

REMARKS OF SENATOR BOB DOLE
COLLEGE OF EMPORIA COMMENCEMENT
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My congratulations to all of the graduates and to all of those who have helped them along the way toward this day. It is indeed an honor to have been asked to speak at these commencement exercises. I almost hesitate to say that -- it may have the ring of cliché about it -- but I say it most sincerely. I am honored to be able to address these commencement ceremonies because they mean so much.

A commencement exercise is a richly symbolic ritual -- well established by centuries of academic tradition. It is an elaborate ceremony designed to single out this particular day, and to solemnize it, and to designate it as a most significant beginning. In the familiar phrase, today is most especially and very uniquely "the beginning of the rest of your life."

SPEAKERS TASK NOT EASY

And it is that in a most dramatic way. For many of you, it is the end of formal education -- though not the end of learning.

It may be the start of independence. The beginning of being on your own.

Let me observe, by way of self-defense perhaps, that at such moments as these, according to the traditions that apply, it is my role to try to put this beginning in perspective. The commencement speaker is by custom, expected to put the beginnings you make today toward the rest of your life -- in other words, to put the future -- in perspective.

I am to predict what you may expect from now on. It is permitted for me to paint a rosy picture, if I choose, of a world anxiously awaiting your generation to come along and cure the ills that generations before you have left as their legacy. Or I can unveil a picture of the future heavy in crimson, a picture of blood, sweat and tears, in which the world and the responsibilities you now enter upon pose an arduous and constant burden where struggle and strife are the most you can expect.

But obviously, I can't promise either. For some of you life may accord perfectly with the first picture. For others, the second may apply. For most, I strongly suspect, there will be elements of both.

And that, I frankly admit, is the closest I can come to prophecy. It is the only perspective I can put on the future for you.

And I believe it's not too defensive to assert that it is the only predicting I can be expected to do with any accuracy at all.

This college class of 1973 graduates in a year when a scandal in Washington has caused some men, who claim to know, to make dismal prophecies about the future of our democratic society. And I, for one, don't believe them.

PROPHETS OF DOOM NOT NEW ON SCENE

I was in college in 1943 -- and am sure that at that time there were long-faced commencement speakers around the country prophesying gloom and doom for the country. But frankly, I don't remember them or what they said exactly, and I doubt that anyone else does. There was a war going on, and people were much too busy trying to overcome obstacles to success in the war effort to take the time to listen to those who said we were going to fail.

Then ten years later there may have been those who chose to send the Class of 1953 on its way out into what they call the "real world" with an unhealthy dose of pessimism about the future. But judging from the progress we made in those times, no one really listened.

Again, the Class of '63 may have heard some prophecy. Less gloomy perhaps, probably even hopeful for the future of peace in the world and of prosperity. But who can fault a speaker who pretends to prophecy, for failing to foresee Vietnam, the urban riots, college disruptions and the rest?

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CAN'T PREDICT FUTURE

No one can fault these speakers for their false predictions. They can only be faulted for pretending to prophecy in the first place. And that is true today as much or more than ever in the past. The pace of change has picked up and continues to accelerate with every passing day. Anyone who tries to foresee and predict the future, under such circumstances, betrays in himself either arrogance or stupidity. Now as ever, the future can't be known by mere humans and I don't pretend to be anything else.

So the best I can offer, then, is a perspective on the present. And one that some may call narrow at that. Being a politician, I wish to speak of politics, of this country, of what we call our system; and to speak of the responsibility we all have towards it, and of how, in more recent days, some men have seemed to fail in that responsibility.

Current events and recent headlines are not usually the stuff of commencement speakers. They deal in vast themes and classic thought -- in Plato and that crowd. But current events form my subject today because they dominate the attention of too many people to ignore. And they deal with a subject too important to ignore.

In the view of many observers, the current controversy has shaken the foundations of our system and our political processes to their very roots. In the minds of some, the peoples' faith in their institution of government has been unalterably shaken, and can never be fully restored. In the minds of some, your faith -- the ability of young people generally to believe in the system and to confidently work with it -- has been incurably wounded and the scar can never heal.

But I don't believe it.

NEW PERCEPTION OF AMERICA

We have gone through many changes -- many crises -- in the past. We weathered them and we will weather this.

It occurs to me that it is perhaps only in the very recent past, only in the last few years -- and almost two hundred years after the American Revolution -- that we have come to realize how truly revolutionary America is.

A great many explanations have been offered for the turmoil of these times. A great many reasons given for the tumult and unrest this country has gone through in recent years -- and most notably in the last decade.

Rising expectations, more leisure time, growing affluence -- all are offered as explanations. But none satisfies. None is the total answer. And I can't define that total answer myself. I can only describe an answer that suggests itself to me -- that the disorientation we have experienced as a nation results from the recent discovery of how truly revolutionary this society is.

That is a startling discovery. And an unsettling one. Perhaps in its own way -- in its own time -- each American generation makes the same discovery. I don't know. Perhaps each generation discovers what America really means and lives that meaning -- and passes on without having found a way to first pass on that discovery to others. I don't know.

And perhaps it is best that we make that discovery -- each generation -- for ourselves. Unsettling as it may be. Even if it means -- as it has in these times -- a certain disorientation. Perhaps it is even necessary that we make that discovery for ourselves. But whatever the case, whatever the explanation -- it is, I think, obvious that that is what has happened to us in the last few years.

