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42nd Commencement Address

Laurance S. Rockefeller

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*please return
Rung*

FROM: Room 5600
30 Rockefeller Plaza
New York 20, New York

FOR RELEASE:
Monday A.M.
June 13, 1960

TELEPHONE: Circle 7-3782

Commencement Address
by
Laurance S. Rockefeller
Connecticut College
New London, Connecticut
June 12, 1960

President Park, Members of the Graduating Class, Parents, and Friends:

The role of a commencement speaker is somewhat obscure and none too enviable. Who would wish to stand as a last obstacle between a group of hard working seniors and their well-deserved diplomas!

I would much prefer to sit with all of you and share the sense of admiration and pride a fond parent so properly enjoys on such a happy and unique occasion as this.

However, as your commencement speaker, I welcome this opportunity to congratulate all of you for having qualified not only as graduates of Connecticut College but also for recognizing that a college education is worth the necessary sacrifice of time and effort.

How many of you realize that only forty per cent of the women who start college are sufficiently interested or motivated to finish?

Today I would like to share with you some ideas on a subject I strongly believe is of great importance not only to your welfare and happiness as individuals but also to the well-being of the people of this country as a whole.

I have in mind the basic need that you learn to recognize and think of yourselves first of all as human beings, as people, and secondly as women.

I don't for one minute mean to imply that you should minimize your role as women. Obviously you will continue to be needed as the mainspring of the family and the home. You have unique qualities to bring to these tasks -- qualities of insight and perception, of conviction and love.

However, we live in a time when your creative fulfillment as a person requires expression not only through your role in the home as wife and mother. It also depends on the contribution you make to society as a whole.

Society badly needs you. To the extent that you qualify yourself intellectually to be an active participant in the political, social, and economic life of our nation, you will be progressively wanted, respected, and appreciated for your contribution.

I do not need to tell you that the traditional view that "woman's place is in the home" has gradually been giving way to the demands of a modern industrial society and most importantly, to the demands of women themselves. Do you know, for instance, that in view of present trends, the average woman may expect to spend from twenty-five to thirty years of her adult life employed outside the home? That by 1970 one-third of the jobholders in this country will be women?

As women have progressively sought employment, the tendency has developed to make them choose between a family and a routine job, on the one hand, or a career and no family on the other. This is a harsh and unrealistic choice, and the conflict which arises reflects an out-of-date view of the situation.

There is no reason in the world why satisfying work outside the home -- whether a profession or other type of skilled work -- cannot be successfully combined with family responsibilities, realizing that those responsibilities will consume much more time at certain stages in life than at others. And even during that period, there is every reason why a woman should keep her mind active even when she has no more than an hour or two a day to spare from her other duties.

The issue now is not whether women will or should work -- but where, how and for what they will work. The issue is whether their work will be dull and unimaginative or challenging and creative. The right choice seems obvious. Both women and society as a whole have everything to gain by a positive decision.

From a career planning point of view in contrast to men, a young married woman assumes her maximum homemaking responsibilities almost at the outset of her career. However, since she is likely to marry in her early twenties, her career as mother will have passed its most active peak by the time she is thirty-five, leaving her progressively free to apply herself to other activities for a great many years to come. Clearly the time as well as the opportunity to work are now generally available to women.

Let us look for a moment at how we have arrived at this dramatically new situation.

With few exceptions, for nineteen hundred of the past two thousand years, women generally received little or no formal education. They were consistently denied the right to vote. They were generally considered to be mentally, morally, and physically inferior to men.

Without doubt, historically, women have been the victims of great prejudice and discrimination on the part of men.

The present relatively enlightened and privileged status that women in this country now enjoy can be attributed primarily to several basic trends or developments that have taken place during the past hundred years.

First, the effect of the industrial revolution made women physically less indispensable in their homes and the family less self-sufficient as an institution. Subsequent events have continued this trend, and heavy manpower demands of World War I created expanding opportunities for employment that drew many women from the home for the first time.

Secondly, the feminist movement, which started in England and spread to this country in the first half of the nineteenth century, had as its goal equality and freedom for women. Understandably, these early feminists showed a great deal of hostility toward men evidenced by their competitive -- even belligerent -- approach which heavily emphasized their "masculinity" and conversely minimized or belittled all that was "feminine."

But the efforts of these social pioneers and reformers culminated in winning for women the right to vote; in England in 1918 and the United States in 1920. This right was not gained in France until 1945, and even today, women do not have the right to vote in Switzerland.

Universal suffrage perhaps symbolized the beginning of the new era of women's participation in our national life. We are only just now beginning to understand and to feel the effects of this major social change.

With the progressive achievement of new rights and opportunities, one might well think that women's grievances against society and society's attitudes toward them would no longer pose much of a problem. However, no great social revolution ever runs its course smoothly, and this one is no exception.

