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60th Commencement Address

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Ladies and gentlemen of the graduating class, Mr. President and distinguished guests, I invite your consideration of the mortal power which strengthens that community of learning to which you are now attached. Everywhere the two most powerful forces of the modern world -- science and nationalism -- are locked in mortal combat: unless they can be reconciled, harmonized and accommodated to the broad needs of society, the prospect for survival of civilization is somber and even desperate. These forces emerged on the stage of history some three centuries ago, and still provide the latitude and longitude of the world in which we live. The science ushered in by Galileo and Bacon, Kepler and Newton and all their affluent successors, opened up a new universe of nature and formulated a philosophy which could comprehend it; it provided impartially, instruments both for progress and for ruin; it made possible both the beneficent exploitation and also the utter destruction of natural resources and encouraged an increase in global population that required epidemics, famines, and wars to satisfy the Malthusian logic. At the same time, it pointed the way to the understanding and the resolution of the problems which it created.

I should add that science and technology, which made possible catastrophes, as they made possible progress and prosperity, are neither malign nor benign, but neutral; it is men, or nations, whose conduct is malign or benign.

Like the new science, nationalism too emerged out of the renaissance and reformation; speedily associated itself with religion, and launched a century of nationalist - religious wars. Not until the American and French Revolutions did it take on its modern character. It has to its credit far-reaching cultural and practical achievements. But for two centuries it has

found its most characteristic expression in imperialism, aggrandizement, conquest, and war; in racism and the exploitation of backward peoples by the strong, and in the cultivation of ideologies that are more often malign than benign. Yet we can no more blame the abstract institution of nationalism for the dangers that glare upon us than we can blame science. Nationalism is what man has made of it -- particularly what western man has made of it. For the nationalism that is now sweeping the world, erupting in almost 150 nations, many of them at dagger's point with their neighbors, is, yes, very much a western institution.

The philosophers of the enlightenment, from Newton and Locke to Jefferson and Goethe, thought to reconcile the claims of science and of nationalism by bringing both under the rule of reason and of law. In this hope they were frustrated.

These two mighty forces proved not harmonious but antithetical: though that was not inevitable, neither was it, I think, surprising. Science is by its nature universal, cosmopolitan and indivisible. Nationalism is by its nature particular, parochial, and devisive. Logically - and ideally - the world of science made for unity and for harmony and for a collective assault on the problems that confronted mankind. Nationalism, in response to laws almost as implacable as the laws of Newtonian physics, made for rivalry, conflict and exacerbation of those problems that threatened mankind.

For over two centuries, now, western civilization has been plagued by this over-arching paradox of its commitment to a science which is, by its nature, orderly, rational, impersonal, and classical, and nationalism, which is, irrational, disorderly, subjective, and romantic, wasting its moral, intellectual and material resources in futile strife. In our own time this paradox has spread to every quarter of the globe. It is one of the supreme ironies of history that the revolt of the peoples of Asia and Africa against

centuries of exploitation and misrule by the west has been carried through with those weapons of science, technology, and nationalism that were, in a sense, invented by the west. Thus the peoples of the "third world," in liberating themselves from the grip of western nationalism, have themselves succumbed to the worst impulses of that nationalism.

What is even more ominous is that almost everywhere modern nationalism has associated itself with ideologies as fanatical as those which appeared to justify the inquisition and launched the religious wars of the seventeenth century; witness the holocaust of the Hitlerian years, and the barbarism associated with so much of totalitarianism in the past half century; witness, for that matter, our own conduct in Viet Nam and Cambodia. The genius which since Newton has enabled man to penetrate to the secrets of the universe now enables him to realize the apocalyptic vision when the great globe itself shall dissolve and leave not a rock behind. By the eighteenth century, the forces of Newtonian philosophy and of nationalism were linked in uneasy alliance. It was an age that witnessed the transformation of dynastic nationalism to cultural, and what came to be called, romantic nationalism. It was an age, too, when statesmen as well as philosophers worshipped at the altars of reason and respected the claims of the arts and letters wherever they appeared. This seeming paradox was almost caricatured in Frederick the Great or Catherine the Great, but in America it seemed no paradox at all but the common sense of the matter. For here the same energies that went into the creation of the new nation went into the creation of institutions that transcended nationalism: thus, into the founding of the American Philosophical Society, the American Academy of Arts and Science in Boston, and of many new colleges that sprung up in the nation.

