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# DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

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# NEWS

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REMARKS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY BY SECRETARY OF TRANSPORTATION  
JOHN A. VOLPE AT SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY COMMENCEMENT, BATON ROUGE,  
LOUISIANA, MONDAY, JUNE 1, 1970, 5:00 P.M., C.D.T.

I am tremendously honored and privileged to be here with you today. This is one of the most important days in your lives and I am deeply appreciative that you have asked me to share it with you.

Over the years I have addressed many colleges and university commencement exercises . . . Catholic schools, ivy league colleges, State universities . . . but for me this commencement is by far the most meaningful.

Your university has a spirit and a sense of mission too seldom evident in America today. Your university carries a banner of optimism. You -- the students, graduates, faculty, parents and friends of Southern -- are bolstered by hope, progress and determination. On this campus your university's heritage stems from nearly a century of steady self-improvement. Your university's heritage is a century of hope, faith and progress. Southern's heritage is testimony that educational excellence is available in this great land of ours in the north, south, east and west.

There is another reason why I am delighted to be here today. Your university, and our Department of Transportation, are today launching a tangible program that I am certain will result in a long and fruitful association.

I am delighted to announce today that Southern University is the recipient of a \$148,000 research and training grant under the university program of our Urban Mass Transportation Administration. Southern University will now begin training experts in our demanding field of transportation planning. This program will help make Southern an even greater school and will provide those who follow you through these halls with new wide-ranging career opportunities.

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This is just a start. Already, three members of your graduating class have accepted positions with our Department and will be working with us in Washington. And this summer -- under a cooperative program -- three undergraduates will be working in our Federal Highway Administration offices. Also this summer, Professor Ingram of your Engineering Department will be in Washington to get a grasp on our manpower needs and our developmental challenges. He will, in a sense, be our "Field Employment Counselor" as we draw upon the educational resources here in the months and years ahead.

Professor Ingram's work also will supplement a new course in highway building which Southern University will be establishing this fall. Our Federal Highway officials will soon be meeting with your faculty helping organize the course and will assist with the instruction when it begins.

And so I am here as a friend and a partner. I am here as a Cabinet member whose vital concern is the challenge of transportation -- forecasts show that this Nation will have to double its transportation capacity in the next twenty years. That's a challenge that will require every ounce of expertise, skill and dedication that is available from your generation of educated men and women. That is what we will expect from you as partners.

But I also come here today -- as I said -- as a friend. And in that context, I prefer to concentrate my remarks not on transportation but rather to address myself to a larger topic.

I would like to talk, for just a few moments, about the American dream.

Too often, in recent months and years, the American dream has been described as a nightmare. Too often too many people have forgotten that at the end of every dream there comes an awakening -- an awakening that can be frustrating and disappointing, or can be bright and promising.

I am aware that optimism is not exactly the prevalent mood on American college campuses these days. I know that your generation is even more aware of the great issues of the day. More attuned to personal hangups, and more committed to human welfare and social justice than any American generation in history.

I know too, that many young people today -- depressed by what they see around them -- claim that the American dream has never been more than a bubble and that the bubble has burst.



We are told that this Nation and its ideals have been torn by violence, rotten by indifference and poisoned by self-indulgence. We are told that the United States is just another crowded Nation, unable to even maintain a semblance of order.

We are told it is time for change -- radical change. But those cries are as old as the Nation itself.

America is change and America has changed. The changes frequently come in convulsive spasms -- whether they be a battle for independence, a civil war, a depression, world wars or a soul-searching evaluation of 20th century goals and directions.

In the depths of change there is turmoil, surely. We are an unsettled society, of course. But this is not just because of change -- it is because of the speed of the changes.

I have often pointed out that mankind had thousands of years between the discovery of the wheel and the invention of the internal combustion engine. Yet it has been only slightly more than a half-century between the flight at Kitty Hawk and that day last year when we heard the words "Eagle Has Landed."

