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corrected copy,
as delivered, by
Mrs. Schlesinger at
Commencement exercises

THE CRISIS OF ABUNDANCE

rather Twenty years ago the Class of 1935 in a thousand American colleges and universities, clad in caps, gowns and fresh new A.B. degrees, advanced unhappily into what appeared a bleak and inhospitable future. Commencement in that distant period was not -- as I trust it is today -- an occasion for unrestrained joy and gratification. It meant, ^{in 1935} in essence, thousands more new people walking the streets in search of work at a time when nine million Americans could find no work at all. It meant entry into a world of bankrupt business and terrorized labor, of hungry sharecroppers and desolate migratory workers -- a dark world of breadlines and soup kitchens, of insecurity and want.

Suppose the members of the Class of 1935 would have envisaged the America we have today -- a nation with nearly 68 million men and women at work, a gross national product of 370 billion dollars a year, business booming, trade unions solid and respectable, social insurance and farm price supports built into the law of the land. Transported into so rich and overflowing a nation, they might well have supposed that the millennium had

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indeed arrived. If people had jobs, and enough to eat, and prospects for security in case of unemployment or old age, and hope that their children would live better than they had lived themselves, *it might have been thought in 1935* what more could any one ask? The dream of abundance seemed to promise a solution for all the problems of life.

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Yet we dwell today in the economy of abundance, that promised land which glittered so brightly two decades ago for those mired in the slough of depression. This year we will probably buy more automobiles, drink more liquor, eat more candy, spend more money for personal consumption, and turn out a larger national output than ever before in our history. Everything, as the phrase goes, will be pouring out of our ears. Yet, the fact remains, that, as a nation, the richer we grow, the more tense, insecure and unhappy we seem to become.

A good deal of this fearfulness is due, of course, to the world situation. Only a fool could ^{feel} be cheerful in a world living under the overhanging threat of Communist aggression and of atomic war. Yet one feels that if, by ^{some} magic, the Soviet Union and Communist China could be made to vanish tomorrow, if the Communist creed were extinct and forgotten, if the atom still baffled and resisted our physicists, many of our contemporary anxieties would be as potent as ever. One ^{it is hard to} cannot easily escape the conclusion that our trouble largely lies within us. Indeed, sometimes we have seemed to project our internal fears on the world around us, recoiling from fancied threats like small boys in a graveyard at midnight. Much of our trouble, in short, seems to come from our inability to cope with this new world where material abundance staggers our imaginations and gluts our minds.

A few weeks ago I heard a conversation between that ~~ever~~ fertile and unquenchable figure, Mr. Beardsley Ruml, and an aspiring young brain truster of the nineteen fifties. As the braintruster expressed a wistful nostalgia

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for the problems which his counterparts had tackled with so much enthusiasm and relish twenty years ^{ago}, Mr. Rumel turned on him with scorn. The brain-trusters of the thirties, ^{Rumel} he pointed out, had not lived off the problems of the past. They had identified and met the challenge of their own time. The necessity now, he added, was to identify and meet the problems of 1955.

"The problems are there," he said, "only we are not yet sure how to recognize and classify them. In the thirties we had a crisis of depression. In time, we learned how to diagnose and prescribe for that. Today we have something far subtler and far harder to deal with. Today we have a crisis of abundance."

It would be wrong to overdraw the picture of abundance. Even in our own wealthy ^{+ blessed} land, ugly splotches of poverty remain -- in the cities and more especially in isolated pockets on the countryside. We should never forget, for example, that in this year, in which the national economy will produce goods and services to the value of 370 billion dollars, ^{- that in this year} more than one quarter of our farm-operator families will enjoy net cash incomes for the year of less than ^{one} a thousand dollars. Yet, for all this, economic abundance is the key to the fifties, as economic want was the key to the thirties. The problem you will face in the years ahead -- assuming always that the world manages to avoid the catastrophe of thermonuclear war -- is how to live with abundance.

That still may seem, in certain ways, a rather silly problem. How much easier, one imagines, to live with abundance than to live with scarcity!

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Yet everything in this world exacts its price; and the price of abundance is becoming increasingly visible, I think, in the way we are tending to approach the hard questions of life. For abundance does two things in particular. It creates wealth, and it creates leisure; and living with wealth -- and living with leisure -- are experiences which no mass society has ever undergone before.

I do not want to address myself here to the economic problems of wealth and of leisure. As more machines turn out more goods and more services, more and more of our economic gains will inevitably be taken in the form of shorter work days. Wealth and leisure advance hand in hand, as the twin offsprings of technology. What I want to discuss today is rather the psychological -- indeed, the moral -- repercussions of these problems. What I want to consider is our success in meeting as a nation the challenge of wealth and the challenge of leisure.