America's most distinguished political spokesmen were also her most distinguished philosophers -- Franklin and Jefferson chiefly, -- who were successively presidents of the philosophical society and represented the new

nation to the enlightened world of Europe, and John Adams, who founded the American Academy in Boston and wrote into the constitution of Massachusetts special provisions for the encouragement of learning, and was a war-maker, a peace-maker, and a nation-maker. Certainly in the eyes of the philosophers, there was no incompatibility between the enlightenment and the kind of nationalism which they envisioned. Their vision encompassed both, and what a vision that was: except in the realm of science there had been nothing quite like it before, except in the realm of science there has been nothing as exhilarating since. Men's minds were enraptured by the concept of a universe all of whose manifestations were governed by great cosmic laws -- laws which controlled the wheeling of the stars in the Heavens and the ebb and flow of the tides in the oceans and equally the operations of politics, jurisprudence, the society and the economy, arts, letters, and music, and even of morals. (Did not Immanuel Kant's categorical imperatives have the force of natural laws?)

They were exhilarated too, by the conviction that the reason of man could penetrate to these laws and by conforming to them bring all the operations of society into harmony with the laws of nature and nature's god. In that exultant vision there could be no conflict between the claims of the world of philosophy and the world of politics: both would be suffused alike by loyalty to reason and to law.

It was an age when the United States, speaking through Dr. Franklin, and France through Jacques Necker, could decree immunity, in time of war, for Captain Cook and his men because they were "common friends to mankind"; when a Hessian officer about to put the flames to the house of Francis Hopinon -- (he was one of the signers) -- was so impressed by its library and its scientific apparatus that he ordered the flames extinguished and wrote into the fly-leaf of a book "this man is clearly a great traitor but he is a man of learning and must be protected"; when George III could welcome Benjamin West of Philadelphia

into his household as a royal painter, and permit West himself to welcome, throughout the war, a stream of American students, including Trumbull, Stuart, and Peale, whose paintings celebrated the birth of the new nation. It was an age when Napoleon could decree that the university city of Gottingen should be spared the ravages of war out of respect for the great classical scholar, Christian Heyne; and when the French institutien -- this was in 1808 -- could confer its gold medal on Sir Humphrey Davy and Davy himself could cross the Channel and receive the medal to the plaudits of all Europe. "Some people," wrote Davy, "say I ought not to accept this prize, but if the two countries or governments are at war, the men of science are not." That note was to resound again in those more humane and enlightened years. Thus Sir Joseph Banks, for 40 years president of the Royal Society, which functioned as a kind of international clearing-house for the cause of science and learning everywhere, persuaded George III to forego a great botanical collection captured from the French naturalist La Billiarderie and wrote that "nothing is so likely to abate the rancour that politicians entertain against each other as to see harmony and good will prevail among brethren who cultivate science." Edward Jenner, of smallpox fame, put it best of all: "The sciences are never at war. Peace must always preside in those bosoms whose object is the augmentation of human happiness. With the triumph of modern nationalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries all this came to an end. There were, to be sure, faint echoes of this spirit in the last world war: the Luftwaffe spared Oxford and Cambridge and the allied Air Force spared Heidelberg and Gottingen, and thanks to the intercession of Henry Stimson, the United States Air Force spared the temple city of Kyoto. Even if our current statesmen might be so fully enlightened, which is dubious, it is inconceivable that atomic warfare could be so selective.

Modern nationalism challenged and then largely destroyed the community of culture built up over the centuries. It did this by setting up or manufacturing

not only political but cultural, ethnic and ideological barriers between states, substituting ethnic for religious fears and animosities, changing the character of war from dynastic and mercenary to popular and ideological. It did this by calculated appeals to the worst traits of human nature prejudice, fear and hatred, and by fostering the pernicious notion that some nations were designed by God, nature, and history to rule over others. Or even that there was some cosmic law which dictated that one nation was destined always to be more powerful than any of its rivals, what we may call the "number one" psychology, and which affects and afflicts us virulently. It was no wonder that nationalism, in its origins not without idealism and benevolence, came to be the most destructive force in history and one which now threatens to end all history.

Today the forces of internationalism, cosmopolitanism and the community of science and learning are everywhere in retreat and the forces of parochialism, insularity and fanaticism increasingly triumphant.

The great powers (and not the great alone) glare upon each other with ceaseless enmity and obsessive fear and pile up armaments in a mindless race which none can win and whose outcome will in all likelihood be either universal bankruptcy or universal catastrophe.

As the governments of the great powers seem increasingly lost to reason, and churches -- which once strove to be universal -- either share the obsessions and animosities of their societies, or seem impotent, the responsibility for restoring the community of learning falls, inescapably, upon the Academy, and by that term I embrace of course, all those institutions of learning, of science, of research, the libraries, the museums, the great societies dedicated principally to the search for truth.

