COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS
BY
THE HONORABLE SOL M. LINOWITZ
FORMER UNITED STATES AMBASSADOR
to the
ORGANIZATION OF AMERICAN STATES,
at the
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN
ANN ARBOR, MICHIGAN
Sunday, August 9, 1970

" Reflections on a Troubled Campus"

I am pleased to be here at the University of Michigan, to pay respects during this commencement season to an institution for which I have such high regard; and to your President, Dr. Fleming, who has given such effective leadership to higher education.

This is a time of deep anxiety and uncertainty both at home and abroad. It is a time of paradox when we have learned to achieve most and to fear most. It is a time when we know more about war than we do about peace, more about killing than we do about living.

It is also a fateful time. In the past men have warred over frontiers. They have come into conflict over ideologies. They have fought to better their daily lives. Today, however, each crisis overlaps the other and we find ourselves in an upheaval that touches upon every phase of our existence - national and international, religious and racial.

Part of the upheaval is as old as poverty. Part is as new as a walk in lunar space. In this country we feel it in a society sullen and dissatisfied with things as they are, and in the underlying seething and unrest that have so frequently erupted into violence.

Unhappily violence is no stranger to our history. Many - too many - of the excesses we deplore today are the fruits of yesterday. We have only to remember the early traders who brought the first black slaves in chains to this country a year before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth, and thus laid some of the groundwork for today's headlines.

Our nation itself was born in violent revolution. And as we continued our expansion we seized Indian lands or made treaties with them which we broke when convenient through military force wherever necessary. We secured our Southwestern and Western borders through force of arms - including a war that in its time enkindled as much dissention as Vietnam. Historically, therefore, there is some small basis in fact for H. Rap Brown's bitter dictum that "Violence is as American as cherry pie."

But despite all this, we are basically a progressive people committed to the goals of true civilization and to the law as the means for achieving social change.

Yet it is all too clear that in recent days confidence in the law has seriously declined in this country. It is all to plain that resort to violence as a means of achieving change is more widespread than at any time in our recent history, particularly among those from whom we would normally expect enlightened and principled responses to pressing problems.

And that's what I want to talk to you about today.

Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes once described our system of government as based on the notion that truth is most likely to emerge from competition in the marketplace of ideas. Putting it another way, our system assumes that those who feel themselves affected by public policy will feel free to contribute to the national debate. This in turn places upon all of us an obligation not to remain silent - not to remain part of a silent majority or a silent minority - when we believe we have a contribution to make.

So throughout our history we have respected the right of those who have wanted to contribute in the form of dissent - even against a war in which we were engaged. We have done honor to Thoreau who preferred jail to paying taxes in support of a war he thought iniquitous; to James Lowell who put his opposition into poetry; to William Vaughn Moody who wrote:

"Let him never dream
That his bullet's scream
Went wide of its island mark;
Home to the heart
Of his darling land
Where she stumbled
And sinned in the dark."

And Americans such as Carl Schurz, Samuel Gompers, Jane Addams, Andrew Carnegie, Mark Twain joined the outcries against what they regarded as an unjust war; [while William James asked: "Why do we go on?" and answered: "Because first the war fever and then the pride which always refuses to back down under fire."]

Because we have respected the right to dissent, it has proved to be an effective instrument for change. Let us candidly admit that for generations our laws perpetuated deprivations inconsistent with basic constitutional principles. Despite years of protracted litigation, many restrictive laws began to break down only when they were tested by deliberate but non-violent acts of dissent and passive resistance. Luncheon counter sit-ins and freedom rides were among the most striking examples of the techniques that became

necessary to expose injustices which were being justified in the name of the law. These were heartening examples of the individual's capacity to effect public policy through active, peaceful dissent.

But by gradual yet perceptible progression, this strategy of peaceful noncompliance began to take on a more dissonant tone - and fierce assaults on the social order were launched in the name of the loftiest causes. In the fever of heightened expectations, personal frustration and group restlessness, the crucial distinction between peaceful civil disobedience and violent social upheaval became obliterated.

