



COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS BY JAMES RESTON
WILLIAMS COLLEGE, JUNE 9, 1960

PRESIDENT SAWYER, MEMBERS OF THE FACULTY, PARENTS AND MEMBERS OF THE

CLASS OF 1960:

I can't get over the idea that a few minutes of silence or a walk in the woods would be more appropriate than one more speech on so hot and sad a day, but I will try to be brief. In fact, if I run over ten minutes, I will welcome a demonstration.

There is a certain ritual to these occasions. Some middle aged speaker you never heard of is supposed to tell you that the world is a hopeless mess, that it is all the fault of the Older Generation, and that we're just waiting around for you to bound out of college and fix things up.

Well, I have news for you. The world is not a hopeless mess. It's not all our fault, whatever is wrong. And we're certainly not hanging around to hand things over to you. The first thing you have to learn when you get out is how to tolerate middle aged bores. And the second thing is that these same bores are determined to stick around and get in your way as long as they can.

It must have been hard for you not to wonder this week whether you were going out into a lunatic world. The Puritan conscience always reappears in times of great tragedy. The assassin's guilt is suddenly transferred to the whole American nation. I wish we confessed our real sins more often and didn't assume quite so much responsibility for our imaginary sins.

America is not sick: it is drunk. It is dizzy with change. The vast advance in the pace and power of life has been too much for it. We have changed the world faster than we can change ourselves or our institutions. We are making more progress with the social reconstruction of our lives, in my view,

than any other nation in the world, but we are in a race with the pace of history and are still falling behind.

It is not the politicians who are changing the world. Johnson with his modified capitalism, Wilson with his modified socialism, De Gaulle with his modified monarchy, and Brezhnev and Kosygin with their modified communism are all in the same boat. They are all rushing about trying to make the pitiless facts of the modern world fit their old conceptions, old ideologies, and old habits and they are all in trouble. For it is the scientist and the ordinary people--the fertility of the human mind and the fertility of the human body--that are changing the world faster than we can adapt to its new problems and opportunities.

Obviously, there is a lot of mental and moral insanity in our own society. Take a walk in any great city at night, if you dare: the evidence is all around you. We used to pray: Lead us not into temptation... Now we are not being led but driven into it. Many people have so much that they cannot handle it; many have so little that they cannot bear it. And the affluence is conspicuous, and the waste appalling, and the voice of the hawker--urging us to buy more and consume more on credit--cannot be avoided even in the most miserable slum.

H.G. Wells wrote a little book thirty-three years ago called "What Are We to do With Our Lives?" Reading it again this week, I had to wonder why we have been so slow to understand the consequences of change. He was saying then, not that society was sick, but that it was blind and thoughtless, that we had to clear a lot of mouldy rubbish out of our minds before we could begin the effective work of reconstruction. And then, he thought, we could go forward with what he called an OPEN conspiracy to build a cooperative peaceful world.

I mention this now because it seems so relevant to me at the present time. Let me be specific. The failure to keep asking this big question--What

are we doing with our lives?--not only leads many individuals but many great corporations, and even great governments into narrow and dangerous paths. If we were reasonably clear about this in Washington, I doubt whether we would be spending our money and energies the way we now are. Vietnam did not develop into a world issue, dividing the alliance and our own people and postponing the urgent cooperative work of the Northern Industrial nations because of the acts of wicked men. If Lyndon Johnson had been clear about the nation's priorities, he probably would not have given so much weight to his personal fear of being the first American President to lose a war.

I don't want to plunge into this thicket except to make a point. It is that men and institutions and government need clear definition of the central purpose of their lives if they are to avoid being diverted constantly by second-

ary or even trivial considerations. The more complicated the world becomes, the more we specialize; the more we specialize, the more each of us concentrates on his little part of the job, and before long, if we are not careful, we find

that all this machinery of colleges, newspapers, governments, and even churches clatters along without much reference to the purpose of all this activity.

Incidentally, this is the really exciting thing about the Roman Catholic Church today. Pope John asked and imposed the right question: Is the church relevant to the modern age? If not, let's make it relevant.

The student activity in this year's elections provides another

illustration of this problem of the effective use of our lives. The students

have concentrated on electing Senator McCarthy. He did not discover and inspire

them so much as they discovered and inspired him. But anyway, they have made an

art of playing hooky and have shown in the process that they can be effective

working within the system.

Islam and Hindu, all over the world. These things often involve the future of highly emotional controversies between communist and non-communist, Jew and Arab,

and a military revolution all at the same time. We are involved in a racial revolution, a social revolution, an urban and agrarian revolution, a political revolution, a violent age. We are trying to deal with a political

security around the presidential candidates in this election five years later.

with the same old political campaigning techniques, and we provided no real through political mobs in the emotional atmosphere of Dallas. But we still go on John Kennedy was killed too. We criticized crowded political rallies and rides tears deal with the assassination of Robert Kennedy. We deplored violence when But deplored violence does not deal with the problem any more than torrents of Everybody is deplored the use of violence these days, and no wonder,

idea,

I'm a little optimistic about this, but I still think there's something to the James McGregor Burns, who knows more about defeat in politics than I do, thinks fifteen or twenty of them, and this would be a great service to the Republic. and worked to bring them down in November, I believe they could retire at least the University students in their districts got together, even at this late date, identify the fifty most conspicuous dunderheads running for office this year. If Consider, for example, the worst of them. It would not be difficult to

candidates.

