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Commencement Address by Monroe E. Spaght at Stanford University June 12, 1966

Mr. President, Rev. Read, Members of the Stanford family, Parents, Friends, the Class of 1966.

I thank you, Mr. President, and your people for this most pleasant reason to come home. This is my own, my native land, and to be here today, with family, friends, with Stanford all about me, is a nostalgic and sentimental hour.

To the Class of 1966, congratulations and the very best wishes to you all. This is a day you will never forget, and may it always be a pleasant memory.

I sat once where you sit now. Since that day a long generation of time has gone by. It doesn't seem so long ago--and you won't think so either, for you will take the same road--and one day one of you may find yourself where I now stand.

I sense deeply today this passing of generations, of changing faces. I look at you today and I see the sons and daughters of my generation, the children of the young people who sat alongside me down there on that day not so long ago.

Not so long ago, did I say?

Stanford's first commencement was in June 1892. This is June 1966. Exactly halfway between was June 1929, when we received our diplomas over in Memorial Church.

In time as much Stanford history has gone by since my commencement as had gone by from the University's beginning up to that day in 1929.

Viewed in that context, I must face up to some admission of antiquity. I have to admit that 37 full years have gone by.

What has my generation done with all those years?

This would be an appropriate day to make a brief accounting to you. Let me do this and, as I do, remember that one day you shall do the same, possibly standing here, or facing your children elsewhere or, barring that, in some quiet hour facing your own soul.

It is proper that I should make an accounting, for we too, like you, had received the blessing of an education. "To whom much has been given, of him much shall be required." To us, much had been given.

I could begin by saying that we lived in difficult times. Indeed we did. The Class of 1929 had just left the campus when the great depression was upon us, and it was June of 1940, only 11 years later, when a very great man was moved to say: "The battle of Britain is about to begin. Upon this battle depends the survival of Christian civilization." Such frightening problems were hallmarks of our time. But I want to discard the protective shroud of excuse because every age has its own particular burdens. No generation is without its full complement of problems--problems which seem to it even to exceed those faced by any other generation. Each man's toothache is acutely his own. Perhaps you would do well to remember this, too, and not plan to use your inheritance of problems as any advance excuse for the day when you may stand here.

No, no excuses, for we had our opportunities--and we used them! I believe that history will do well by us in some regards. For example, we will be credited with one of man's brightest pages for accomplishments in increasing knowledge of the world about us.

You know the evidence:

- The highest standard of living the world has ever known.

(more)

--The age of scientific research, with no area of human ignorance immune to the searchlight of organized investigation.

--Great strides in medicine.

--Dramatic advances in transportation, communication.

You know all of this--I don't need to belabor it.

My generation has participated fully in all of these great stories. These accomplishments didn't come about without great dedication and sacrifice and work by all of the trained minds of these decades. Perhaps these things alone could be my justification, for they are hailed so often and are indeed of such great significance. But they aren't all I have in mind. We did some other things.

The record shows that my generation has worked ardently and not without success in areas of human endeavor far removed from the physical sciences. Let me illustrate.

Today, some tell us that man will destroy himself before he learns to live with himself. It is said that we are hopelessly stuck in the advance toward peace, freedom and human dignity. With this I disagree.

We poured out our blood and treasure to defeat the tyrants who would plunge us into a new dark age. After that, we in the United States might have gone on a rampage of conquest. We alone had the bomb. We alone had an economy in full vigor. But the ideal of freedom is our heritage. Never has there been so strong a nation so reluctant to use its strength.

History must honor us for a singular and mighty program of aid and encouragement to help rehabilitate a war-ravaged world. Too, we have strived with patience for understanding with all our neighbors everywhere. We followed this course not from expediency but because of a deep stream of intellectual dedication to the concepts of freedom and human dignity.