The university has traditionally heard these frustrated, impatient voices of dissent long before other segments of society. Clark Kerr once compared the universitites in this country to the canaries which miners used to take down into the mines with them. Being more sensitive to bad air than the miner, the canary would keel over first, warning the miner that he was in trouble.

Similarly, over the years the restlessness on our university campuses has been a warning of trouble in a troubled society. This is what is happening today. The university seethes today as it senses and, indeed, amplifies the widespread public unease and malaise, born of a decade of vicious racial tension; a prolonged war in Vietnam; three major assassinations, and now Kent State and Jackson State and Augusta; the stalemate in the battle against hunger and poverty; a recognition of the rapid deterioration in the quality of our environment; and the increased awareness of the inequities of our society. And the university sounds a cry of despair over the discrepancy between the promise and the performance of our institutions.

In confronting these problems at this difficult moment - both on and off the campus - there is a grave danger that we may be losing our foothold - that we may be ignoring one of our greatest strengths: our shared conviction that we can best solve our problems through open discussion in an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect. What we do about that conviction will determine - far more than the gross national product, far more than the outcome in Vietnam and Cambodia - the strength of the bond which holds our nation together.

Yet in recent days we seem to have forgotten this. For the hard, cold fact is that precisely in this area where our strength must be greatest we have been sapping away at our own resources. In past weeks we have watched people of great lung and muscle power - on both sides of the political spectrum and on and off the campus - launch bitterly divisive attacks upon one another. We have heard the word "intellectual" again become a kind of rallying cry for the bully in our society. We have seen men turn to name-calling and invective, as group has attacked group with rage and with passion and sought to polarize our society. And through it all, we have watched the cement which has held us together as a people begin to crumble.

It is time - long past time - for us to talk with one another about how to make the cement of our society bind again.

It is time for us to regain an understanding of what it is that has made this country strong.

The founders of this republic knew there would be times when this nation would be sorely tested, when public excitement would imperil liberties and when men would have to summon the greatest degree of restraint and moderation. They knew that there would be times when the coercive eliminators of dissent would ultimately seek out the dissenters. They also believed, however, that this nation would not, in any hour of emergency, forget the basic source of its strength while people huddled silent and fear-bound like clusters of polyps. They understood that a truly democratic nation could exist only on forthrightness, courage, confidence and, above all, integrity.

As one who well remembers the period some 15 or 16 years ago when we were still climbing out of the dark pit of McCarthyism - when thoughtful students thought in silence rather than risk being labeled "controversial" - I am personally gratified by the lively interest of American students in the world about them. An apathetic young American citizenry would be an international tragedy; one that is alert, interested - and yes, vigorously argumentative - is a vital line of defense against the decline of our free institutions - institutions founded on our constitutional commitment to free speech.

This is <u>particularly true</u> at a university. For if a university must stand for anything, it must stand preeminently for faith in reason rather than in dogma, in <u>rationality</u> rather than in inevitability in the free rather than the shuttered mind.

The university must be our response to the bigot, the demagogue, the prophet of doom, the tub thumper - no matter how high his office. For it is here above all other institutions that we proudly proclaim our faith in the American dream and in our aspirations for tomorrow.

It seems to me that if there is one attitude you should take away from a college education, it is a passionate commitment to free discussion - and a recognition that your own ideas may be wrong. For the alternative to free and open discussion is not, as some would suggest, a joyous anarchy in which no individual is bound by the decision of another, but a dictatorship in which all are disenfranchised but the few - and the few are frightened.

You who are, as the current expression goes, "doing your thing", are really not doing anything that is revolutionary or new - especially when it comes to not trusting anyone over 30. As some of you may recall, it was <u>Thoreau</u> who once said: "I have lived some thirty years

on this planet, and I have yet to hear the first syllable of valuable or even earnest advice from my seniors."

As one who has lived for considerably more than thirty years on this planet, perhaps my advice may not be valuable; but I assure you that it is earnest. Indeed, it draws from Thoreau again, who also said: "It is characteristic of wisdom not to do desperate things."

