

BY HENRY R. LUCE

THE
HUMAN
SITUATION

*Being the address delivered
at the Fifty-third Commencement
Stanford University*



LAURENCE FROST AMPHITHEATER
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Members of the Graduating Class:

IN THIS PLACE OF BEAUTY so familiar to you, it gives me great happiness to share the last few precious moments of your college life. You are here to receive the well-earned evidence of serious work. You wear the cap and gown devised centuries ago. They signify knowledge acquired in the discipline of the intellectual tradition of the Western world. It will be the privilege of your President to certify that, having submitted to that discipline, you belong to the fellowship of those who seek truth in conscience and in humility. It is my privilege, as a fellow student, to welcome you into this fellowship: life-long, world-wide, immortal.

All of us wish that we might welcome you into a different sort of world than it now is, but we salute you with a deeper affection, because you go forth so resolutely to face the world as it is, to face personal danger for your country, and for all of us.

One truth is already yours—the truth that life is a perilous adventure in a dangerous universe.

Another truth, in various times and places, men have sought to prove — and not wholly without success — the truth that they are creators, that, even in a perilous universe they can create societies which seem to them reasonably good and worth maintaining. You have arrived at a time in the world's history when this truth needs, and needs desperately, to be proved again. You will find this task to be involved with a peculiar difficulty. For men differ not only

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on what is good; in our time they differ most radically on the basic question: What is man?

A quarter of a century ago a Frenchman and an American met to establish the peace of the world. Each of them had an idea about the nature of man. The Frenchman was Clemenceau, called the Old Tiger. He said: "Human nature is always the same." The American was Woodrow Wilson. He said: "Human nature has entered a new phase in its development."

This difference of opinion was not an idle philosophical subtlety. It was at the very heart of the conflict of Versailles.

Since then, much history has passed over the dam—whole Niagaras of history have rushed into the ocean of human memory. Tons and tons of books have been written. And what do we know? Who was right?—Clemenceau or Wilson?

It would be convenient to say that both were partly right, and partly wrong. But such convenience is not possible in the practical world. For you are constantly required to act on one assumption or the other. Your actions may be confused and contradictory, just as your opinions are confused and contradictory. But it is folly to suppose that you will ever achieve a perfect amalgam of the points of view of Clemenceau and Wilson. "Know thyself"—it were well to know with which assumption which of us is more nearly in accord.

In welcoming you today into the fellowship of those who seek truth, let me confess to you as fully as I can in these few minutes my opinion in this matter. I would be happy if my opinion were worthy to be called my faith. Shallow opinion or deathless faith, I take my stand with Woodrow Wilson. And for a very simple reason. For while I cannot be sure

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that human nature has entered a new phase of its development, I cannot escape the conclusion that human nature must presently rise to a new level of goodness—either that or come close to destroying itself in a mounting discord and despair. As I listened the other night to Mr. Hoover's masterly summary of what has been happening to man, my opinion seemed to be confirmed and also my faith.

To agree with Wilson on the main premise is not necessarily to agree with him, in past or future tense, on what to do about it. And I would ill deserve the confidence placed in me this day if I were to give any encouragement to youth to ignore the stubborn wisdom of Clemenceau. On the contrary, I urge you never to forget Old Tiger. Acquaint yourself with his ferocity—for with the fierce love of a tigress for her cubs, he fought for the salvation of his country and his people. Remember him; remember his premise: "Human nature is always the same." As long as you live, there will be plenty of reason to know that human nature—your own and every man's—is both stubborn and weak, and usually most stubborn in wickedness and stupidity, usually most weak in goodness and intelligence.

But you do not need to be told this. When you project the issues to the world stage and consider the problems of world peace, you have no illusions that peace can be established and maintained by any magic formulas. You know that hereafter this nation must be a strongly armed nation, with a vigilant diplomacy. We must learn to be as wise as serpents—and not altogether as harmless as doves.

Nor is it only in the great affairs of state that human nature proves as unreliable as ever. When I was going to my train in New York a monster sign on a Broadway movie palace shriekingly inquired of me: "*Is Youth on a Moral*

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Binge? Admission 55 cents." The frailty of human nature is evidently still the most exploitable fact about it.

