

18-S-69

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY BY
SECRETARY OF TRANSPORTATION JOHN A. VOLPE,
AT THE UNITED STATES COAST GUARD ACADEMY IN
NEW LONDON, CONNECTICUT, JUNE 4, 1969.

Honored graduates of the Class of 1969. I have learned in these first few months in the Department of Transportation that the office of Secretary includes a few privileges and honors.

One of the privileges of which I am most proud is that of having the United States Coast Guard in our Department of Transportation. One of the highest honors I have received is the invitation to address your commencement exercises today.

You will shortly be commissioned as ensigns in the Coast Guard and will become active members in the Department of Transportation. Let me, then greet you. Welcome aboard! We are very glad to have you on our team. And I hope that as the newest members of our agency your ambitions are as large as the many opportunities that lie ahead. I hope that a large number of you are even now thinking that someday -- after a few exciting years of service -- you yourself may be standing here as Secretary of Transportation, or as Commandant, or as Superintendent. I want everybody in our Department to aim for the top!

Just to fill you in on what the rest of us do for a living, I might point out that as well as performing some 45,000 maritime search and rescue missions each year, DOT is responsible for:

-- providing air traffic control for 14,000 airline flights a day, while we adopt and enforce regulations to insure the safety of 150 million airline passengers;

-- help build nearly 15,000 more miles of interstate highways, to add to the 27,000 already completed;

-- set standards of safety to be followed in the manufacture of about 10 million automotive vehicles each year; and standards of safety affecting 100 million vehicles on the road today;

-- work with and assist the nation's cities with their urban mass transportation problems.

Some of our other responsibilities include running the St. Lawrence Seaway, operating the Alaska Railroad, managing 2 of the nation's major airports (Washington National and Dulles) and providing high speed rail transportation demonstrations here in the Northeast corridor.

So you can see what kind of a Department you are part of now.

Recent events in Washington are good omens for your future. President Nixon has taken new and promising initiatives in Vietnam. He is determined that he will be a President of peace and I am certain that events will bear him out. He is also using the same, cool, rational approach to protect America's future interest by proposing for defensive purposes the new safeguard anti-ballistic missile system. This system offers great dividends for America's future security. But President Nixon's concerns extend beyond the very vital interest of foreign and military affairs. He has brought to the White House new logic and confidence and a sense of calm assurance combined with firm direction and unassailable moral authority. The President has determined that the vast progress shown by our nation in the resolution of technological problems shall also be made in resolving our social challenges. He believes that any nation that can put a man on the moon can put a man on his feet. We shall see vast improvements in our cities and new hope for our rural poor and for the underprivileged everywhere.

Commencement speeches are not as easy as they once were. The traditional script calls for me -- in time honored maturity -- to warn you -- happy, carefree young men -- of the troubles that await you in the world outside. But through some curious inversion of our times, I feel compelled to advise you that the world is, in fact, not quite as bad as it seems -- and is, actually, getting steadily better. Perhaps some of you may have difficulty believing this but I see it happening.

When I compare what life was like when I was your age to what it is today, I am astonished at the incredible advances. Let me list some of the things that have come into use just in your own brief lifetime. Antibiotic drugs . . . television .. radar .. atomic energy . . . jet aircraft . . . computers . . . electric heat . . . plastics . . . rocket propulsion . . . prefabricated housing . . . satellite communication . . . the whole technology of minaturization. I could go on. Yet scientists say these accomplishments are as nothing compared to what lies ahead.

This steady march forward is not appreciated by some. There is a tendency among some of our college youth to confuse action with motion. To use a nautical metaphor there is a cry to batten the hatches, pull in the sheets and point her up -- close-hauled and tight -- biting into the wind. The halyards strain, the sheets are taut, the wind sings in the rigging and away we go. But at the end of the day -- in spite of all the excitement -- we haven't moved forward very far. True progress, on the other hand, is more like sailing before the wind -- wing on wing. The boat rolls and wallows and lumbers along with little indication of movement. But a glance off to the side is revealing. The buoys are flying by.

Gentlemen, I know there is forward movement. I see the landmarks of progress flying by.

I was particularly struck a few weeks ago to read in a booklet from the National Education Association of the speed of the growth of knowledge. This group of experts estimates that the total sum of man's scientific knowledge doubled for the first time in 1750 -- the second time in 1900 -- doubled again in 1950 -- and for the fourth time -- only 10 years later in 1960. And the pace of this growth is not slackening. The problem today is how to assemble, collate and make this vast scientific knowledge available for practical use in improving our way of life.

