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51st Commencement Address

Whitney M. Young Jr.

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COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

Whitney M. Young, Jr.

June 8, 1969

Executive Director, National Urban League

Students, particularly the graduating class of 1969, parents, friends and faculty, President Shain and Chairman Griswold: -- I hope I'm observing the new correct pecking order, as I start with students and end with the Chairman of the Board. I know that what the students particularly would like most would be to make this a brief ceremony. But I want you to know that I would be inclined to oblige them, but it has taken us 350 years to get into this mess, and it's a little too much to ask me to pull us out in 10 minutes. So if I detain you longer, I'm really not trying to get you people who are sitting back in the sun beautiful.

Not so long ago a group of miners found themselves entombed in one of the Kimberley Diamond Mines in South Africa. Surrounded by unlimited riches, they slowly met their death. Thirsting for water, starving for food, in need of spiritual comfort, they found that the diamonds were worthless. And so it is in our society today, we are skilled in the art of making war, we are unskilled in the art of making peace. We are proficient in the art of killing, we are ignorant in the art of living. We probe and grasp the mysteries of atomic fission and space travel, but we reject all too often such simple lessons as the Sermon on the Mount and the Golden Rule.

Somehow there must be found in our scheme of things a respect for those broad human values that transcend materialism, or else we shall find ourselves entombed in our diamond mine of materialism. The shrill beeps which come to us from far and distant space, as our satellites go loping around the globe, bring us home messages about ionosphere temperature and radiation. But they also tell us something I think vastly more important. They tell us that this tiny orb that we are now privileged to inhabit has become so shriveled and so diminished that every man is in fact every other man's next-door neighbor. In this enforced intimacy with other human beings, friendship, love, and consideration are our most important possessions.

Let me say at the outset that only the most hopeless optimist in our midst would fail to acknowledge that we as a nation are in serious difficulty. At a time when this country has every reason for having peace at home and respect from abroad, instead we find ourselves frightened, and fearful, and timid, enduring the near contempt of the rest of the world with a President who can make a commencement speech only at a little General Beadle College out West somewhere, or at an Air Force Academy, and who lives virtually in an armed camp; and with a distinguished governor from the State of New York who cannot visit the South American countries without fear for his life. At a time when people are concerned with crime in the streets and safety to their persons, rancor, bitterness, and conflict run rampant between young and un-young, between parents and children, between black and white, and oftentimes labor and management. All of this at a time when we have an unprecedented gross national product almost 40% that of the world's, a time when we have unprecedented technological and industrial know-how and creativity that have brought to the large majority of Americans unparalleled convenience, luxury, and comfort. Why is this? Why do we find ourselves in this rather ironical situation at this moment in time?

in spelling it out for you as I see it, if I seem to use black Americans as an example, I do so not unmindful of the fact that there are other minorities. I always tire a little bit at the end of a speech when somebody comes up and smiling, says, "Well you know, I'm a minority too -- I'm bald-headed." Or, "We women are a minority," and that's why I suppose this college was born, because they wouldn't let you into other colleges.

But I single out the black American because I think the black American is symbolic and he is unique. He is the only involuntary immigrant to the country. He is the one who has suffered the tragedies of slavery and enforced servitude. He is here in larger numbers and his high visibility adds to the irritation people must feel. But I feel strongly that the black American has become the barometer of the validity of the American system. If this citizen of 350 years who has given his blood, his sweat, and his tears to the building of this country, if this citizen who has been the drawer of the water, the hewer of wood, the tiller of the soil -- if he cannot find in America, after 350 years, freedom and dignity and true equal opportunity, then America is through. We will go down the drain of history as the biggest hypocrite and as a nation who had a magnificent opportunity but out of its greed blew it, and blew it tragically. No suburb is so far, no skyscraper is so high, no country is so far away, that any of us can now escape. We are all part and parcel of the problem. And we will learn to live together in this country and in the world as brothers, or we will all die together as fools.

I think the reason that we are in serious straits is that the disinherited, the disadvantaged, the have-nots of our society are fully aware of their plight. They are not only aware of the gap between their standard of living and other human beings', but they are fully aware that that gap was man-made, and not God-made. They are aware that they are victims not of congenital inferiority, but they are victims of a callous, a selfish and an indifferent society. More than this, and here is where I have my dilemma about education, for it is to the credit of education that the have-nots of our world now fully understand how other groups, including American, similarly situated throughout history went about changing their plight. The have-nots have read about Susan B. Anthony and that band of noble artistocrats who went about with little rocks in their muffs breaking out the windows downtown, in protest over disenfranchisement. They have read about the labor movement, the Greens and the John L. Lewises, and the Samuel Gompers and the Eugene Debs. They have read about the American Revolution itself, and I'm sure there were people prior to that sitting over in London expressing mixed feelings about Americans, that they agreed with their goals, but they were a little concerned about their methods. And their methods, as you recall, were rather violent.