with the requirements of the coming age than the most of the Congressional dates in both parties who have a chance to win the Presidency are more in touch not in the Presidential race but in the Congressional races. All the candidates may be, however, that the really critical battleground for change this year lies by concern is that, if they are disappointed, they will give up. It

nations and races and creeds for which many men are willing to die or to kill. The facts are plain and pitiless. My worry about the young rebels of today is not that they are protesting and demonstrating against many aspects of our society, but that they will stick for one or two brisk skirmishes and then quit. It is not hard to master the techniques of militant anarchy. A modern technological society is very vulnerable to it. Fifty determined young men with the aid of a few technicians can go down the manholes and cripples, not only Columbia but the City of New York. Any madman can terrorize a city or kill a Senator, but remaking a society into something even a little more fair, decent, and compassionate is a much more difficult, and complicated job. It is very hard work. It takes a very long time. It requires a great many patient people sticking with a great many tough jobs, but the greatest ally of the militant minority is the indifference of the majority. Even today, only a very small proportion of our people are actively engaged in the improvement of our common life. I am concerned about what seems to me a growing mood of pessimism in the land. Maybe I make too much of it because we in the reporting business are largely responsible for it. We concentrate on the contention and conflicts of life; we have forgotten Berlin, which was the real danger to world peace but talk only about Vietnam; we climb all over Columbia University in its troubles and ignore Williams. This is natural but it depresses the national mind, and despair can be almost as dangerous as indifference. Unless I miss my guess, we shall make our way through this gloomy period, whatever else you can say about America it is grappling with the great questions of human life. It is working on the questions of world peace. It is at least

conscious of the poor. It is making a greater effort to compose the injustices to the Negro people.

How then is a college graduate to approach this kind of world? One way is to reject it and escape from it. There are many ways of doing this, some of them quite fashionable. Academic life provides many comfortable corners where you can lose yourself in your own little narrow specialty and ignore social and political issues of the age. It is not true that there is "no place to hide". A remarkable number of highly intelligent people are hiding all over the place. Business life offers many opportunities to move from air-conditioned offices to fancy suburbs along wide highways that by-pass not only the slums but much of life itself.

The excuses for bugging out are endless. You can say and maybe even prove, that the world has been taken over by inferior men who do not have your noble vision of life or are too slow for your tastes. You can gather with other "superior" people and scoff at the banalities of the press and politicians. And of course you cop out altogether and live for yourself, if you can stand it, with the help of whatever stimulents you can find to ease your depression. Maybe you would be happier in porky middle age than I, but I wonder.

Meanwhile, there is work to be done. The peace talks have started but last week we lost more boys in Vietnam than in any other week of the war. Robert Kennedy is dead, but after all the crying and exhortation, the problems remain. That is the way the world has gone from the beginning:

Listen to these lines:

"To whom can I speak today?

The Gentle man has perished,

The violent man has access to everybody

To whom can I speak today?

the last third of the Century. We are 23 years beyond the second world war. We
So misery is a comparative thing. I mentioned that we are just entering
punished students, instead of the other way around.

confronted by the first World War. Also, in those days, college presidents
if you go back another generation, most of your grandfathers and grandmothers were
history of the human race. That one made Vietnam look like a minor skirmish. Or
had the chance to go to college) in the middle of the most savage world war in the
lot. When your parents were your age, they got out of college (if in fact they
Twentieth Century. Far from pitying you, I think you are a comparatively lucky
You are the first college graduating class in the last third of the
to me that a cool look at the present age justifies a little more hope.

write as well as the old grumblers. Besides, despite all our troubles, it seems
The main difference I find in the modern grumblers is that they don't
"the good old days."

This was written over a hundred years ago by Walt Whitman. So much for
scondrelism..."

in the women, nor the women in the men...The great cities reek with robbery and
appalling. We live in an atmosphere of hypocrisy throughout. The men believe not
lying principles of the States are not honestly believed in...The spectacle is
and here in the United States. Genuine belief seems to have left us. The under-
"Never was there, perhaps, more hollowness at heart than at the present,

Or hear this second quotation:

very good one, over four thousand years ago in the time of Egypt's Middle Kingdom.
This was not written by Gore Vidal, but by a gloomy bard, and not a

The world is surrendered to criminals."

There are no righteous men,

have problems, God knows, but if we look at them in historic terms, they are not all that bad. Twenty-three years after the first world war was 1942. By that time, Hitler had already occupied the Rhineland. Mussolini was in Abyssinia; almost all of Europe was overrun by the German armies, and the United States was about to be attacked at Pearl Harbor.

The situation today is quite different. This country, by its sacrifices, has created a new balance of power in the world. We have not found the answer to small wars, but at least we have avoided a big war for longer than the British and French did when they had primary responsibility for maintaining peace between 1919 and 1939.

The outlook is not hopeless. The American people are not "sick."

There is plenty of sickness among us but mainly we are just diverted or indifferent. The political process is responsive to the will of the people, but, like love, it has to be expressed at the right times.

Meanwhile, on a more personal note, I would urge you to be very careful about scoffing at the moral values of the past. Some things we do know about

future. You are going to live in a crowded and convulsive world. The way things are going it is likely to be a deceitful world, dominated by large institutions. If on top of this, all your fears and charges are true, that it is run by fools

and demons--then surely personal love and friendship, and some kind of faith will be more precious than ever before. Already, the family is the one unit of society that makes more sense than any other, and I cannot believe that it is in your

selfish interest to trifle with the values on which the honor and fidelity of the family are based.

This brings me to my final point. I sometimes think that on the great occasions of life, we celebrate the wrong people. On birthdays, we remember the

child and forget the Mother. We grieve for the dead and sometimes overlook those who are left behind and envy the dead. And at graduation we celebrate the graduate and forget the parents. This is not quite fair--especially now when graduation is often an expensive interlude between two expensive phases of education--all at the Old Folks expense.

So I congratulate not only the class of '68 but the parents of the class of '68. The latter have at least stayed the course, and that, after all, is the main thing.