The danger of wealth, of course, is materialism -- the worship of riches; *the worship of wealth for its own sake* in particular, the notion as Professor J. K. Galbraith has phrased it, "that the accumulation of goods and the multiplication of gadgets is the be-all and end-all of American civilization." One already sees in the American mind an unconscious conviction that the production of consumers' goods for the sake of private profit should take precedence over everything else. Thus too much of our overseas propaganda has seemed to suppose that we could persuade the rest of the world of our superior virtue by persuading them of our superior wealth. We have presented the image of Americans as

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richer, taller, heavier, better fed, better dressed, living in bigger houses, driving longer, lower and snappier cars, producing wider movies in more gorgeous technicolor -- all presumably intended to prove that, if we are wealthier than the others, we are also wiser and nobler than the others.

But we have forgotten that bigness is one thing, and greatness another. Our propaganda thus fails, because the object of propaganda is to enable others to identify themselves and their cause with oneself; while our propaganda of wealth, conveying a gross and repellent, and ^{I think} false, image of our nation to the world, presents a picture with which few other people care to make identification. We ought to remember sometime that our own Declaration of Independence spoke, not of 'life, liberty and the pursuit of consumers' goods', but of 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.'

Other nations sometimes look for wisdom in the United States, or courage, or forbearance, or understanding, or spiritual idealism -- for quality not quantity. But we too often turn them away by proclaiming that our kitchens are whiter, our refrigerators colder, our milk creamier, our skyscrapers taller, our hydrogen bombs deadlier than those of anyone else -- and that it is all the result of a system where man, in serving his own self-interest, serves the interests of all. Sometimes when I hear our leaders denounce the 'godless materialism' of the Communists I fear that they are doing it in the name of a 'godly materialism' of their own.

Indeed, the very quickening of religious concern which many have detected in recent years suggests how inadequate simple

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materialism is as a philosophy of life. The success of Norman Vincent Peale and his positive thoughts, the search through religion for 'peace of mind' and 'peace of soul', the popularity ^{on two continents} of Billy Graham on two continents -- all this seems to represent a reaction, however confused and muddled, against the belief that superior wealth means superior virtue.

But, ironically, the power of the materialistic faith has been great enough to corrupt a good part of the religious revival which had sought to transcend it. "The themes of 'peace of mind' and 'positive thinking'" Reinhold Niebuhr, our leading theologian, recently remarked, "either express a religion of self-assurance or they are pious guides to personal success." In either case, he continues, they represent "very dubious" forms of faith because they tend to make religion a source of complacency rather than a source of humility. In short, where religion should provide a method of criticizing ^{of judging} selfishness, too much of the popular religion of our day provides a method of endorsing it.

Sprinkling holy water on materialism does not really enable us to meet the materialistic challenge. And the challenge of materialism is accentuated by the challenge of leisure. For, as the work day grows shorter, the hours which men and women must fill for themselves grow ~~longer~~.

Will our attitude toward leisure be ^{will it be} passive or creative? Will we approach leisure as spectators waiting to be entertained or as civilized human beings in quest of education and fulfillment? Will we prostrate ourselves, like primitive savages, before the

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icons of our time -- the television set, the film theater, the comic book, the juke box -- seeking narcotics which will tide us over the terrifying void between the end of one workday and the beginning of the next? ^{would seem to be} This is where our current cult of materialism is surely leading us. Or will we see in leisure an unprecedented and heaven-sent opportunity to grow, to learn, to change -- to develop ourselves and to develop our civilization?

I do not know the answer. But I am sure of this -- that, if an age of abundance creates problems both of materialism and of leisure, the philosophy of materialism, even of the currently fashionable 'godly materialsim' offers very little help in meeting the challenge of leisure.

To master leisure -- to make leisure a means of growth, and not of stagnation -- we require a different attitude toward life. We have to have a humility, an inner discontent, a desire for improvement; we have to free ourselves from the self-righteous illusion that civilization has been perfected in the United States, A. D. 1955. We require a larger dose of what used to be called, in simpler days, idealism. And by idealism I mean, among other things, an occasional willingness to put the interests of others ahead of the immediate interests of oneself.

The sad fact is, ^{as all history has shown} that unlimited pursuit of one's own self-interest does not necessarily serve the welfare of all. Our nation has never been richer than it is today. Yet in certain respects -- and in respects vital to our future -- it remains poor. Let me mention two areas of activity where the failure of materialism has

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been spectacular and threatens to do us incalculable material damage. One is the education of our people. The other is the national provision for medical care and services.

The Twentieth Century Foundation has recently published a new edition of its invaluable work on America's Needs and Resources. Using the best statistical techniques, it attempts to forecast the situation of the American economy in 1960 -- what our needs will be, and what resources we will have available to meet these needs. In no field is the gap between what we are likely to be spending in 1960 and what we should be spending greater than in education and in health. For an adequate educational program for our children in 1960, we should probably spend about \$22 billion dollars that year -- which is about ^{6-1 one/2} \$6.6 billion more than by present indications, we will be spending. In the area of civilian health and medical care, the estimated need for 1960 is in the neighborhood of \$25 billion dollars a year; the probable expenditure is over \$7 billion less.