But it is to the everlasting shame of education that we need have a revolution at all, for what this says, in effect, is that education has failed to do its basic job, and that is to prepare people to live and to understand what a democratic society is all about. The have-nots are aware of all of these things, most important today, the have-nots are joined by a new ally -- young people. And here I hope you don't make the mistake of assuming that when we talk about young people who are indignant about injustice,

we are only talking about hippies or yipples. You know, these are a meaning-less set of terms, anyway. It's a way that white America has devised in order to isolate its deviant youngsters from regular white kids. They never call them white kids. They always call them hippies or yipples or crazies or SDS members, and they're only white youngsters when they shave their beards and take off their beads and cut their hair. Then they're white kids again.

This isn't done with black kids. It's always "SDS students" and "black militants." An awful lot of white America is still fooling itself into thinking that the revolutionaries in our society are black. They are not. They are not the most violent and threatening element to America. Black people by nature are not a violent people. If we were, we would have been violent long before now -- or else we have the longest time-fuse known to man.

The violent people in our society are white. It was white people who killed Robert Kennedy, and John Kennedy, and Martin Luther King. It was white people who lynched from trees a documented 8,000 and an un-documented thousands more black people. It was white people who decided on a Vietnam policy. It was white people who decided about an American Revolution and a Civil War. It was white people not black people who bombed little children in churches in Birmingham. And who are most of these white people -- the revolutionaries? Not the sons and daughters of the impoverished of Appalachia. They are the sons and daughters of middle class and upper affluent Americans. The fact that they have taken on this society is something that we cannot take lightly, because it is not, as some people would hope, a phenomenon of the moment, like panty raids or crowding in telephone booths or swallowing gold fish. Because this generation of young people knows quite clearly that they are unique. They are the first generation to have within its power the capacity for the total destruction of all mankind. It is the first generation, most of whom were born to receive things, and therefore who take material prosperity for granted, and they are not going to be co-opted and seduced by stock options and promises of economic security. They are at best cynical and at worst contemptuous in their appraisal of a society that spends 60% of its budget for defense and 15% for health, education and welfare. They are disgusted at a society that when it feels it is being threatened by inflation, instead of making a major revision of the tax laws that would eliminate such loopholes as permitting wealthy people to buy up tax-free municipal bonds or to buy up old property and write it off as depreciation, thus escaping taxes, not to mention the vast sums written off for depletions when we don't need oil depletion allowances--Instead of eliminating these tax dodges, what does society do? The society cuts the Youth Corps and the Job Corps. And the society says "maybe we'll have to have a little more unemployment to sort of cool things off, to keep it from heating up." But it does find money for a net system, at a time when we need a missile net to catch hungry little babies in Mississippi and Alabama and New York -- we are appropriating money for the dubious possibility of maybe catching a few bombs from Red China.

Why are we frightened? Why do we spend 80 billion dollars? We spend it because we have not developed the ideology to the point that it will sell itself. We as a country have lived a lie. What we did was to write a constitution in which we declared that all men were created equal

and have certain inalienable rights. What we did was to devise a Judeo-Christian set of ethics and we proceeded to exclude many people, all black people. For 250 years we enslaved human beings because of their color and rationalized it on the basis that they were not men. And so it's not unusual to see the picture of Thomas Jefferson working on the Declaration of Independence and right at that point where he is saying, "We hold these truths to be self-evident," he is being fanned by a slave, a man that he owns. And it doesn't occur to him at all that it is incongruous, that it's hypocritical.

For another hundred years black Americans have been disenfranchised. Why do we have to send American boys to die in Vietnam when not a single Chinese has died? Why do we send them to Korea to die, when not a single Russian died. It's because the ideology has not been practiced to the point that others will fight that battle for us. And so of course we have to spend billions of dollars, but it becomes foolish. We are like the rich man who lives in a block surrounded by poverty, and out of his fright he keeps building the wall higher and higher. How high can you build a wall? Do we end up with an America that we cover with a dome like the Astrodome in Houston, living in fear? Or at which point do we sit down and reassess our values and what we are all about?