I talk about freedom and human dignity and possibly you may be thinking that these words are a bit worn out, perhaps even a little old-fashioned. I know. I am sure I heard them too at my commencement and I am sure that I wasn't very much impressed. But I came slowly to understand them and to see their value, and later still to cherish them as I have seen how deeply they are prized by those who have so much less than we. The concept of freedom is not going out of style. Believe me, it has never been more precious. I can see now that to understand that simple word freedom requires a lifetime of thought and of exposure to it, perhaps even more of exposure to where it is not.

Freedom itself is still in peril--perhaps it always will be--but the voice of freedom was never stronger. Listen to these words:

"I see freedom in the world today as the great life-giving river of which America is the source. It will be whatever we are, not more, not less. So, if we hope to make the principles of freedom meaningful in the world, we must first make sure they have mighty meaning for ourselves."

Words from 1776? No--words of our time. The words of Adlai Stevenson!

Recall once again the best remembered line in John F. Kennedy's inaugural address:

"My fellow-Americans, ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country."

I think that greater still is the one that followed it:

"My fellow-citizens of the world, ask not what America will do for you but what together we can do for the freedom of man."

(more)

The concept, the basic right of the idea of human freedom was never more ardently embraced or more vigorously fought for than by my contemporaries. We have deeds as well as words to show. Never have a people tried harder, nor succeeded more, in expressing a basic belief in freedom and human dignity in practical acts of generosity and faith around the world.

Indeed, much remains to be done. It goes without saying that we had no corner on wisdom. In many a land the ominous cycle of ignorance, poverty, hunger, and disease once again proceeds upon its ancient round. These battles are yet to be won.

Just one other example of accomplishment outside the scientific laboratory, this in the area of education.

The idea of mass education, or as I would prefer to say--everyone educated to the limit of his ability--may not be an American invention, but it might as well have been. For nowhere is it practiced so well.

I saw a little printed verse on a wall in Bangkok. It was attributed to Confucius and went as follows:

"If you plan for a year, plant rice
If you plan for a decade, plant a tree
If you plan for a century, educate."

Our wisdom isn't new, but we are seeing it applied as never before.

In seeing other lands, I am impressed again and again with how unique America is in its dedication to education for all. How sad it is that we are unique, for the world so desperately needs the trained mind. Universal education stands out as one of the most right and proper as well as practical concepts of modern society. Education in its widest, most universal sense is probably the only hope, probably the only path to ultimate peace.

My generation has contributed here. The task isn't finished, but we have helped bring it far. In proportion to total population, the United States has 70 per cent more students in higher education than Russia, nearly three times as many as Canada and Japan, and from four to six times as many as the nations of Western Europe.

Where did all those years go? Let me use my words; they went in a great human effort marked by basic goodness and great accomplishment. They went in decades of hard work concerned as much with human destiny as with scientific research.

But the year is now 1966. Indeed, 37 years have passed and you, our sons and daughters, begin now to take a greater involvement in this world that we have had our hand in fashioning. In our remaining few minutes I would like to pass on to you a few thoughts about what I believe you are going to encounter in your lives leading out from today.

In facing now this ever increasing involvement you pass in a sense from the role of the critic to that of the actor. In no generation before you has there burned more brightly the spirit of free inquiry. I suppose some university presidents in this fair land might use other words, but at Stanford we use dignified words. As I say, free inquiry. Some of your contemporaries, perhaps not particularly you, have been having their say on American campuses about what is wrong here and there.

(more)

We all applaud and encourage the privilege of free inquiry and are not too shaken by seeing it take novel forms in college years. But it is true nonetheless that youth is the time of black and white, while maturity is for shades of grey. We welcome whole-heartedly your fresh and constructive infusion into our world, but you will face the necessity of developing a certain ability to take disappointment and to compromise. There is the sobering requirement for even the most courageous rebel to find some time that no one is granted the power to create a new earth. While revolution will seem simple at 20, there is a day when one learns it may be better to live with a durable non-aggression pact, hopefully involving no major sacrifice of principle.

It has been said that some of your contemporaries "don't think much of the legacy that has been left them." Shame on them! Let them think again about that legacy, much of which is not God-given. Let them think about the simple privilege of being students with the rare freedom of being allowed to dissent. Let them remember, too, that the critic of his father will stand trial before his own children!