But, finally, as regards the Clemenceau view of human nature, it does not necessarily result in a cynically depraved attitude toward human affairs. Far from it, the Clemenceau view is perhaps the one most apt to be the basis of what one may term a *civilized* attitude. When we think of the best in old Europe—and perhaps even more typically in old China—we think of eminent men who were not overly impressed by how good men are, nor overly distressed by how bad they are. Taking things as they found them, these civilized men had the skill and the will to establish and maintain societies in which there was more harmony than discord, and in which life was, to a rather remarkable degree, tolerable.

After having been the arbiter of Europe for three decades, the Swedish Chancellor Axel Oxenstierna wrote to his son, who was representing him at the peace conference after the Thirty Years' War. The son was discouraged, but not the old man, who wrote: "Do you not know, my son, with what little wisdom the world is governed?" That was a civilized, an urbane attitude. And it worked: Europe proceeded to enjoy two of its most brilliant, and, on the whole, most peaceful centuries.

What then is wrong with the civilized view? Does not the very name I have given it define it as the appropriate attitude for educated men and women? Whatever attitude we adopt for demagogic purposes—for our public or personal propaganda—ought we not privately to understand that a tolerantly cynical view of human nature is appropriate among us who wear cap and gown? There is only one trouble with the civilized view, and that is that civilization

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may be breaking down. Already, I think, there has flashed through your mind the famous phrase of Sir Edward Grey in 1914: "Everywhere in Europe the lights are going out and we shall not see them lit again in our lifetime." Actually we never did. And even that is not quite the point. The point is that it was never possible that the lights which went out should be relit. The lights which went out were the lovely gleams of candlelight in castle hall, the warm glow of the kerosene lamp in cottage parlor, the romantic gaslight of the streets of London and Paris and Vienna. These nineteenth-century lights could never go on again. Another light was waiting for its turn—the very light of the lightning itself—the Age of Electricity, the Age of the Dynamo—a New Age indeed, an age when all the power of heaven and hell was once again impatient to be linked, in a new mystery, to the life of mortal men.

My argument then is that what we call the civilized point of view toward man and his affairs is not only a rational but even perhaps the most useful attitude on one condition—namely, provided that a civilization exists, more or less coherent and stable, in which to apply it. But if such a civilization does not in fact exist, then there is set up a "cosmic demand" for another attitude. The moral imperatives begin again to hammer on the iron doors of fate.

It was something of this which Wilson felt. It was an American kind of feeling. For nothing is more American than to feel that what ought to be done can be done and what can be done ought to be done.

Something in the historic situation—then and now—Wilson truly felt. But there were other prophets prophesying the coming of your age. Beginning about the time when your parents were born and proceeding until now, the most

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formidable books written by men of the Western world have been books announcing a time of great troubles, if not death, for Western civilization. Nor were they all written by pessimists. There was also, for example, that indefatigable optimist, H. G. Wells. In his *Outline of History* and other books, Wells could scarcely restrain himself from jumping up and down with excitement trying to tell his dumb readers that before them lay the most magnificent epoch in human history—if only, if only, they wouldn't be so dumb; if only, if only they would take his advice and appoint ten scientists to run the world. Oh, H. G. Wells adored scientists!

Taking all the prophets together—Wilson for American democracy, Wells for scientific management, and all the rest—I think we can discern two basic facts which call for a new dispensation in human affairs. They are both positive facts. They are cause for joy, not gloom. The first is the dynamic spread of the idea of human freedom—an idea of which Aristotle had only a faint glimmering, but which now, after 1,000 battles and 10,000 martyrs, is common talk among even the world's illiterate. And the second fact is the culmination of the idea that knowledge is power. Aristotle may have fathered this idea; it has given to every American the mechanical equivalent of 100 slaves, or 200, or 300.

Freedom and power—Wilson understood the first of these ideas but not the second. But he did understand that something had to be done—something radical, bold, courageous, magnanimous. Policy must go out to meet a human nature “entering upon a new phase of development.” On so much, I think, we must take our stand with Wilson.

Freedom and power. We can see more clearly today

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what the problem is. We have the advantage of a quarter of a century which though otherwise so ignoble has been fantastically brilliant in the attainment of power through scientific knowledge. We can see now how these two facts of our time, freedom and power, conflict and nullify each other. The same power which frees men is the power which may be used to seduce and enslave and destroy them. The same machine which can take you to a beatific solitude among the stars rains death on masses of little children.

Freedom and power. There is one other observation to be made about them. While they are both available to all men and will be craved by all men, freedom and power are, at this moment of history, to an extraordinary degree, American phenomena.