Despite -- or perhaps because of -- the vast accomplishments of this revolution in expanding opportunity for women and overcoming prejudice, large numbers of women have been left uncertain of their identity, confused about their responsibilities, anxious but unable to take advantage of what society now offers them.

Let's consider education for a moment. To be sure, more women are going to college than ever before, but compared with men, the proportionate increase is far lower. An amazingly small percentage of women are taking advantage of the opportunities for graduate study and training in such careers and professions as law, medicine, nursing, scientific research, teaching, social work, business, finance, and politics. In fact, in 1920 one out of every seven doctoral degrees was awarded to a woman. Today it is closer to one out of ten.

So it looks very much as though women, having successfully participated in a revolution partly of their making, have thus far found neither the confidence nor the initiative to carry it through to its logical conclusion.

In a sense, many women now find themselves as shackled by their own uncertainties as they were once shackled by external restraints. Now it is not for lack of opportunity. It is because women have not seized the vast range of choice available to them or prepared themselves adequately to assume privileges, responsibilities, and obligations which could -- and should -- readily be theirs.

Despite the freedom and opportunity to train and apply their intellectual resources, too many women fail to do so because their aspirations are limited and their motivations weak.

How are we to explain this contradiction between women's expressed need for intellectual fulfillment on the one hand and their lack of motivation on the other?

I have the strong suspicion that far too many of us -- both men and women -- have not recognized the extent of these revolutionary changes. We have failed ourselves to realize and to point out to our children how wide open the doors actually are for women to participate in virtually every type of activity society has to offer.

The time is past when we can afford to ignore the contribution which women have to make to our society and culture in addition to those essential gifts which they already bring to home and family.

What is this contribution? I for one don't subscribe to the notion that men are characteristically the custodians of ideas while feeling and emotion are reserved to women.

Actually, the nature of each individual man and woman is a varied and varying complex of thought and feeling, reason and intuition, masculinity and femininity. I personally believe, with these premises in mind, that it is of vital importance that women as well as men come more and more to play their part in influencing the nature and values of our social structure. I see our society becoming less brittle, unstable, and lopsided as men and women more fully join in bringing into play the talents and abilities they have in common as well as those special qualities which complement one another.

The obstacles to women joining with men in such an alliance are still formidable. But the individual and national stakes are high and it behooves both men and women to find ways and means of working toward this end.

By way of example let me suggest a few ideas that should prove helpful.

Let us start with the men who, I confess, are as much to blame as the women themselves. We men must try to develop a wholly different set of attitudes toward the intellectual capacities and attainments of women. We must let neither our own vanity, prejudice, nor selfishness deter us from encouraging and assisting women to develop confidence in their abilities and to use the creativity and imagination which they have been given in equal measure with men.

Second, the early years in a girl's life are crucial in establishing her future aspirations. It is then that family, school, and church begin to condition girls as well as boys for the world which they will enter as active members. Quaint traditions about what is a "masculine" and what is a "feminine" interest or idea must be discarded. I am not advocating the overthrow of dolls. But I am suggesting that a girl who early displays a fascination with ideas or with medicine or with building bridges should not be told that this is none of her concern -- that her place will be in the home or, at best behind a typewriter.

Third, schools and colleges must do far better than they are now doing to guide and encourage girls to develop and use the intellectual abilities which they most certainly possess. In a recent survey of several hundred women interested in becoming doctors, not a single one attributed her decision to prepare for her profession to guidance or

encouragement from a high school dean or principal or counsellor. In fact, on the contrary, many reported having been positively discouraged from thinking in terms of a specialized career that required years of training. Some were told that they could not possibly combine such a career with home and family.

Fourth, the schools and colleges must at the same time develop much more flexibility with respect to the girl who, for one reason or another, interrupts her formal education. There is no reason why education should not be available to her at any stage in her life. Education is a continuing process and it must never be allowed to lapse.

Finally, there is need for substantial improvement by government and business in their policies affecting women. Both should take a close look at how they might readjust their practices and routines so as to encourage women to develop and apply their skills more fully. Far more widespread availability of part-time work and training, for example, could make an enormous difference to the many women whom automation and packaged foods have helped free from at least half a day's labor in the home. We are without question wasting a valuable human resource by failing to use more imagination and flexibility in dealing with this situation.

These are only a few examples of what needs to be done. Many more could be cited.

In conclusion, I realize that not all of you will agree with the emphasis I have put on the need for women to assume a fuller and more active partnership with men. Understandably there is certainly room for difference of opinion here. But I am sure we can all agree that the dignity, freedom, and welfare of every individual -- man or woman -- is of momentous concern to all of us.

This is, indeed, the greater matter, of which the role of women in our society is a critical part. The ultimate values at stake are freedom and equality of opportunity for all. Every aspect of our national life should give proof of our faith in these principles. We must apply them regardless of race, creed, color, or sex!

To meet this challenge is the only sure road to national excellence and to the fulfillment of the human spirit.