The Academy remains the one unifying force which has, over the centuries, exalted what is common to mankind and permanent in history: the disinterested search for truth, and the cultivation of wisdom, of beauty and of virtue. Let

us not forget that the Academy is older by far than the nation - state and, if nationalism permits, may flourish centuries after nations, as we know them, are a thing of the past. It had its origins in those groves where Plato and Aristotle taught. In that Alexandria where, a century later, arose the largest library of the ancient world, in the early collections of books and manuscripts in monasteries and churches and palaces all through the era of the later Roman Empire, in the founding of universities in Italy and Spain, France and England in the 12th and 13th centuries, and the creation of the great learned societies in the seventeenth century, many of which are still with us. All of these are bound together in the common enterprise: preserving the heritage of the past, enriching it, and passing it onto posterity.

How illuminating the history of the founding of those two great academies that have contributed so much to this enterprise: The Royal Society of London and the American Philosophical Society. Christopher Wren, prepared the first draft of a charter for the Royal Society in 1661. The way to so happy a government (he wrote) we are sensible, is in no manner more facilitated than by promoting of useful arts which upon mature inspection are found to be the basis of civil communities and free government, and which gather multitudes by an orpheus charm into cities and connect them in companies. That by so laying in a stock of the several arts the various miseries and toils of this frail life may be remedied and alleviated.

The Society, therefore, was to meet weekly, and orderly, to confer about hidden causes of things with a design, by their labors in the disquisition of nature, to prove themselves real benefactors to mankind.

The American Philosophical Society contained a very similar admonition: Whereas nations truly civilized will never wage war with the arts and sciences and the common interests of humanity, the society should maintain cordial relations with learned societies everywhere in the world regardless of politics or war.

Our own Smithsonian Institution was--after long travail--dedicated to the same broad humanitarian objectives. Thus, as its first secretary Professor Joseph Henry wrote: it was not the purpose merely to establish a library or a museum for the diffusion of popular information, but a cosmopolitan establishment to increase the sum of human knowledge, and to diffuse this to every part of the civilized world. No other interpretation of the will is ... in accordance with the terms employed ... the increase of human knowledge, by which we must understand the additions to its sum would be of little value without its diffusion, and to limit the latter to one city, or even one country, would be an invidious restriction of the term Men.

All of the great problems that confront you now and will confront you during the rest of your life are global: population, energy, food, the pollution of the skies and the waters, the salvation of the seas from exploitation and destruction, the control of outer space and epidemics, weather manipulation, biological warfare, nuclear holocaust. All of these are global problems. Not one can be solved by a single nation, no matter how large or powerful. If they are to be dealt with at all, it must be by the cooperation of science, learning and the arts across the artificialities of national boundary lines and across the historical hostilities of race and creed and of ideology.

Of all institutions, it is the Academy--again I use this term in its most inclusive sense to embrace colleges, universities, scientific and philosophical societies, libraries, museums, great foundations, and even those branches of government like the Smithsonian Institution devoted to the advancement of science and the arts--that is best fitted to assume leadership in this affluent enterprise. It is not enough that the Academy indulge what Milton called "a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary." The Academy has its own standards, its own obligations, and its loyalties above and beyond those to party or nation, that was put with characteristic elegance by the greatest of the American spokesmen of the enlightenment; it was

in the midst of the revolutionary war, when the new nation was fighting for its very life, that Thomas Jefferson, himself Governor of Virginia, wrote a letter to his friend, the astronomer David Rittenhouse, then serving as Secretary to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania: "Your time, for two years past, has, I believe, been principally employed in the civil government of your country; though I have been aware of the authority our cause would acquire with the world from its being known that yourself and Dr. Franklin were zealous friends to it, and am myself impressed with a sense of the ardousness of government and the obligation those are under who are able to conduct it, yet I am also satisfied there is an order of geniuses above that obligation, and therefore exempted from it; nobody can conceive that nature ever intended to throw away a Newton upon the occupation of a crown. It would have been a prodigality for which even the conduct of providence might have been arraigned had he been by birth annexed to what was so far below him ... If we are to survive, we must revive the commonwealth of learning, a commonwealth which encompasses the whole of mankind and embraces not only our own age but the heritage of the past and the potentialities of whatever future may be vouchsafed us." In calling upon members of the Academy to serve this commonwealth we are returning to that tradition which for two millenia commanded the loyalty of artists, philosophers, and men of letters, and which, in our own country inspired those founding fathers who did not separate politics, morals and philosophy nor allow the claims of nationalism to distract them from the claims of humanity.

I close with some lines from a letter which Washington addressed to the legislature of Pennsylvania just a month before he assumed the office of President of his new nation: "It should be the highest ambition of every American to extend his views beyond himself and to bear in mind that his conduct will not only affect himself, his country, and his posterity, but that his influence will be coexistent with the world and stamp political happiness or misery on ages yet unborn."

Thank you.