



# Department of Justice

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COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

BY

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TO THE

1990 GRADUATING CLASS  
UNIVERSITY OF SCRANTON

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Hodding Carter, former spokesman for President Jimmy Carter's state department, unburdened himself in The Wall Street Journal recently on the subject of commencement addresses. He noted that:

"If the speakers are even moderately self aware, they know they are irrelevant and are therefore blessedly brief. If they are so fatuous as to believe that the students assembled hang in fascinated rapture upon their every word, they will be unbearably long."

Somewhere between these two extremes must lie a happy medium. And I am bold enough to try to strike it this morning... indeed, I am here and I have no choice!

Let me begin with the obvious.

It is a great source of pride for me to join you today in observing the finale of your undergraduate education. This marks a beginning as well as an end for you, but more important, it should mark a shift. Most of you, I am sure, are already starting to understand what an astute observer, John W. Gardner, meant when he noted:

"The ultimate goal of the educational system is to shift to the individual the burden of pursuing his own education."

I want to extend my warmest congratulations to those of you graduating -- as you take this burden on your own shoulders. But let us also remember others who have done much already to help you lift it this high -- your families and loved ones who have supported your dedication and hard work toward attaining your degree. For them a rousing cheer is certainly in order.

But what sort of burden is it -- this pursuit, from here on out, of your own education? You will be finally "on your own," but what will you be facing "out in the real world"?

One thing for certain: your lives will be lived at a far swifter pace than the world has ever set any previous generation. I'm sure you are aware of the accelerating time line that modern civilization follows. Some while back, Alvin Tofler, the futurist, noted that if we divide the last 50,000 years of man's existence into 800 lifetimes, approximately 62 years each, this is how they break out.

Approximately the first 650 of those lifetimes were spent in caves. Only in the last 70 lifetimes have men communicated by writing, and only during the last six lifetimes have masses of men communicated via the printed word. Only during the last four lifetimes have we been able to tell time accurately, and only in the last two lifetimes have we possessed anything electronic. In fact, the overwhelming majority of all material goods that

undergird our daily life were developed during the immediate present -- the 800th lifetime -- that is, during your own lifetime.

But something else has also been happening during your lifetime. Those who have seldom gained from all this accelerated progress are now reaching out for its rewards, seeking to catch hold of its upward spiral of rising fulfillment. You have witnessed -- over this past senior year of your own lifetimes -- old walls come a-tumbling down, bringing another new birth of freedom, this time worldwide, and a great rush to emulate the Western democracies and the economic promise of our free markets.

All this shows clearly why you must, each of you, keep pursuing your own education. It is your primary means of survival. It also helps shape our collective wisdom about democracy for a teeming world, where mankind is both emergent and resurgent. And it will help you face the situation that H. G. Wells described so eloquently: "Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe."

So this morning I would like to speak to you about your responsibilities along these lines, now that you are about to go officially "out on your own." But as I remind you of those responsibilities -- to yourself, and your fellow men and women -- I also need to remind you that each is accompanied by marvelous

opportunities for you to grow and serve in the years ahead. Always remember, you gain strength from whatever you take on your own shoulders -- even if it looks like heavy lifting at the time.

I

First, what are your responsibilities to yourself?

You owe yourself an unswerving commitment to do your best, to adhere to a personal standard of excellence. Too often, we tend to look on excellence as the accomplishment of only the few, or worse, as a quality effort reserved for only the right moment in a budding career. That should never be the case. Honors are due many of you today who have already excelled, and I applaud your achievements. But I am not restricting my remarks to any such group, even for their most laudable accomplishments.

You should all be challenged by a commitment to excellence. And your commitment should encompass every activity you undertake, not just those that are glamorous, exotic, or financially rewarding.

Indeed, as the same John Gardner once noted:

"An excellent plumber is infinitely more admirable than an incompetent philosopher. The society which scorns

excellence in plumbing because plumbing is a humble activity, and tolerates shoddiness in philosophy because it is an exalted activity, will have neither good plumbing nor good philosophy. Neither its pipes nor its theories will hold water."

The relevance of this message to all of us is apparent from what were essentially the "pipe failures" of our technology at Three Mile Island and in the ill-fated voyage of the Challenger astronauts. It is evident as well in what philosophy professor Allan Bloom calls the "impoverishment of the souls of today's students."

And today there are so many opportunities for excellence to which you can apply your talents. They range --

- \* From reestablishing personal and societal value systems which can eventually conquer what the President has rightly called "the scourge of drugs". . .to the strengthening of the family as an institution of worth in our society.
  
- \* From achieving a higher marketplace ethic. . .to a renewed emphasis on making things rather than making deals.

- \* From finding technologies to deal with the everyday problem of waste disposal. . .to the devising of cures for cancer and for AIDS.
  