This brings us to the heart of the matter which I wished to lay before you today as you reflect upon all you have learned and set out to make your life count for somewhat in the great assizes of history. The challenge of the circumstances of our age is, above all, a challenge to America. Here, if anywhere, men must demonstrate a goodness equal to the power they command.

To be sure, all nations are living together today in a common present. The future will be marked by an unprecedented exchange of ideas and experience.

China and Ind, Hellas and France,
Each hath its own inheritance,
And each to Truth's rich market brings
Its bright divine imaginings.

The question now urgently asked is whether America has something of supreme importance to bring? Has something been brewing here among us which may become a civilization?

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Now, almost nothing is known about how civilizations happen. We used to say that only a dozen men could understand the Einstein equation. There are hardly more who are qualified to speak on the natural history of civilizations. You are fortunate in having one of them, Lewis Mumford, on this campus. But, difficult though it is to say what civilization is, whence it comes and whither it goeth, the word stands for something very real. We recognize it clearly in the panorama of the past. We say, confidently, here it is in Athens, and here in Rome, and here in China. What about America? Is there—in being or becoming—an American civilization? We are not just sure yet. Many Europeans say there isn't. And some American intellectuals agree, no longer believing in Emerson and Whitman. Their suggestion is that we, in America, are simply an incident in Europe's great age of discovery—a boisterous, fertile, fairly happy episode in European history, but, in sum, undignified and not in the deepest sense creative.

Here on this Western shore of our continental home, I should like to give it as my faith that there has been on this continent a unique manifestation of what human life can be. Lincoln said that our nation was conceived in liberty and dedicated to a proposition. That, if true, is unique. I believe it to be true. No other nation, I think, was ever dedicated to any proposition—certainly never before to the proposition of the individual man; that is to say, to the genius and to the worth of all men. In this uniqueness of dedication lies a prophecy—the prophecy that there is, in being and still becoming, an American civilization. It waits now for fulfillment in your lifetime.

As Rome was not built in a day, so neither was this American civilization. It has long since had its first poets

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and seers. It has had its soldiers—many in khaki, many more in denim and calico. Across 3,000 miles the graveyards of innumerable towns and hamlets speak not only of the humble annals of the poor; they speak also, with an eloquence clear and profound, of men and women who fought for something not themselves, of countless individuals who died for something beyond the ranges, who fought and struggled for bright hopes—and for a faith to which they gladly gave the name America.

Should we try to describe the fulfillment of this American civilization? Everywhere today we look forward to the end of the war and we think of the *problem* of re-employment. Problem? Why do we call it a problem? Why not rather an opportunity! I do not mean to be “unrealistic”! I would not so gravely offend the intellectual jargon of the moment. And, indeed, the reconstitution of the peacetime economy is a terrific problem. But somehow we will solve it. Somehow, that is, fifty-five or sixty-five million Americans will be at work—at work with a more magnificent array of tools than any of us can imagine. They will be at work and not as slaves but as free men. And what will they be doing? Oh, innumerable things. I, with some pet plans in my head, will be causing some of these things to be done. You, with pet plans in your head, will be causing yet more things to be done. Every American with pet plans in his head—and are you an American if your head is not buzzing with pet plans, screwball or otherwise?—all Americans will be causing things to be done. Therefore, we ask no one man nor one committee to plan American civilization or to publish total blueprints of our creativeness. Tens of millions of Americans will be enormously at work and they will enjoy the fruits of their labor. Some-

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how, that is—here comes a realistic figure—somehow we will have a national income of \$150,000,000,000. How will we use it? Ah, that's a touchier question. That's what we will have to be more concerned about if we are going to be deeply proud and deeply happy about our American civilization. Americans do not have to learn how to create wealth. If they sometimes forget, they remember again. Americans do not have to learn how to share the wealth—they know how to make a rough justice do that job. They have only to take care that their "justice" is not so rough that they lose the sense of Justice. But how to use wealth—how to work to the glory of God—yes, well, that is man's eternal study and it must be our study once again—and more. The study of how to use our productivity is not one for the few only; not only for those who bring into being a great university like Stanford; the lesson of what to work for, of how to live, is one for all Americans. In learning this lesson they will at last define what they mean by "the American way of life"; they will round out their form of civilization.

An American civilization? We need not worry too much about its outward and visible manifestation; we need not be too impatient to see its fulfillment in magnificent enterprises, if we can be sure that the spirit which informs it is still strong within us.