UNIQUE AND REVOLUTIONARY

"Always, since the records of man have run," Theodore White wrote in 1969, "most people were poor and only the few were comfortable. Today, in America," he went on, "most people are comfortable and only the few are poor."

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And we have only just come to realize how truly revolutionary -- how truly unique in the history of man -- that is.

And always, in the past, it has been these few -- these comfortable few who have enjoyed the favors of government, the benefits of society, the privileges of citizenship. Yet, today, in America, it is the few who are poor who have enjoyed the lion's share of attention, from the major institutions of American life. And it is the many who are comfortable who have made it so -- who have directed that attention upon those who have been left out or left behind.

And surely, in all the world, that is unique and truly revolutionary.

And too, in the past, among men and among nations, the problem of where and how to get enough has always preoccupied men's attentions and consumed their energies. Where and how to get enough food, adequate shelter and sufficient quantities of those things we refer to as necessities.

But today, in America, the problem is no longer will the earth and water yield resources in sufficient quantity. Our problem today is can the earth and water and air sufficiently absorb the enormous amounts of wastes we produce.

And surely that is a unique -- and a revolutionary problem, unprecedented in the history of man -- at one and the same time our great achievement and our great burden.

PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

In America, then, we have solved -- or have at least brought under control -- many of the great problems that have vexed men for centuries. But with each new solution, comes a new problem.

The ability to solve problems, and the considerable success we have enjoyed in doing so is itself the source of new problems.

We sent men to the moon, satisfying the curiosity of centuries. We determined to do so. We said that we would. And less than ten years later, we did. And now, many wonder why we can't apply the same determination, the same energy, the same technique, to the vexing problems we still confront here on earth.

And perhaps we can. The problems of human nature are certainly different in kind than the problems of space travel. Overcoming the force of gravity is certainly a less complex -- and perhaps a less difficult challenge -- than overcoming the forces of ignorance, of crime, of disease and of human misery that many tell us are susceptible to the methods of moon-shot technology.

DIFFERENT PROBLEMS -- DIFFERENT ANSWERS

They are different kinds of problems, but perhaps they can be made to yield before the miracles of our technology. Perhaps we now have the tools to make that better world men have wanted -- to approach that utopia men have dreamed of.

I don't know the answer to that. And our technology is still too young for anyone to know for sure.

But my concern, quite frankly, is not with the kind of a world tomorrow brings. If it is the world without poverty that some look forward to -- that I look forward to frankly with some scepticism -- if it is the world where the great scourges of man, disease, ignorance and want are absent, there may still be lacking certain essentials that can make the world what we want it to be.

BASIC QUESTION

You live in some of the most exciting, most promising times in history when we seem, by all account, on the verge of world changing developments. But I would suggest to you that the more important questions by far, than the question of what kind of world we may have in the future, is the simple -- older -- question of what kind of men or women we may be in the future.

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A nation -- ours or any other -- organizes itself and establishes its system in response to a series of fundamental questions, posed by the people to themselves. Shall people live free or not -- and what does that word mean?

America answered that question in the affirmative. People are and ought to be free, we said. Each man is his own man, but, we added, no one is ever totally on his own.

And so we set about to build a nation based on two insights that might seem to exclude each other. We built a nation of people who were fiercely self-reliant, yet at the same time, they were people who relied on each other. We established that delicate balance between being our own men, our own women, and knowing we could never be really on our own -- knowing that we needed others and the help they could offer.

For whatever reasons, perhaps it was nothing more than the unsettling rapidity of change I mentioned, that balance was lost. Gradually we placed growing emphasis on the insight that many of our fellow citizens needed our help, and lost sight of the fact that still and all, each individual is and properly has a right to be, his own boss.

BALANCE UPSET

Over the span of my years in Washington, the system fell out of balance and that helps to explain why, for example, since 1961, the system has been widely questioned, roundly abused -- and largely misunderstood. It has become the scapegoat for our own failures and shortcomings. We have -- in short -- blamed it for everything.

When the hungry went unfed -- we blamed the system.

When the sick weren't treated -- we blamed the system.

When men went to prison -- we blamed the system.

When the poor among us were ignored -- we blamed the system.

And having gotten into the habit of blaming the system for all that we have failed to do, some of us yield now to the temptation to see in the present circumstances of government scandal, the system's most spectacular failure of all. And yet, this may turn out to be one of its finest victories.

SYSTEM STILL SOUND

A quick look at what has happened demonstrates my point. The 'what' of the situation is that a few men -- unfortunately in positions of tremendous power and public trust -- abused their power and violated their trust. But how does that condemn the system?

My answer is that it doesn't. Not at all.

For it was the system that found them out. It is the system that is uncovering the facts. When the hearings and the trials are over and the verdicts are in -- it will be the system that measures out justice in the case.

It will be the system -- not in a vindictive nor vengeful way, but in pursuit of full justice -- that will have done what it exists to do. It will have discovered and judged and punished those who contemptuously tried to go around it.

It will be the system that will have ferreted out the guilty, protected the innocent and restored the confidence of those who may have come to doubt it.

In the process -- and perhaps I am doing now what I said I wouldn't do, by predicting the future -- but in the process, I believe the system will have restored and strengthened itself. It will have reasserted its claim on our loyalty, its claim on our trust.

And as always, we will be the winners.