But after this admonition, may I predict that, in what I hope will be your never-ending campaign for change, you will be met by and large with tolerance and reason, for one of the great underlying strengths of a very large segment of our society is a reasonably enlightened population with an inherent sense of fair play.

I would believe that your rebellious contemporaries in our land have been treated with a good deal of patience and understanding. You, in turn now, will beget a generation with its dissidents. May I hope that you will be equally patient and understanding of them as we have been of those among you.

In the wider world you will face a full agenda of problems. The one of population is going to be on your doorstep the day after tomorrow. You will have to look squarely into the deadly eye of the hydrogen bomb. And peace will be fleeting and insecure.

But young America faces an additional burden. Here is something I see everywhere I go. The responsibilities we face as a nation are sobering. Everywhere, everyone is looking to you and me for every form of help. Not only food for hungry mouths, or military aid for the preservation of their liberty, but for leadership in thought, for education, for technology, for the rudiments of capability, and the demands are not going to lessen.

You will have to face these demands--and face them with everlasting patience and faith--to friends and foe alike--knowing full well that many of your actions, conceived in generosity and kindness, will be misunderstood. You will not always be loved. And some day you may face a lonesome decision in some distant land--to choose between being despised for weakness and being respected for the justice of your actions even when they hurt. And I think you will learn, as have others who walked the path before you, that there can be only one choice.

They will be times that try men's souls.

You will live in a world of emerging national units, of people who are clamoring for a fairer share of the basic necessities of life. And you will know that the answer, both morally and pragmatically, is to narrow the gap between the haves and the have-nots. You will find that some old and tried institutions, like free enterprise and private investment, will be required instruments to this end. You will need to bring both tried practice and new theory to the task. You will have to lead and inspire, even while practical needs demand practical answers. It will call for the very best in you. (more)

"The final test," as Justice Holmes said, "is battle in some form. It is one thing to utter a happy phrase from a protected cloister; another to think under fire--and to think for action upon which great interests depend."

I say these things not to alarm you, but to tell you that they are there. For this is the world in which you will make your lives. And I know that you will not turn away from your obligations. Perhaps you couldn't, but you wouldn't if you could, for you come of a great people and great tradition.

David Starr Jordan writes of his first meeting with Senator Stanford, when he was being invited to come out and head up the new university. Said Stanford:

"I hope to develop in California a university of the highest order, where students can be trained for usefulness in life."

Usefulness in life. The one, final measure of success. Here again you are blessed, for the world never needed you so much. In your time, every trained mind will face the greatest imaginable opportunity for being useful to his fellow men.

"To whom much has been given, of him much shall be required." To you, much has been given, but you will merit our trust. We admire you so much. We have great faith in you. One day you will face your summing up. When all of your achievements have been cheered and all your shortcomings acknowledged, may there remain a solemn pride, a kind of joy, and self-respect.

One last thought:

Many of you today take leave of these beautiful hills, these lovely skies and red-tiled roofs. These are exteriors, but their meaning is more, for they enshroud a great university. Part of it will go with you and will be in your substance forever. It will be the spirit of the founders and of every teacher and of every one of us who have gone before you. It will be a nostalgic, sentimental, but meaningful part of every day of your life.

And for this blessing may I ask one thing, that you be forever a champion of the concept of the "university," a champion of the old ideas of truth, knowledge and, above all, of freedom in all its meanings.

John Masefield, the English Poet Laureate, summed it up absolutely when he wrote:

"There are few earthly things more beautiful than a university--a place where those who hate ignorance may strive to know; where those who perceive truth may strive to make others see."

I charge you to resist the efforts of anyone who, under any pretext whatsoever, attempts to divert this or any other university from its hard-won classic objectives. Be a champion of good and universal education--it's really the one, great hope. In that same first meeting with Dr. Jordan, Senator Stanford said it well: "I insist that there can never be too much education."

If we could only be here, one more generation down the road from the Farm, to hear your account of stewardship. What a story you will have! God bless you all!

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