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DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

NEWS

OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20590

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REMARKS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY BY SECRETARY OF TRANSPORTATION JOHN A. VOLPE
BEFORE THE NIAGARA UNIVERSITY BACCALAUREATE, BUFFALO, NEW YORK, SATURDAY,
MAY 30, 1970

I would begin by acknowledging my gratitude for being invited to attend these ceremonies today at Niagara. I feel deeply honored to celebrate commencement with you. I must say I share your sense of accomplishment at this major turning point in your lives and I am indeed privileged to join this company of distinguished honorees.

I might add that my satisfaction is shared by my wife. She trained as a nurse, and has kept in touch with the profession, and was delighted to hear that you are planning major expansion of your excellent nursing program.

Niagara indeed has proven itself to be a great institution. This is a good place to get a good education.

However, what we sometimes forget is that as William Raspberry, the Washington columnist put it recently, "education is the solution only to the degree that ignorance is the problem." He meant that it takes more than mere facts to live the sensible life. It takes judgement, hope, and a sense of moral and spiritual values. That is what you have really learned here at Niagara -- you have received an education that is ennobled by truth and purpose.

I believe that Niagara University has a special mission to preserve eternal truths in a time of spreading social and moral unrest. For the graduates of the school know who they are and where they stand. I felt a sense of hope and optimism the minute I walked onto this campus -- one I wish I could share with young people and adults throughout our country.

This atmosphere must grow from that common sense philosophy of St. Vincent de Paul which is quoted on the first page of the Niagara Undergraduate Catalogue: "Perfection does not lie in ecstasies," St. Vincent said, "But in doing well the will of God."

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I can't imagine a better interpretation of Christian duty in the secular world. It reminds public servants like myself, of course, that they have a two-fold responsibility -- to be a dual servant of God and of the people, to know what belongs to Caesar and what to Christ.

As for yourselves, imbued with this principle of Christian action, you can make a great impact on the world of public affairs. You can be timely and yet timeless, open to change yet rooted in certainty. You will be committed to learning and living creatively -- without rancor, bewilderment or greed.

And that learning must continue with a vengeance. As Bob Dylan put it, "If you're not busy being born, you're busy dying." That's a poetic truth and also a practical one.

So what have we been doing in the two decades or so of your lifetimes? We have tamed the atom as a source of electrical energy, built vast computer systems, made enormous advances in medicine, spread television throughout the land and twice landed men on the moon.

What is the meaning of these and other developments? Is their significance merely technical? During your lifetime have we been busy being born? Or have we, as some would have us believe, been busy dying? I would say we are being born, born to understanding.

For the work of science reveals again and again the presence of a Divine Intelligence behind the impersonal facts of the material world.

Look at this earth. If it moved one percent closer to the sun we would burn to a crisp. If it moved one percent further away we would freeze.

We are here solely because of a divine plan. And we have only seen the merest beginning of the unfolding of that plan. One central fact guarantees further change in human affairs -- the fact that 90 percent of all the scientists in human history are alive today, and their work will utterly transform this planet.

The most radical change of all is that we are beginning to apply our democratic principles in positive action programs to improve society. And we have begun to see that we can't build a decent society for individuals simply by encouraging them to indulge themselves. We see the consequences of selfishness all around us in a landscape that often looks like a dump or a battlefield.

Let's face it, we have used this country as if the land would last forever, as if the frontier would never fade. But we are beginning to learn that we must build a society on human values, not narrowly commercial ones.

We have learned from the ecologists that we must have a greater reverence for life and for the earth. We have learned from the blacks that we must have a greater concern for those who have not had a fair shake. And we have learned from the students -- from you and your contemporaries -- that we must come up with better answers to larger questions.

Frustrated by the pace of social reform, some young people turn to violence. But it's not the answer -- if for no other reason than that it always generates a reaction. I am convinced that the young people of today want to work for change within the system, not destroy it.

We must not only be brought together, we must work together as well. The main question then, is -- what can we do as partners? Rene Dubos, the great microbiologist, points out that we have fulfilled only one-half of God's command in Genesis. He did indeed command man to go forth and subdue the earth and populate it. But the second chapter of Genesis states that man, after he was placed in the Garden of Eden, was instructed by God to "dress it and keep it."

