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President Fainstein's 88th Commencement Address

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2006 Commencement Address
Connecticut College President Norman Fainstein

Good morning.

(20 second of “Yellow Submarine” is played.) That was, of course, the Beatles’ “Yellow Submarine.” The single record sold 1.2 million copies in just four weeks during the late summer of 1966. The song was not really about submarines, but rather about 1966. That was the year I graduated college — forty years ago.

On this, your graduation day, I wonder what we make of the years since my graduation day. (And I bet there are quite a few members of the Sixties generation out there who can join me in this little bit of reflection). What would the balance sheet look like for America and the world?

Now, a really careful examination of life everywhere over forty years would be a daunting and tedious task. So I’ll take you on a tour that will be highly selective and personal.

Despite the war in Vietnam and riots in our cities, we were an optimistic bunch. Four years of college had taught us some irrefutable truths. The world was modernizing fast and inexorably. Reason was bound to prevail everywhere over superstition. The Middle Ages would never return, and science would never again be challenged by religion. The triumph of Western, liberal democracy was the inevitable outcome of world history (at least once the totalitarian Soviet communist empire collapsed). The more technology we developed, the more human life would progress. I believed each and every one of these propositions.

As you reflect back on what you’ve learned at college, would you accept any of my truths of 1966? How would you, members of the Class of ’06, assess the decades since I graduated — the decades since your parents and perhaps even your grandparents, were young. What lessons would you draw from your own review?

We can start with a field of inquiry in which you have all graduated summa cum laude—music. Has the music gotten better since the days of the Beatles—even if you can listen to hours of it on your MP3 players?

Whatever you conclude about the music, we would probably all agree that technological advances have been truly extraordinary, and in every aspect of life — from biotechnology to digital TV, but also from carpet bombing in Vietnam to smart bombing in Iraq, from clumsy telephone taps to the NSA’s new database of every phone call made by every American.

Whoa, let’s lighten up! I’ll get back to the serious stuff in a moment.

###

When I wrote my senior thesis, the Xerox machine had been around for two or three years, but university rules still required that copies be made with carbon paper. Word processors made their appearance in the late 1970s, and personal computers, as they were called, in the early 1980s. ARPAnet, the military predecessor of the Internet, was first established in 1969. So, all of you seniors who completed your theses and term papers in the electronic age, who made your smashing PowerPoint presentations, who automatically graphed the results of your high-tech scientific experiments — recognize how hard life once was for us old folks!

Now, how you evaluate technology may be a different thing from recognizing its pervasiveness and significance. Nearly every breakthrough raises its own questions about negative consequences in energy consumption, environmental degradation, the purposes to which the breakthrough is put — even in simply making us humans fat and lazy.

I can think of only two inventions since my graduation that have made life infinitely better and with no downsides attached. At a luncheon last week with sociology majors I made my pronouncements. I'll give you a second or two to guess what they are.

The answer is ATMs and EZpass. Alas, our clever seniors called me on both. ATMs facilitated consumerism and indebtedness. EZpass encouraged even more driving, with all of its consequences. However, one bright thing chimed in that there was a third great breakthrough in American life these last forty years—good coffee, good coffee nearly everywhere. Of course, there is then the curse of a hyper-caffeinated America, another star student noted.

The fact is that there may well be no such thing as technological progress that is an unmitigated blessing. So I ask again, how would you draw up your own balance sheet?

###

Nineteen ninety-six was a year of racial upheaval in America, as was the remainder of the decade. The civil rights movement was turning northward, and its radical elements were calling for Black Power and black separatism. Our cities were erupting in civil disorder, even as a series of new federal civil rights laws was establishing the basis for a more racially just society.

Much water has passed under the bridge in the forty years since then. If 300 years of racism has not been eradicated, it has been significantly mitigated. Black/white economic inequality has been reduced, according to many measures. The overt racism and, yes, anti-Semitism, of my school days in West Haven, Connecticut, are, indeed, largely things of the past in a more tolerant and less prejudiced America.

Yet racial inequality certainly exists in America today, as does racial discrimination. Segregation in housing and schooling is still the dominant pattern, and scholarly studies show time and again that it cannot simply be accounted for by differences in income, much less by free choice among black people and other people of color. On the world stage, ethnic inequality and conflict have hardly lessened at all, and it is frequently to be found within racially subordinated peoples, as witness the African genocides of the past two decades.

So, here the balance sheet shows real progress but also continuing injustice and misfortune on a grand scale. What do you think?

Nineteen ninety-six marked the founding of the National Organization for Women and the latest incarnation of a women's movement that had mobilized several times in the previous century. It was also a period of increasing consciousness about consumer safety and the natural environment. In the coming years all three movements would become prominent in American politics and produce important legislation at the state and national levels.

Looking back from 2006, I believe that much has been accomplished for the good, especially when we take into account the gay rights movement of the 1970s. Individual rights are much better protected now than when I graduated college. Women have closed much of the economic gap between themselves and men. The environment is no longer taken for granted.