This is what this young generation is protesting. But it, too, must distinguish protest from program, and symbols from substance, and rhetoric from relevance. This is no one-night stand. This is not something you can only do from the security and the comfort of a university where free inquiry is encouraged and permitted. This is something you must do in the hard give-and-take of community life. This is not an obligation you take care of by tutoring little black youngsters in the ghetto. This is a challenge you must have, to take on white racism. The problem of black people in this country, as the Kerner Commission (composed largely of white people and all pretty conservative), said, "The problem is not black pathology, it is white pathology, it is white racism." You must take it on. Cicero High School is not going to invite me in to give a Commencement Speech. The John Birch Society has not asked me to make a lecture. Those frightened, fearful people who voted their prejudices in Los Angeles last week are not people I'm going to reach, but they are people that you've got to reach.

This means that we have to cut through some of the noise about law and order. The best example of order the world has ever known was produced by a man named Adolph Hitler. With his Gestapo and his storm troopers, he had perfect order. He had them goose-stepping all over the place. Nobody dared to dissent. He used that perfect order for activities leading up to the destruction of 14 million lives, 6 million in ovens.

There will never be order in this country, and there should never be order until in fact we have justice. How orderly do you think women would be in this country today, if they didn't have the right to vote. (They are bad enough as it is). How orderly do you think the working man would be in this country if he had not secured the Wagner Act? How orderly would Americans be if we were still the proud possession of Great Britain and a member of the Commonwealth? No, we wouldn't be orderly, and the poor

of this country, black and white, are not going to be orderly. They need you, and they need you desperately. Law and order has become a slogan, sort of a catchword, a code word for suppression. And suppression will only escalate, will only bring in a larger group of dissenters.

Now who are the people -- and this is why I would challenge the students to take them on -- who are those who are most resistant to change? Who are most unwilling to give up some of what they have to see that others have just a little bit? They are for the most part the people who just made it, who themselves came to this country a generation or so ago, at a time when all you needed was a strong back and a willing mind, and unskilled work was plentiful. They are people who cut their eye teeth on WPA (Works Progress Administration) and NYA (National Youth Administration) and CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) and FERA (Federal Emergency Relief Administration), who are now saying, "We are sick and tired of all these federal give-away programs." Who are these people? They are the sons and daughters, and grandsons and granddaughters of the Americans who came over here from foreign countries and who were given 40 acres and a mule, who were also given farm agents to teach them how to farm, and who are now being given subsidies not to farm; who are being given a total of 4.5 billion dollars for farm subsidy in a country that gives away \$450 million for a food stamp program to feed the hungry.

These are the people I call the affluent peasants in our society -- the people who have acquired middle class income but who are not undergirded with the aesthetic and the cultural and the educational experiences that go into making one a middle-class human being. These are dangerous people, and if you think for one moment that they will stop at the suppression of black people, you don't understand them. They are dangerous because they are not deep readers, if readers at all. They wouldn't know Karl Marx from Groucho's brother. But they are so deeply insecure and frightened that they believe that a great world is an exclusive world. And they just started with black people, and then they talk about school boards, and then they talk about library boards, and then they talk about the curriculums, about that Connecticut College up there and what they are teaching. All these are great patriotic people. They wrap themselves with the flag and with mother. They have little flags in the back of their cars for the most part. They wouldn't let a black man move into the neighborhood. Every car in Cicero and Bronxville for the most part has a little flag. These are cities where Al Capone can move into but Ralph Bunche can't.

The thing I would hope you would do is to get away from the generalizations. There is a difference between Rap Brown and Ralph Bunche. And you can't lump a whole group of people together. But we also have the right, if you will, to have our crackpots. There's no reason why white people should have a monopoly on crackpots. We have a right to make mistakes. We must have responsibility if we want to be asked to be responsible. The Irish did not start out after they secured Irish power by electing John Kennedy. They started by electing a man named Curley, who would make Adam Powell look like the epitome of political morality. And every group down through history

has had it -- their klan. And I say to my concerned friends these days, that when white America gets rid of the White Citizen's Council, and the John Birch Society and the Ku Klux Klan and the Fascists and the Nazi groups, I will then get rid of the Black Panthers. But if you cannot get rid of the former with all of your advantages, well there is no possible way for me to get rid of the latter. The amazing thing that history will record is not the fact that a few black people acted unwisely. The greatest thing that history will record will be the fact that most black people have for so long been so patient and have retained a faith and a confidence in a system that didn't deserve it, and a system that now, not to prove to black people, but to prove to its own young people, must change.

