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REMARKS BY SECRETARY OF TRANSPORTATION JOHN A. VOLPE AT THE COMMENCEMENT OF IMMACULATA COLLEGE, WASHINGTON, D. C., SATURDAY, MAY 20, 1972

I am honored and complimented to have been invited to address you today. Yours is a school I have long admired, and I hope that as you leave I can leave you with several thoughts that conscientious citizens of all generations must consider.

While my professional career goes back quite a few years prior to my appointment to President Nixon's Cabinet, I suspect that it is as a member of that Cabinet that I have been invited to be with you this afternoon. And it is from that position that I feel a responsibility to discuss with you -- in an open and free academic environment -- the story from this side of the generation gap.

But before doing so, I bring to you the greetings of President Nixon. He has asked me to convey to you his congratulations on your graduation and his best wishes for your continuing success.

As I am sure you are aware, the President has shown great interest in, and concern for, the continued vitality of parochial education and the preservation of such institutions as Immaculata which you have been so privileged to attend.

I believe we have broken from the hackneyed tradition of the inspirational commencement speaker extolling in dazzling rhetoric the great virtues with which young people must equip themselves to meet the challenges of some strange new world to which they will awaken tomorrow.

I am sure we can agree that the condition of the world to which we shall all awaken tomorrow has been significantly shaped by the actions we take today.

A favorite and cogent expression of the professional athlete is: "The future is now." It is a concept difficult to refute.

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Never in my long experience have I been associated with a person so keenly aware of the great consequences today's actions bring to bear on tomorrow's world as is President Nixon.

Were the President a practitioner of the political expedient he would have long ago forsaken our obligations in Indochina. To have done so would have assured him unprecedented political popularity. At the same time, it would have made impossible his repeatedly stated goal of achieving a peace with which we can live for generations to come.

Other world leaders in the past have espoused the goal of a lasting peace. But their lack of resolve and their yielding to expediency made it unattainable.

Our involvement in Indochina, as was our assumption of responsibility as a world power following World War II, was the direct result of the tragic history recorded during the period between World Wars I and II.

Those were the two decades when the Western powers by a policy of inaction in the face of aggression forfeited the freedom of smaller nations.

That was an era when isolationist voices were heard in America, Britain and France -- a period in which a British Prime Minister could ask what possible interest his nation could have in events taking place in central Europe.

It was an era of false peace. It was an era devoid of vigilance. It was an era of peace purchased at the price of freedom for men, women and children in far too many of the less fortunate and less powerful nations of that time.

The lessons of history blur too easily and rapidly. Many of those critics of the Administration's Indonesian policy who today brand our Vietnam involvement "immoral" are among the same persons who condemned as immoral the inaction of the Western democracies in the 1930s.

I see no moral difference between what happened to Austria and Czechoslovakia in the 1930s and what is happening today in Indochina.

We see naked, overt aggression there today -- just as we saw it when Hitler threatened Europe. We see a totalitarian force moving against its neighbor in utter contempt of life and human values.

But there is a difference today. Whereas those nations charged in the 1930s with the moral responsibility to safeguard civilization sat on their hands, in the 1960s and 1970s the leading nation of the free world recognized that no nation, no people can exist as an island.

It would have been easy in the 60s -- as it would be easy today -- for the United States, the strongest Nation in the world, to follow the course taken by the Western democracies of the 1930s.

But despite our critics, I believe this Nation has a strong moral commitment to resist aggression.

Our critics claim that the war in Vietnam is a civil war in which we have no legitimate interest -- much as the "moralists" of another era advised that Austria was really a part of the German nation and Czechoslovakia was in the German sphere of influence.

We are today told that the abandonment of our treaty obligations and commitments would not result in the repression of the people of another country which might fall victim to totalitarian aggression. It would, the critics say, be simply a matter of self-determination.

That, too, was the rationalization offered to salve the conscience of concerned Englishmen and Frenchmen when Hitler was on the march during the thirties.

I submit to you today that the moral posture that such persons assume is in reality the ultimate immorality of selfishness and lack of concern for mankind.

It is the immorality described by Edmund Burke when he said "All that is necessary for the triumph of evil in this world is for good men to stand by and do nothing."

Our involvement in Vietnam is the act of a great nation and people who with less moral fiber would have retired into their fortress of wealth and power without regard for freedom and human dignity elsewhere in the world.

While I hope you will agree with the premise I have drawn here today, I respect your privilege of disagreeing with me. I am an advocate of responsible dissent. Such dissent buttresses our freedom.

But I deplore irresponsible dissent -- dissent mouthed for no other purpose than to sway impressionable people for partisan political purposes.

We are hearing too much of that type dissent. In the past few weeks, as President Nixon brought to bear greater forces to end the Vietnam war and at the same time offered the most generous of peace terms, we have heard him defamed as the accelerator or the escalator of the war.

I am perplexed by those who protest the President's actions on the basis of humanitarian concern for the so-called "innocent" people of North Vietnam, but show no concern for the 70 million people of South Vietnam caught in the path of the Communist juggernaut.

It is not the South that is invading the North.

It is not Saigon that seeks control of all Indochina.

It is Hanoi, when offered the most generous of peace terms, that refuses to end the fighting.

But end it will, as President Nixon has pledged. And even as he brings this pledge to fruition, he embarks upon yet another peace-seeking mission to Moscow, following by only a few months a similar mission to Peking.

And when we achieve this peace -- this less turbulent world environment we all yearn for -- how shall you use it?

I believe your generation will speak the truth and live the truth; that you will repudiate and reject those who do not have the courage and faith to work and live within your ever evolving and improving systems.

Our problem -- yours and mine -- are not those of a failing society. They flow from an ever expanding one -- a society ever seeking self improvement. I believe that history will record the 1970s as a turning point in man's progress.

The trail that lies ahead has been blazed by men of extraordinary vision. Among these was Joseph Wood Krutch, scholar and drama critic who foresook New York City for the Arizona desert -- there to live with his books and thoughts and to commune with nature much in the manner of a modern day Thoreau.

Shortly before his death in 1970, Krutch wrote: "The seventies may be the beginning of the end, or the beginning of a new civilization. If...the latter, it will not be because we have walked on the moon or learned how to tinker with the genes..., but because we have come to realize that wealth, power, even knowledge are not good in themselves but only instruments of good or evil."

There, I submit, is sound wisdom expressed in simple Christian words. Their meaning is crystal clear -- your generation holds the power to destroy all life. Or it can create a far better world.

I hold no doubt as to the course you will take. Your heritage has been molded by the loving disciplines of your families, your church and by this institution.

- 5 -

I urge you always to bolster that heritage by maintaining confidence in yourselves, hope for mankind and faith in God.

My congratulations on your achievements that are marked by this ceremony today and also the triumphs you will experience in the days that lie ahead.

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