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FOR RELEASE: To morning papers of Monday, June 8, 1964

ADDRESS BY
ATTORNEY GENERAL ROBERT F. KENNEDY
COMMENCEMENT EXERCISES
MARQUETTE UNIVERSITY, JUNE 7, 1964
MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN

Father Kelley, Father O'Donnell, Governor Reynolds, members of the faculty and men and women of Marquette:

It is a very great honor for me to come here today to accept this degree and with it, membership in the distinguished ranks of Marquette alumni.

I have looked forward to visiting Marquette with particular anticipation since I read up on your early history -- I should now say our early history -- and discovered what interesting exercises Marquette has had at the end of the school year.

After the first academic year, for example, on June 28, 1882, there was a program which I doubt could be matched today. Before assembled citizens of Milwaukee, one young man demonstrated how to calculate the number of gallons in a wine cask. Two students prompted hearty applause when they drew a "beautiful map of Wisconsin on the blackboard." There was singing and some acting and then came the oration of the evening, entitled, "Let My Actions Speak."

The aspect of the oration that particularly attracted me was the crowd's reaction to the speaker. The speech, a newspaper account said at the time, "was listened to with breathless attention." I am sure Marquette audiences have not changed in the intervening years.

The purpose of those 1882 exercises was to demonstrate to the citizens of Milwaukee that Marquette could indeed provide a respectable education. No such public display is needed now from what has grown into this great university. Its men and women have demonstrated the importance of their Marquette experience by the contributions they have made to Milwaukee, the Midwest, and the nation.

The outstanding performance in the Peace Corps by Marquette graduates like Barbara Olsen, Mike Shea, and Rocky Santos provides vivid illustration.

There is a picture of Rocky in the Peace Corps files in Washington showing him at the site of an extraordinary project in Ecuador. He and five fellow volunteers succeeded in organizing several hundred natives to blast and carve a road to their village out of a steep and stony 1,000-foot hillside. The picture shows him with some dynamite, with a smile and -- loyal to the ends of the earth -- with a Marquette sweatshirt.

The intelligence and energy of young people like these Marquette alumni demonstrate that America is modifying the axiom, "youth will be served" to "youth will serve."

Idealistic and vigorous, it is a deeply necessary service in our difficult and paradoxical time. We are fast discovering that whatever our wealth or our technological skills, each new advance exposes an old problem.

Our scientists grapple with the difficulties of placing a man on the moon, but the immediately troubling concern of our society is whether men of different races can sit together at a lunch counter. Automation provides us with wonders of production and information, but no answer to the question of what to do with the men the machines displace.

In short, the power and the resources of modern technology, education and civilization do not enrich the lives of all men. We do not all live in the same century.

The New York World's Fair exemplifies the scientific advances of the 20th century and it offers suggestions about the America of the 21st century. But less than an hour away in Harlem, people live in squalor and despair more closely resembling the 19th century. A few hundred miles away, in the remote hovels of Appalachia, the life of the people is, if anything, worse than it was a hundred years ago.

Such disparity cannot be tolerated in a society which believes in free opportunity, or even in one which only talks about it. And I believe that our generation is committed to seeking an end to such disparity and solutions for the problems of the nation and the communities in which we live.

Labels for college generations are always risky. To call earlier college eras simply the Silly or the Silent Generations was to exaggerate. But I think it is fair to describe yours as a generation of unusually genuine and intense concern with social justice and intellectual freedom.

Political and social involvement have meaning to you and your contemporaries across the country. Thousands of students work on behalf of civil rights, or remedial reading, or community problems. Peace Marchers or college civil rights demonstrators may not always express their concerns in the wisest or most effective manner, but it is clear that those concerns are deeply felt.

Those concerns stem in part from the intensified concern of our whole society for the problems of social justice. And they also stem from your Marquette training as educated, humane men and women. You will continue to feel these concerns as part of the legacy of college.

So there is no need for me to come and exhort you, in the manner of so many of the commencement speeches made since commencements commenced, to develop such concern. What I come instead to ask is whether you -- and those like you in the colleges of the nation -- will continue to act on behalf of those deeply felt concerns.

The very college experience which has helped to expand your awareness of these problems is also the experience which prepares you for a place in society far removed from the problems.

As lawyers or doctors or businessmen -- or as their wives -- you will be escalated beyond contact with the large number of people in this country whose principal worries are hunger and hope. You will be part of the mere 9 percent of Americans with college degrees and you will be equipped to work in the very latest day of the 20th century.

But will you also work to bring the benefits of your preparation to the citizens who still live in the past? Will the problems of race or poverty or underdeveloped nations exist for you only in the sympathetic but abstract world of the Sunday newspapers and the political magazines?

It is not enough simply to be aware, or concerned, or sympathetic. While we are a free society, we are not yet a perfect society. One can find a squalid America as easily as a scenic America; a bitter, hopeless America as easily as the confident America of polyethylene wrapping, new cars, and camping trips in the summer.

Michael Harrington has described the poor as the invisible Americans. Let me propose that the phrase can be reversible. It is, after all, only a matter of perspective. For the unemployed city laborer or the uneducated Appalachian teenager or the ailing, elderly widower, it is the comfortable American who is invisible.

Let me suggest that just as the university gives you the tools and talents to work at the highest levels of society, so does it call on you to give to all society the benefits of those talents.

"Our country," said Theodore Roosevelt in 1899, "calls not for the life of ease, but for the life of strenuous endeavor. The twentieth century looms before us, big with the fate of many nations."

That prediction may be even more valid now than it was when uttered. There has, perhaps, never been a time in our history when the gap between college and community has been smaller, when the need for active involvement by young people has been stronger, and the opportunity for them to do things of significance has been greater.

I would say to all of you that the most meaningful and rewarding way of achieving that involvement is in politics, in Government service. Politics has not always been an honored profession and there still are those who would agree with the view expressed years ago by humorist Artemus Ward: "I am not a politician and my other habits are good also."

But that is not the only view. The word "idiot" comes from the Greek for a person who did not participate in public affairs. And in America, I believe we have come to develop respect for the public servants who make such an important contribution to our society.

There is opportunity to share in that contribution for young people and there are many in government, whether in the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice, or as aides to President Johnson, or in state and local governments across the country.

The likelihood is that you will choose a private career, but the same point still applies. Whichever arena you choose, you can still carry a sword against the common concerns which afflict our communities.

"Our ordinary citizens," said Pericles in his Funeral Oration, "though occupied with the pursuits of industry, are still fair judges of public matters...Unlike any other nation (we regard) him who takes no part in these duties not as unambitious but as useless."

You, the beneficiaries of the best training our society can provide, have a particular obligation to be useful, an added responsibility for the welfare of society.

Certainly you will be concerned with the quality of schools -- but let that concern extend beyond the schools your own children attend. Certainly you will be concerned with juvenile delinquency, but let your concern extend beyond criticism to the treatment of the social conditions in your community which breed delinquency.

It is not enough in these times to lend your talents to your job, to raising a family, and to leading a self-sufficient, pleasant life. You, with the advantage of a college education and with the spirit of freedom and human dignity it releases, must participate wholeheartedly in politics, government, and community affairs.

Two years ago, in this city, President Kennedy stated the alternatives. "I see this country," he said, "as the most powerful, vital, vigorous country in the history of the world, carrying responsibility all around the world...Or I see it standing still."

Let us make our choice for progress. Let us obliterate the past which is, for too many citizens, the somber present and the hopeless future. With the clarity and compassion of the university atmosphere, let us labor to build a future in which all Americans can share, with common prosperity and common pride.