Civilization had thousands of generations between the time man tamed the use of fire and the day of the steam engine. But we have only had a flicker of God's eyelash to adjust from steam engines to nuclear reactors.

Just 300 years ago -- a relatively short distance into the past -- there were only about 470 million people on the face of the earth. Today it is estimated that there are close to 3 1/2 billion souls on this weary planet -- with well over 200 million of them right here in this country. Experts tell us we will have a population of close to 300 million by the year 2000 when you move out of the "dawning" and into the actual age of aquarius.

What will happen in the next 30 years -- the years when your generation will take up the reins of leadership in America and in the world? What will you face?

We are in the midst of a second industrial-scientific revolution, with more knowledge, more ability, more technical capacity, than ever before in the history of civilization. At the same time, we have perfected communications to the extent that everyone knows what's going on. We have expanded our educational facilities to the point where millions of people now have not only the power, but also the inclination to do something about what's going on.



We have the potential to be the greatest assemblage of articulate problem-solvers the world has ever seen.

Sure -- we have problems of crowding, poverty, racial strife, environmental pollution and ugliness. And they are serious problems.

But I maintain that a Nation that turned an empty, forbidding continent into the most dynamic Nation in the world in the short time span of two centuries or so -- a Nation that created the first mass democracy with essential order and essential freedom -- can certainly cope with the pains of change, cope with the seam-splitting, the conflict, the dissent and unrest.

This Nation has a foundation of solid rock -- bedrock people such as yourselves, who are determined not to "drop out or tune out;" solidly rooted people who don't know the meaning of the word "quit."

I have tremendous faith in you -- and your colleagues on other campuses -- who will inherit the mantle of leadership. This confidence of mine in today's students may come as a surprise to some. You may very well have had me pigeonholed elsewhere. We Americans have -- for far too long -- tended to categorize and separate people. For instance, popular opinion would have us believe that most of today's students are bent on violence and abandon. I know better. I know -- from meeting so many of you -- that virtually all of our students are hard working, conscientious young people who are looking for a chance to make this a better world -- a chance to improve the quality of life.

You young graduates are entering a very complex world and I can only believe that because of your commitment, this world will soon be a far better one than we have known.

You young graduates of Southern University have another source of strength that you perhaps do not appreciate. But I know of it. I know of it from personal experience and I have seen its force in others.

Historians and sociologists say the tremendous drive of the American people comes from the fact that we began fresh and brand new as a country -- that we had no restraining fetters of tradition -- that we had an abundance of good rich land . . . we had the freedom of democracy and the spirit of optimism and hope that all these factors engendered. But I also suggest the



true vitality of the American people, regardless of color, creed or national origin, derives from the fact that we all started out as members of a minority. And let there be no doubt about it . . . "minority" and "drive" and "determination" are synonymous.

I myself have roots as part of a minority -- the son of Italian immigrants. In Boston in the 1920's I was "different." We lived in a different section of town. We spoke a different brand of English and we tended to stay in our own neighborhood. I guess we were not rich. We were probably "disadvantaged." One of the earliest memories I have is walking along the railroad tracks picking up lumps of coal to take home for the stove. And I don't need to tell you, there were no Volpes in the Country Club.

My friends, I am not -- in any way -- trying to minimize the challenge of the future.

There is hard work to be done -- barriers that must be brought down. And there are minds that must be changed. But I know you have the stuff to do it. It won't be easy. In fact, it will be tough. I remind you, however, of the saying of Elbert Hubbard who wrote, "God will not look you over for medals, degrees or diplomas -- but for scars."

And you are not alone. You have friends that are interested in you. You have friends in Washington who are listening to you. Not only listening but working to give you better opportunities.

I know in our own Department of Transportation at this time last year we had not one single black employee in a top level position. Today we have 13 black officials in so-called "supergrade" positions, which means salaries of \$26,000 and up. We didn't hire them just because they were black -- we hired them because they were qualified and capable. They are in management positions. They are decision-makers.

And I take great pleasure in noting that one of the most valuable members of our Department's executive team is here with me today.