And remember the prayer of St. Francis: "Praised be my Lord for our brother the wind, and for air and cloud, ... and all weathers by which thou upholdest life in all creatures." Indeed, I wonder if St. Francis should not become the patron saint of all ecologists and ecology-minded laymen.

One thing is certain -- our style of life must change. Perhaps we will have to get along without the no-return bottles, without lingering pesticides, without leaded gasoline, without phosphate detergents. We definitely will have to penalize the polluters of our life-giving air and waters. We'll have to get noise under control because it has risen three thousand percent since 1939 and poses a real threat to the human nervous system and major organs.

I know we can reach these goals. Just in my Department of Transportation alone, for example, we have two contracts underway to find out how to suppress jet engine noise. We have reached agreement with the airlines to bring about speedy retrofitting of jet engines to cut pollution. We are working closely with Detroit and major universities to reduce auto pollution by modifying engines and exhaust systems.

With Health, Education and Welfare, we are establishing standards that in the next two to five years will drastically cut air pollution. And we intend to enforce them. We have encouraged the move to get the lead out -- of gasoline, that is. We are pushing support of new technology which can sharply reduce bus fumes, and make engines quieter. And we have helped buy low-pollution buses for cities in California and in Washington, D.C.

Before long all buses could be equipped with these breakthrough devices. Your pressure as citizens can speed the day. Make your views known.

Yes, if we are ever to achieve an environment that is truly safe, clean, healthy and fun to live in, we will have to modify some of our most deeply held beliefs about transportation.

We have to start thinking in terms of an overall, balanced system of transportation to provide this country with the mobility it demands in an age of expanding leisure, recreation, travel, and tourism. This will be our biggest growth industry in the next 10 to 15 years, according to the Wall Street Journal.

That's why I am personally delighted that Niagara has set up an institute for the study of transportation, travel and tourism. There is nothing like it in the academic world. The institute can perform a valuable service by training energetic young people in the skills of this growing industry which is so full of potential for world peace and understanding.

I believe that the initiative shown by Dr. Porrath and his colleagues will be emulated during this decade by other universities, public as well as private. Those of you who are getting your degrees from the transportation institute today will play a central role as transportation experts in the coming years.

The next 10 years will be exciting ones in transportation. In the past, we accepted an ideology of growth for its own sake -- more cars, more planes, and so on. But that can no longer be the answer in overdeveloped nation like ours.

That's why we in the Department of Transportation are strongly emphasizing new methods to move people. We are looking at the high speed trains in the Northeast Corridor, the tracked air cushion vehicle which we'll start to build soon, the vertical and short-take-off planes for medium distance journeys, and even such concepts as the tube train, the dial-a-bus, and the gravitrain.

You people are going to be living in a new age of mobility that will make ours look pretty antiquated. But you will not be a generation which confuses motion with direction, or speed with progress. You graduates of 1970 are going to make a difference, more than any generation before you. Whatever else you become, you will not be a careless generation. Not after attending to the words of Simon and Garfunkel.. "People talking without speaking -- people hearing without listening..."

I believe your generation will speak the truth and live the truth and repudiate those who do not have the courage or the faith to work within the system.

Our problems are not those of a failing society; they flow from the conscience of an expanding one. Our descendants -- generations in the future -- could look back on 1970 as the fulcrum of history -- the time when an ancient people known as the Americans accepted their responsibility to lead the human race toward a new epoch in its endless progress.

The path has already been blazed by men of extraordinary foresight like Joseph Wood Krutch, the scholar and former drama critic who quit Manhattan 20 years ago to live with his books and his thoughts in an adobe hut in the desert outside Tucson. He became an enthusiast for nature and a defender of the American environment long before it was a public issue.

Just a few weeks before his recent death, Krutch wrote a prophetic 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... 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."

What profound wisdom there is in these simple Christian words. Their meaning is obvious. Your generation will have the power to destroy all life. Or it can create a garden of serenity.

I hope you will always strive to be equal to this dream of perfection. Certainly those who have been educated here at Niagara will never surrender to the forces of commercialism or cheap and deadly sensations. Keep your commitment to learning, retain your passion for love and truth. Have confidence in yourself, hope in mankind, and faith in God.

Do not forget what it means to be young, and to have counted. My best wishes for coming years of triumph.

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