and worry about whether we are, indeed, in danger of being anesthetized by affluence. There are those who fear we are approaching the point where our growing mastery of means - of technology and production - is matched only by an emptiness of ends. There are those who are disturbed by what they sense is an increasing equation among too many Americans of the good life with the mere accumulation of goods.

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There are those who are far less impressed with the prosperity so many Americans enjoy than with the poverty so many Americans endure.

For as long as we have been a nation - and longer - one group of Americans has enjoyed infinitely less than its share in the building and the blessings of American society, and infinitely more than its share of poverty and privation, of humiliation and hatred.

I speak of the American Negro.

It is not only the Negro who suffers in our society from poverty and privation. But, as one observer has pointedly put it: "No one is poor in America because he is white. Many people are poor because they are black."

I have said that in today's world we can isolate neither problems nor people from each other - neither private nor public decisions.

If we could see no other way, we could see by the flames that lit the skies over many American cities in recent months that we cannot separate the future of white America from the fate of black America.

Leveling stores and homes in the ghettos with a torch is not the answer. Nor is leveling the blame. And the one sure way to fail to find the answer is to hang out signs that say, "Business as usual."

Let us all condemn riots; let us never condone violence.

But, above all, let us understand - and let us act.

Let us understand that, for at least a century, white America has insisted that if everyone would just sit still - if "outsiders" and "agitators" would stop interfering and stirring things up - time alone would eventually remove the race problems from our midst.

But the Negro knows - and we ought not to forget - that time hardens, not heals.

Let us understand how the deep frustrations of men long denied can find expression in the incendiary rage of men who will no longer be denied.

Let us understand how those who have suffered sustained and systematic exclusion from American society do not always feel bound by its constraints.

Let us understand that it is not the Negro alone who is warped and wounded by our indifference and our animosity - for those who would deny the dignity of another must thereby degrade their own.

Let us understand that we cannot expect those in our ghettos to equal the achievements of other Americans when they do not enjoy the opportunities the rest of us take for granted. We cannot ask from them - as we often do - the kind of utterly heroic effort that few of us who are more fortunate ever manage to make.

We have passed the point of no return on the racial problem in America.

We have reached the point where the ability of each of us to live a full and free life rests, in fact, upon our ability to insure the same opportunities to all Americans.

That, above all, is a symbol we want not to change but to abide by.

"One of the weaknesses of a democracy," Stanley Baldwin once told parliament, "is that until it is right up against it, it will never face reality."

But one of its strengths is that it is a way of organizing society so that it can, indeed, combine reverence for symbols with freedom to revise them.

And while we do have a way of always wanting to see and savor our world sunnyside up and, while Mr. Baldwin may have had a point, things are changing. Perhaps it is because the new generation of Americans can see more clearly that we are right up against it.

It seems a generation that questions the assumptions of the old as severely and stringently as it questions its aspirations.

It seems a generation that takes with a new seriousness the old admonition of Socrates that "the unexamined life is not worth living."

It seems a generation less frightened by the prospect of the manipulation of man by machine than by the practice of the manipulation of man by man.

It seems a generation unwilling to respond to new situations by wrapping itself in the security blanket of old stereotypes.

It seems a generation increasingly committed to the creation of a genuinely personal world - in which all conversations and contact can be conducted person-to-person and man-to-man.

It seems a generation far better able than mine to fashion an environment in which man can live and thrive.

That's the way it seems to me. The important thing is how it seems to you.

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