You members of the class of 1969 are especially favored because at this moment, in their never ending search for a new and better way of life, the scientists of today are now directing their attention to the sea.

The sea, which carried our ancestors to the riches of the new world, is today itself a new frontier, a frontier with the promise of resources which will at least match those we are likely to find in outer space.

Our own American interest in maritime research and development has passed the speculative scale. A Congressionally sponsored commission has enthusiastically recommended that our government move forward in a major program of marine exploration. Of special interest to you is the study's further recommendation that the Coast Guard take a leading part in this exciting endeavor.

To all this I say, wonderful! I am all for it. No organization is better equipped to be a partner in such a program than the United States Coast Guard.

There is, however, another recommendation in the report. The Commission asks that the whole undertaking become the province of a new specially created government agency -- and that the United States Coast Guard become part of this new department.

I cannot support this recommendation. It is my personal belief and hope that the Coast Guard will remain an integral part of our Department.

I must confess there is some personal sentiment behind this. As a native of Massachusetts, I have a special place in my heart for the Coast Guard. The Service's first cutter was built up at Newburyport, and was named the "Massachusetts." And the Coast Guard Academy itself was first established in 1876 over at New Bedford, where it prospered for some 14 years.

For these and other reasons, I am tremendously proud to be associated with the Coast Guard.

But beyond this, there are real and urgent reasons involving national purpose that recommend the maintenance of the Coast Guard within the Department of Transportation.

Now I do not intend on this happy occasion to burden you with high level differences of opinion. Suffice to say that whatever decisions are made, you young officers of the class of '69 will be in the forefront of this new major marine effort. You will be the leaders in this new and great scientific adventure. In the parlance of Wall Street -- you are in on the ground floor of a great new growth industry. Our ceremony here today is, thus, a proper commencement -- a true beginning.

But you gentlemen begin here today more than a professional career. You are formally entering the military service of your nation.

You are being commissioned as officers by the President of the United States. This is a most proud and splendid moment for you and for all of us -- your parents, friends, professors and classmates. We salute you. But the moment is brief. Shortly you will be taking your places as officers on ships, aircraft and other stations of your service. Soon you will know the responsibility of command. This is a major burden, for he who commands others must first command himself.

You have been taught here to think positively and constructively. You have been given instructions in thinking logically -- and you have learned discipline. All these things will help you in your total development as individuals -- individuals with responsibilities that must be met -- and missions to fulfill. And this training will stand you in good stead.

The years ahead will see you -- through necessity -- leaving behind many of the specifics of the education you have received here.

You will be forgiven, I suppose, if someday you forget the date of the second battle of Bull Run .. the exact number of lines in a sonnet and the number of amendments to the Constitution. But you will never leave behind and will always carry with you something far more important -- the things of the heart. You know them well -- discipline -- pride -- courage and honor. Of all the treasures a man can possess, these are the finest. You have begun to know them here.

Four years ago when you came to the Academy you began more than an education. You began a constant exposure to a rich and noble tradition. The United State Coast Guard is an old and tested military organization with a long history of superior service. It is, consequently, rich with the memories of many brave and decent men who have gone on before. The memories of these men have been kept alive here and you have shared them. It is this fellowship -- this camaraderie with the heroic -- that gives your service its great morale and esprit. This spirit will sustain you in the trying moments of need.

But this great pride of your service carries with it an unspoken expectation -- the later obligation that you shall, in the hours of peril, at whatever personal cost, so conduct yourself that your actions shall be an inspiration to those who come after. This is the ultimate test -- but it is the true test of all great men. I have every confidence you will meet this test and pass it with glory.

But on this happy occasion I will not leave you with the thought that all will be grim duty. There is adventure ahead.

I have the feeling that for a man, that career is good which keeps him in close touch with the sea. For men like you with an extra ration of brine in your veins, the sea can be an old and exciting friend. You know something of this friendship already . . the infinite majesty of the ocean sky at night -- the grey fury of the North Atlantic -- or the rich gold sunlight and lush blue waters of the tropics. And there is the laughter and friendship of the ward room, the weekend passes and pretty girls. And as always with the sea, there is often danger. But danger is necessary for courage. The sea, as always, demands much of its followers -- but it offers far more in return. You are most fortunate in your calling.

Now the hour has come and you are ready to set forth. I speak for all of us here when I wish you, always, a fair tide and a smooth sea. May the wind be always at your back. Goodbye, good luck and God speed on your voyage.

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