The essence of wisdom, the very soul of learning, is to recognize truth, to know that no one among you - as, indeed, no one among us - has all the answers. Perhaps the fatal flaw in my generation was not to recognize this truism earlier. You must not fall into the same path of error.

For with all the accumulated wisdom of my generation, and with all the wisdom of yours, who can deny that each of us has fallen into desperate ways. My generation has been involved in too many tragic wars, big and little, declared and undeclared. Yours, in protesting against the desperation of war, has itself turned to desperate things to demonstrate your dissatisfaction with things as they are.

I recognize, of course, that there is a vast difference between the violence each of our generations has spawned. Obviously, one cannot compare battlefield horror with protest and the motivation that inspires most young people to voice their determination to change the status quo.

But what does trouble me deeply is that too many intelligent and sensitive students have failed to understand that where one man flouts the law, no man can be confident of the protection of any law; and that one who assaults the balance of the legal order in our society is actually pushing it further away from our common goal of freedom under law.

Too many have failed to recognize that there are very few instances in history where violence has successfully remedied injustice - and very many instances in history where violence has provoked injustice.

Thomas Carlyle glued to the books in his library a personal book-plate with a drawing of a candle and the legend: "I Burn That I May Be Of Use." The motto is old-fashioned, but hardly foolish. It is by no means undesirable that you, the youth of today, should be burning with determination to improve the world. Mankind needs flame, and only the young can supply it. But the educated man will also understand that mankind's accomplishment is the control, not the propagation, of fire. And the man who wishes to call himself educated and who seeks to lead others must ask - must know - why it is he is burning and must ask whether he is really being of use.

Now is the time for all of us to move forward in a massive new effort for understanding, not only on the campus, but everywhere. We have heard too much already of the dissonance of conflict, the angry rumblings of revolt, the shrill cries of violence - and it is enough. It is time to chart new directions, to hear the true sounds of man's creative genius - not only the genius of his music and art and literature, his science and technology, but the genius of his peacemaking and peacekeeping.

Your generation is the first in all history to believe that we have within our reach the tools and resources to abolish poverty and discrimination in all their forms. You have the opportunity to raise your voices, to exert your influence to assure that these tools and these resources are used constructively, compassionately, peacefully, to help better the human condition.

So today I ask you and your generation not to curtail, but to magnify and broaden your protest.

I ask you to protest against all those who seek to set group against group and individual against individual in this country in order to impair our mutual respect and trust for one another.

I ask you to protest against all those who advocate finding answers through desperate acts no matter how noble their cause.

I ask you to protest against the failures of our society to rid us of hunger and disease and illiteracy that still affect millions of our fellow citizens.

I ask you to protest against the malnutrition that is slowly starving at least one-fourth of humanity, against the hovels in which millions of human beings on this earth are compelled to live.

I ask you to protest against the lack of opportunity and hope which confronts millions upon millions on this earth.

I ask you to protest against discrimination and prejudice in all their forms.

I ask you to protest against life as usual in the face of unspeakable human .

There is no simple answer, no magic formula, that will, in a blazing flash, right all wrongs. If you can spark a constructive program for the future, your success will show that peaceful revolution - peaceful change - can be the key to the future.

It can also be your answer to the preachers of hate and violence - to all who fear becoming a good neighbor to the man in Latin America, in Africa, in Asia - or in Chicago, Harlem and Washington -

to all who blindly seek shelter in a world that no longer exists; in short, to all who want to stop the world and get off. I hope your answer will be that you want to stay on; that you want to become a vital part of the world and add your own contribution toward making it a better place for all men everywhere. This way you can prove your willingness to accept the charge of history with the imagination and understanding befitting the leaders of the wealthiest and most powerful country on earth.

About a hundred years ago Emerson described the opportunity and challenge you face today:

> "If there is any period one would desire to be born in, is it not the age of revolution when the old and the new stand side by side and admit of being compared; when the energies of all men are searched by fear and by hope; when the historic glories of the old can be compensated by the rich possibilities of the new era."
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> "This time, like all times, is a very good one, if we but know what to do with it."

As I bid you Godspeed today, I hope, I pray, that you will know "what to do with it."