The American spirit is rich in its variety. As the leaves of autumn in New England are of every color and yet one, so the American spirit takes the color of many soils and blends elm and spruce and magnolia and sagebrush into the landscape of its home.

For one expression of the American spirit, let me take you back halfway across the continent, a little way back

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toward the Pilgrim Fathers. Let us hear what Kansas has to say in Carl Becker's classic essay:

The men who make the world's frontiers, whether in religion or politics, science, or geographical exploration and territorial settlement, have certain distinguishing qualities. They are primarily men of faith. Having faith in themselves, they are individualists. They are idealists because they have faith in the universe, being confident that somehow everything is right at the center of things; they give hostage to the future, are ever inventing God anew, and must be always transforming the world into their ideal of it. In the idealism of Kansas we shall therefore see nothing strangely new, but simply a new graft of familiar American traits.

Are these still familiar American traits. Is this still the American faith? Let us soberly confess that in the last decade or two American faith has seemed to waver. There have been many scoffers of the faith. Doubt has entered into too many hearts. Those who have held to the faith have waited long for its reassertion in policy and action. And now, at last, we behold a strange thing—that this war, despite its confusions, seems to be recalling Americans not only to a sense of their physical power, but also to a renewed sense of their historic faith and their historic mission of freedom.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the West. Here you have rediscovered a vast ocean which for many years lapped without much meaning on your shores. And you have discovered a new greatness in your own land.

Thus, today, the West proposes to take a greater part than ever before in shaping the destiny of the whole nation. This is as it should be. For if the world needs America, America needs the West.

There is only one certificate required for decisive and

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beneficent influence in our national affairs. That is the certificate of faith—the certification that you have faith in yourselves, faith in your own region, faith in man, faith, as Carl Becker says, in the universe, so that you, like your fathers, will always be transforming the world into your ideal of it.

If this is not the spirit which builds civilization, then civilization is not worth bothering about. Something of this spirit must have been at the core of all civilization. But I think that never before was so great a faith in man and his universe as this American faith, the informing principle of a civilization. The American promise to itself and to the world is that a mighty American civilization will proclaim faith in man, faith in God's universe.

One question remains—the most important, indeed the only important question here and now. Will the question of an American civilization make any real difference in your own life, in your pursuit of happiness? Does it really concern you any more than the probable degree of error in the Einstein equation? You feel that it does. But why? For the reason that you are men and women. What then, finally and ever again, what is man?

The title which I have taken for my remarks today is borrowed from a book of rich wisdom, written some years ago, by Macneile Dixon. Professor Dixon, himself quite unterrified, bids us take a very clear-eyed look at the terrifying universe in which we live. Note well a world of ceaseless dangers and stupendous struggles. The earth is full of anger and the seas are full of wrath. Along with the danger note also the beauty, the ineffable sweetness of life. There is music in the air. And looking all about us, into the heights and depths, we shall find nothing so astonishing

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as man—the one who thinks, dreams, suffers. Professor Dixon, cosmic explorer, is enormously excited about man. How extraordinary it is—if you stop to think about it—that you exist at all. Just imagine—you and I exist! And then what? And then, says Dixon:

The astonishing thing about the human being is not so much his intellect and bodily structure, profoundly mysterious as they are. The astonishing and least comprehensive thing about him is his range of vision; his gaze into the infinite distance; his lonely passion for ideas and ideals; for which, such is his affection, he is willing to endure toils and privations, to disdain griefs and frustrations; for which, rating them in value above his own life, he will stand until he dies in the profound conviction he entertains that if nothing be worth dying for nothing is worth living for.

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The inner truth is that every man is himself a creator, by birth and nature, an artist, an architect and fashioner of worlds.

Well, there you are—there you are. Perhaps you do not feel that you rise quite to the height of that heroic portrait. But something of that is you. Something which will always be you is in that portrait of man. You will be concerned, in war or peace, to fashion your own life, and your own home. In that very process, and perhaps a little more intensely because you are an American, you will be always transforming the world into your ideal of it.

In the wild mill of history, let not your heart be troubled. You are not in an alien universe. This universe is our home. We belong here—more than the speechless mountains or the insensible stars, we belong here. For we have work to do. And Love abideth.

In that faith we dare to recommend to you who enter upon a day of battle that you fight the good fight. And in

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that faith it is permitted to us to say farewell again with love and with benediction: The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord lift up the light of his countenance upon you and be gracious unto you, now and forever more.