There is very little more important to our nation than the education and the health of our children. Yet so long as we cling to the materialistic faith that self-interest infallibly serves the national interest, we will underspend tragically in these vital areas, while we overspend ridiculously on gimmicks and gadgets; on new models of cars and television sets when the old would do just as well; on all manner of consumers goods, not to speak of liquor, tobacco, horse-racing, dog-tracks and the like. One watches the relative decline in our spending for education -- outlays per pupil

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rose annually by 12 percent in the sixty years before 1929 and 2.5 percent in the twenty-five years since -- and one notes the melancholy fact that the second largest increase in recreational expenditures since 1929 -- a mere matter of 17.75 percent -- is for that edifying device known technically as the "non-vending coin machine" (and more familiarly as the "one-arm bandit").

The plain fact of the matter is that we are overdoing spending for ourselves as individuals while we are underdoing spending for ourselves as members of a nation. We set no limits on our passion to gratify our private tastes or foibles -- or our gullible willingness to let others impose new tastes and foibles upon us -- while we fail to provide ourselves with decent public services of the most rudimentary kind. Our national bill for personal indulgence grows ^{more staggeringly} each year. But our schools become more crowded and dilapidated, our teachers more weary and underpaid, our playgrounds more crowded, our cities dirtier, our public health service more ~~bun~~bling and confused, our roads more teeming and filthy, our national parks more unkempt, our law enforcement more overworked and inadequate. And we wonder why, for example, we have a growing problem of juvenile delinquency!

We must sometime make the choice -- whether it is more important to us to have a never-ending flow of new gadgets and gimmicks and models, or to have more and better policemen, firemen, welfare officers, teachers, foresters, and public administrators. In my judgment, we must recognize the fact, in short, that the public

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sector in our society deserves as much attention, support and honor as the private sector. It is absurd when a man dedicated to making money for himself is somehow ^{regarded as} engaged in a nobler occupation than a man working for others in local or state or national government, when service to oneself is regarded as more exalting than service to the nation.

My own view is that society needs all kinds of people and all kinds of activities. I would shudder at a nation which lacked in liquor and tobacco; but I feel that a nation which overflows with liquor and tobacco, like our own, ^{can afford to} might do a little more for schools and hospitals. Similarly I can imagine nothing more grim and terrifying than a society in which the state controlled all economic life; but I feel that a nation which has a robust and powerful private economy, like our own, might do a little more to provide public services worthy of our people. Only when we confront problems like education and health with directness and efficiency will we be making progress in preparing ourselves for the test of leisure which lies ahead.

All this requires liberation from the current exclusive faith in materialism and self-interest. And I think this problem of liberation has a special relevance for the graduating class of women. For you, as the wives and mothers of the future, will be to a special and appalling degree the target of those who do believe that the multiplication of goods and gadgets is the essence of American life. Yet your sons and daughters will be the victims

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if we continue to degrade our public and community services in the interests of twenty-five foot cars and thirty-two-inch television sets. Men thus far have not had much success in identifying the central problems in the crisis of abundance. Even more perhaps than the issues of depression, the issues of abundance will strike closer to women than to men. I would look to an enlarged role for women in our civic life as our nation moves ahead to cope with the challenges of materialism and of leisure.

A century ago Walt Whitman wrote in the first preface to Leaves of Grass: "This is what you shall do: Love the earth and sun and animals, despise riches, give alms to everyone that asks, stand up for the stupid and the crazy, devote your income and labor to others, hate tyrants, argue not concerning God, have patience and indulgence toward the people." If abundance is not to swallow and consume us, we must reach toward new spiritual affirmations. We must devise new means of affirming and nourishing the identity and personality, and not the greed, of individuals. We must develop a new determination to serve ourselves by serving others. We must understand that selfishness is not the highest good.

As Whitman wrote on another occasion, "There is no week nor day nor hour when tyranny may not enter upon this country, if the people lose their supreme confidence in themselves, -- and lose their roughness and spirit of defiance -- Tyranny may always enter -- there is no charm, no bar against it -- the only bar against it is a large resolute breed of men."

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The crisis of depression did, in the end, produce a large resolute breed of men and women. Will the crisis of abundance do as well? Or will it produce a new breed of television-watchers and of contest-enterers, of comic book addicts and of hot-rodders, of people who applaud when the sign tells them to and cannot read without moving their lips? Such a breed is hardly enough for a great nation engaged in a mortal struggle for survival.

But I am confident that, as we gradually understand that abundance creates its problems too, we can lick the crisis of abundance as we licked the crisis of depression -- that in the end, as we begin to face up to the new challenge, we shall have a nation of grown men and women, alert, active and resolute, capable of standing up to the intricate issues of a dark and shadowed future.

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