Yet, and yet — we are not there yet. The mere fact that our country has increased in population by 50 percent, adding 100 million people in forty years, tells you more than any legislation about the pressure on the environment. And, if environmental consciousness is omnipresent, so too are the forces that have — without question — created and sustained global warming. World population has nearly doubled since my graduation, and now stands at about 6.5 billion. Meanwhile, our government has a mixed record on global population control, insisting that 25 percent of American foreign aid go toward abstinence education and forbidding that any of it be associated with abortion.

So much of the pressure on the environment is the result of economic growth — growth which has been exceptional in this, the most powerful economy in the world. One measure of national wealth is Gross Domestic Product — or GDP — per capita. By this standard, Americans are more than twice as wealthy as they were in 1966 — we are 216 percent richer to be exact, with more than \$40,000 now produced annually for every child and adult in America.

But this wealth is unequally distributed, and inequality has increased extraordinarily and steadily in recent decades. In fact, the average American family is worse off than it was in 1966. In that year, this “median” family had an income of \$47,000 adjusted for inflation. Today, it makes \$54,000. True, that is an increase of \$7,000 or 14 percent, even if it is over forty years.

Yet consider this—only 38 percent of women worked in 1966, compared with 66 percent today. Similarly, the percentage of married couples with two wage-earners doubled, and today stands at around 80 percent. So, it takes two salaries to provide that typical family with virtually the same income as one salary did in 1966.

In contrast, those of us at the top have done very well indeed. In fact, the better off we are, the better off we have gotten. The top 5 percent of households improved their average incomes in constant dollars over those forty years by three-fold, to over \$300,000 per year now. And the very wealthiest households, the top one-hundredth of one percent, are seven times better off today than they were in 1966.

So, yes, there has been a rising tide, but it certainly has not moved all the boats up; it has lifted mainly the yachts. Nor has that tide been a natural phenomenon. It has been a product of a changing balance of power within the private sector and of governmental policy in Washington.

The question for me—and perhaps for you—should be whether a nation that grows ever richer and ever more unequal, a nation where almost all of the economic gain is being enjoyed by those already living comfortable or even affluent lives, has truly improved. Equally important, can such a nation maintain a stable, democratic political system as — to put it bluntly — it is divided into a country of the rich **and** a country of everybody else?

###

And what about that 900 pound gorilla that stood center stage as I and my classmates received our diplomas in 1966—the war in Vietnam and conscription—the draft, for those old enough to remember that dreaded word.

I spent a few hours the other day looking through a year’s worth of *Life* magazine — one of the more important sources of news and images in 1966. There, I found much discussion about the war and many, many battlefield photos, not just of American military initiatives but of American wounded and dead, of the enemy, of civilians. I am struck by the paucity of such images these days from Iraq and Afghanistan, despite our much greater technological capacity. Perhaps our government has learned something in forty years about the distaste for war in a democracy and about the usefulness of censorship in wartime.

The war in Vietnam, it was said, was against a single global threat called communism. Our aim in Vietnam was to protect the south from going communist and to keep the regions’ countries from falling one after another — like dominos. As time went on and the war bogged down, our twin goals became to create a government in Vietnam capable of defending itself and to protect American credibility. That was our entire exit strategy. Even if we were mistaken to enter the war, leaving in defeat would weaken our position worldwide in our struggle against communism, it was said. America had to stay the course. Critics of the war were accused of dishonoring the troops who had died and giving comfort to the enemy. Sometimes, they were called traitors.

The draft focused all of our attention on college campuses, because it was actually us who might have to go to war. By 1966, students were organizing against the war, and the first demonstrations took place at Commencements, including my own.

In the end, of course, opposition to the war became widespread. President Johnson decided not to seek reelection because he did not want to further divide the country. After years more of fighting and the spread of the war into Laos and Cambodia, we eventually withdrew. Our policy of Vietnamization failed, and North Vietnam won the war. Hundreds of thousands of Americans and millions of Vietnamese died. A few years later, Pol Pot rose to power in a Cambodia we had destabilized and killed a million or more of his own people.

When the draft ended in the early 1970s, so too did the student movement. As in the case of battlefield images, we have learned that a draft makes fighting a war too costly to too wide a spectrum of the people in a democracy — better to fight wars with small, semi-professional, high-tech armies drawn disproportionately from the working class.

Today, of course, we fight in Iraq. Interestingly, our ambition is not just to stop our enemy — this time something called “terrorism” — but actually to establish democracy — in fact, to spread democracy throughout the Middle East.

I leave it to you to draw the lessons of history, as you choose, and to decide on what we have accomplished in four decades as the world’s most powerful military state.

###

In 1966, the Beatles were on a roll. Another of their hits that year was “We Can Work It Out.” The song closes with these words:

Try to see it my way,
 Only time will tell if I am right or I am wrong.
 While you see it your way
 There’s a chance that we may fall apart before too long.

I do not insist that you all see four decades of history my way or draw the same lessons as I do. But, please, don’t wait for things to fall apart before you take a hard look at the world and act to make it a better place — better according to each of your lights, better according to the values each of you holds dear.

Forty years from now you will do your own report cards on America and the world. Work hard to change the world, so that your report card can be filled with A’s.

With your commitment to social justice, with your talents and proven capacity for hard work, I know you can do it.

Congratulations to the Class of ’06. Good luck, and God speed for the next forty years — and many more days thereafter.