Only a few years ago I called for a domestic Marshall Plan and I said that we needed a compensatory kind of program. I said, "You can call it reparation, if you want to, or indemnification, but I'll call it compensatory". It's a simple fact that after 250 years of slavery -- unless you think that black people are superior -- there is absolutely no way for the masses of black people to compete in the main stream. White people don't need a 250 year head-start on black people. We aren't asking for equal time, but there has to be for black America the same thing that we so willingly gave to Western Europe after World War II, including Germany and Japan. Now there are no slums in West Germany, no unemployment -- all that's in Harlem among the kids whose fathers died in World War II fighting against Nazism. Well, if we can do that, and we should have, then why can't we have a domestic Marshall Plan for America. People smiled and said, "Oh well, sounds like a little pie in the sky." They did then. Then James Foreman walked into their churches and disrupted their services. And they said, "Now wait a minute, we don't like your methods, but maybe you have a point."

Is this where I fail? Is this the only way you get America's attention through dramatic insult? Can we never act through intelligence? Or compassion? Do we have to have 50 accidents at the corner before we get a stop sign?

At what point do we begin to see the great potential that is lost to this country because we don't let people get an education and live in decent housing. This is an investment I'm talking about. An investment in America. We might have let die off a youngster who could have given us a cure for cancer, because black people have made contributions. They did discover the process for separating blood plasma from blood. They did discover the process for refining steel. They did discover the process for mass-producing shoes. Most white people do not know this. They have not been permitted to know it, because if they had, they could no longer justify the enslavement of a people.

Finally, let me say that while I am opposed to violence against property and destruction of property, I'm also, and even more so, against violence against human beings -- the destruction of a man's soul, the violence that's done to the human spirit of a man who cannot afford to play the role of a husband and a father because he doesn't have money, the destruction

of the life of a mother, because she stays awake at night to make sure that rats don't bite her child. We've got to be concerned about that kind of violence and that kind of destruction. Sure I'm concerned about excesses. But I agree with Anatole France who said, "I prefer the errors of enthusiasm to the indifference of wisdom." It's much easier to cool a zealot than it is to warm a corpse. And a society that has indulged itself for generations and generations in excesses of indifference and callousness can now, I think if it has any intelligence, sort of hang in there and indulge itself sometimes in excess on the part of people who care.

What we seek when we talk about getting more black students in these colleges is not just an experience for black students. We are now fully conscious of the whole value system of white America, so that rest assured that what we are seeking is not cultural absorption, but cultural exchange. What we are looking for is to enrich the lives of white people. You have not got an education if you have been born in one of these bland, sterile, antiseptic, ghettos surrounded only by white people and have gone to colleges where there is little or no black presence. It doesn't take many black people, I gather, to make colleges integrated -- that's our high visibility. I would remind everybody that the percentage figures are about 10% for the population and since we're trying to catch up for past deeds, let's try for about 25%. It won't be easy to recruit them. You'll have to be creative and imaginative. You'll have to do as we did in the Urban League when we started hiring white people. We had to lower standards, we had to set up remedial courses. The Phi Beta Kappas from Radcliffe and Cornell and other places didn't know anything about the psychology of the poor; they didn't understand the language of the ghetto. They had head, but they didn't quite have enough heart, and so we had to educate them. And we did and now instead of 1% of our staff being white, it's 30%. And we are very happy about it.

But when we talk about wanting black kids in these colleges we are saying that this world is 75% non-white, and a white kid isn't educated today who grows up without some contact with diversity. We're saying that only through diversity does one get creativity. Sameness only compounds mediocrity. Only insecure, frightened people surround themselves with people who look like them and whose backgrounds are like them and who dress like them. You don't need this if you're going to be cosmopolitan and live in this kind of world that has become a neighborhood such as can put us on a space ship, and in 15 minutes we can go from Cape Kennedy to Africa.

We are saying that we need each other. Black people have something to offer. We are a resilient people. We can be and are a compassionate and humane people. You have denied us the technology, and the skill and the money, but you haven't taken our soul. And you can use our soul if America is to become a truly civilized society.

It was an ancient Greek scholar who, when asked to name the day when they would achieve justice in Athens, replied: "We shall achieve justice in Athens when those who are not injured are as indignant as those who are."

And so shall it be in this country. We shall in fact solve the problem of racism, when those who are not injured are as indignant as those who do suffer. From this day on, graduates, you will wear the badge of this college. Wherever you go and whatever you do, this college will be affected. If you are successful, then Connecticut College will succeed. If you are mediocre, then this college will be mediocre. If you fail, then God forbid, this college will also fail. Achieve success, achieve wealth, acquire fame if you can, but never do it at the sacrifice of a principle you know to be right. Die unhonored, unsung, unknown, die in chains if need be, if that's what's necessary to uphold a principle that's right. Yes, you wear the badge of the college. Wear it with pride and dignity. Good luck and God bless you.