James Washington, former Dean of Howard Law School, is the General Counsel of the Department of Transportation -- the first black man to hold such a post. He is a Presidential appointee; he is an outstanding man of the law and we consider ourselves tremendously lucky to have him working with us.

The General Counsel of our Urban Mass Transportation Administration, George Haley, is also black. But the "blackness"



is beside the point. He is the man who broke the color barrier at the University of Arkansas Law School; he is a former State senator from Kansas and he is one heck of a lawyer. And I know there is movement like this in other government departments as well as in private industry.

I hope you will feel strong, too, in the knowledge that you possess a most powerful instrument of change and progress -- a tool far more powerful than demonstrations, protest or violence. And I am referring to your inalienable right to vote, to participate in creating a just social order.

Exercise this right. Use your vote, be involved in politics and government. Take advantage of America's great two party system. The two party system offers the true test of the best man. The two party system, with participation by those who give a damn can be the key to the good life we all seek -- the good life you and I are determined will come with the fulfillment of the American dream.

My friends -- young and not so young -- I have determined that my remarks this evening would be brief, that I would not belabor you with rhetoric and speechmaking. And in conclusion, I would like to share with you three impressions that have struck me in recent weeks. The first came on Wednesday, May 13 -- less than 3 weeks ago. I was in Memphis -- making speeches about transportation, being interviewed on TV, holding a press conference, meeting with the Mayor and the Congressmen -- all the things a Cabinet member is supposed to do when he visits a major city. And in the middle of this busy day I made sure there was time to stop at the Lorraine Motel.

We stopped and looked up at the balcony of infamy where a bullet fired in hatred had taken the life of that great leader, a true christian gentleman, Dr. Martin Luther King. All I could think of were those words that swept down the mall in Washington on that memorable day of peaceful demonstration in Washington in 1963, when Dr. King cried "I have a dream." And I thought of the dream all of us have -- the American dream.

And then -- last week -- as I was preparing my remarks for this ceremony -- I recalled the words from the song "The Impossible Dream," "To fight for the right without question or pause, to be willing to march into hell for a heavenly cause," and I thought again of this campus -- this group of students -- this distinguished and capable gentleman who is your university's President.



I thought of the history of this school -- and the heritage of America's blacks. I thought of the great men who just happened to be black. Men -- who have made American history. Men like Crispus Atticus, the first American killed in the Revolutionary War. There is a statue of him in my home town of Boston near the spot where he died defending America's hoped-for liberty and freedom. Men like that -- and a tradition like ours -- make the American dream worth working for. We must dream not only of being brought together -- we must dream too, of working together.

It is not trite to speak of dreams and dreamers. It is not "corny" to hope for the best. It is not an exercise in futility to be an idealist and aim for unreachable stars.

My final impression came as I read an obituary last week. Perhaps you have heard of Joseph Wood Krutch -- the scholar and drama critic who left New York City 20 years ago to live with his books and his thoughts in an adobe hut in the desert near Tucson, Arizona. In recent years, he had devoted himself to botany and conservation. On Friday, May 22, he died at the age of 76. Several weeks before his death, Krutch wrote a letter to the Arizona Star. He said: "The 70's may be the beginning of the end, or the beginning of a new civilization. If it becomes the latter, it will not be because we have walked on the moon or learned how to tinker with the genes of unborn children, but because we have come to realize that wealth, power and even knowledge are not good in themselves but only the instruments of good or evil."

This then is a message for the class of 1970:

The knowledge you have received, the power that can be yours, the wealth that is more attainable with each passing day -- must be backed up with the stuff that dreams are made of.

My friends, you cannot be afraid to dream, or you will then be afraid to contribute. Never lose your great expectations, your hopes, your promise. Always commit yourself to looking ahead -- and to learning from what has gone before. Love so that you will have neither the time nor the need for hatred. Have faith in people . . . have faith in yourself . . . have faith in God. And always keep some memory of what it is to be young, for that is the most important remembrance of all.

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