- \* From the further, and ultimately, we hope, complete, elimination of barriers based on race, religion, ethnic origin, gender and disability. . .to the seemingly simple, but in fact highly complicated, matter of balancing a national budget.
  
- \* From neighborhoods free of violent crime. . .to a world free from the terror of nuclear weapons.

All of these opportunities for accomplishment -- and I'm sure you can name others -- depend on the application of training and talent, but please note that they also each uphold standards derived from our shared values. Let such standards be operative, and may they always mark your unbending commitment -- as plumbers or philosophers -- to excellence.

## II

Secondly, as you can readily surmise, my call to you for an individual commitment to excellence -- in short, "to be all that you can be" -- encompasses more than just your responsibility to yourself. It also includes your fellow men and women. You are

bound to contribute to your community, but I ask you also to look toward the multitudinous world and its problems that I have already described.

That means that you must give over some part of your quest for individual self-fulfillment -- for financial security, professional distinction, for prominence in whatever field you choose -- toward furthering those sound values that can enrich the lives of others about you. And even those far away from you.

Life is not just about getting and keeping in either the material or the personal sense.

To the extent that you commit yourself to sharing and giving to others of your talents, your resources, your care and compassion, then to just such an extent will you grow in your own sense of self-esteem and inner peace.

Some of you, I expect, will find careers in public service, as I have. A future governor, senator or even president may be among you. But holding high political office is not the only -- nor necessarily the most important -- constructive goal for citizen involvement. Indeed, more meaningful governance often takes place on the local school board or town council than in the rarefied atmosphere of our state or national capitals.



And, as many of you already know from personal experience, our tradition of volunteer activity still constitutes one of the unique strengths of this nation. Volunteers make a special contribution, in ways unknown and alien to most of the world, toward the welfare of those facing misfortune or disability or other hampering needs in our society.

And today, when our concerns have a worldwide scope, we must extend our responsibilities beyond our own society. We must equip ourselves with more knowledge of the language, culture, customs, and social, political, and economic institutions of other nations. This touches directly upon that shifting of the burden of education to yourselves, once you leave this campus. Narrowly, we cannot deal with the diplomatic, political, and economic challenges we must face if we abide in blissful ignorance. But more broadly, we will be brushing nearer catastrophe if we do not further educate ourselves to deal with the daily increase of the world -- and its clamor of rising expectations.

### III

Finally, let me speak to your responsibilities to these United States of America -- and your opportunity to contribute not only to its strong future but its splendid example to an awakening world.

We are so accustomed to affirming that our democracy is "a government of laws, and not of men" that we sometimes forget how often ruling men -- elsewhere in this world -- have overridden or suppressed the rule of law. But who among you can have escaped such knowledge after the political upheavals of this past year? We have seen much of this hemisphere, all of Eastern Europe, even the Soviet Union itself turning toward democracy, seeking their own version of our "government of laws."

And we -- each of us, and as a nation -- both by example and exhortation, have the opportunity, indeed the responsibility, to offer our best hopes for freedom to this awakening world. We must provide maximum exposure to our democratic culture and the traditions of our political philosophy -- so that other nations may emulate democracy's grand design, which is to elevate the dignity of the individual and then respect, absolutely, that individual's rights and liberties.

Sometimes, to be sure, we need to remind ourselves of what Winston Churchill was once purported to have observed: that "democracy is the worst possible system man could devise for governing himself ... except for all the rest"!

But we must also remind ourselves of the abiding commitment this democracy has made to increase individual rights, to assure due process, and to fine-tune our system, so that we maintain

that precarious balance between freedom and security that has become the plumb line of democracy for this awakening world.

A government of laws and not of men? To be sure. But it still takes good men and good women to make it work. So I suggest to you that propounding democracy -- and continuing actively to educate yourselves in its workings -- will be an important part of your life during this exciting decade ahead.

I will grant you a healthy skepticism about your ability to change the system -- to right all the world's wrongs in your lifetime.

But make sure that what you express is skepticism and not cynicism. For as surely as skepticism can feed and channel constructive effort, cynicism can numb even the most imaginative instincts.

The difference? A noted columnist once observed:

"The skeptic may be distinguished from the cynic by a test: when confronted by something that seems too good to be true, the cynic denies that it is really good, while the skeptic denies that it is really true."

Prepare yourselves then -- even as skeptics -- for a lifetime of what the poet Robert Frost called "a lover's quarrel with my country." He also said that before this country came to be, before we took up the cause of our own independence and freedom --

"Something we were withholding made us weak  
Until we found out that it was ourselves."

Members of this class of 1990 at the University of Scranton:

Do not withhold yourselves. Assume these new responsibilities, enjoy these new opportunities. Commit yourselves to excellence. It is within your reach to raise new standards for yourselves and the nation. . .that can remake the conventional wisdom of today's carping critics. Grasp this challenge firmly, and do everything you can to move the world ahead. . .that one more lifetime which is your own.