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## 50th Commencement Address

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The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author.

Address by Professor Edwin O. Reischauer

at the Fiftieth Commencement of

Connecticut College

June 2, 1968

Thank you very much, President Shain for your kind introductory remarks -- Members of the Graduating Class of 1968, students, faculty and friends of Connecticut College.

It is a pleasure and an honor to be with you on this significant occasion, but at the same time I must confess to some dismay at my appointed task, which is to try to say something appropriate and meaningful in the brief format of a Commencement address. For you members of the graduating class this day marks an important transition from the sixteen years of the routine educational process to greater specialization in graduate schools or the commencement of professional or domestic careers. Traditional commencement day rhetoric runs to the standard themes of achievement, responsibility, challenge, and hope, intoned ritualistically by the speaker and accepted passively by his listeners. But somehow this academic "shrine festival," as the Japanese would call it -- in our terminology we might say a secular mass -- seems inappropriate in this year 1968. The times are out of joint and are not to be set right simply by conventional phrases.

The usual picture of carefree college days spent in cloistered ivy-covered halls was never entirely true and has even less validity today. Students of the present generation are seized by the frustrations and anxieties of the times and feel these perhaps with greater poignancy than do their elders, just because of the greater doubts and uncertainties that face those not yet sure of how they fit into this vastly complicated and confusing world in which we all find ourselves.

Young people also may feel the anguish of our time more strongly than their elders, because, in their time perspective, they are naturally more sharply focused

on this moment in history. As a result, they may have a keener sensibility to current problems than do older generations, whose senses may have been blunted by time. On the other hand, those with longer experience and therefore a broader time perspective may be able to see some aspects of our problems in better balance.

Both perceptions of reality have their own validity. The need is to combine them. We need a dialogue between generations, just as we need a dialogue between the various ethnic and social groups and educational and functional levels that constitute this complex nation.

I should, therefore, like to take this brief time set aside for my talk to try to contribute to this dialogue. The task you and I and all of us face is to try to achieve a better understanding of the bewildering problems that encompass us, so that we can cope with them more successfully. Let me comment on these problems from my own particular perspective as an historian and as one whose life and professional career has made him look at this country from the outside as much as from within.

We all would agree that the United States faces a very grave crisis in 1968. In my judgment, it is a more serious challenge to the whole American system, both dream and reality, than any we have faced since the Civil War. Certainly in my own lifetime there has been nothing like it. During the Great Depression we faced much greater economic problems; there was even reason to doubt that we still had a viable economic system. But it was clear what the enemy was -- unemployment and economic want -- and the nation remained united and hopeful in combatting these foes. In the Second World War, Nazi Germany and militaristic Japan posed a very real threat to the sort of world system of diversity and mutual tolerance that we have always believed in. But again the enemy was clear, and despite real danger and great pain we remained united and hopeful as a nation.

Today, by contrast, we are not menaced by hostile expanding empires abroad or by the threat of economic collapse at home. In fact, we have been misled by a sense of international omnipotence and have had our wits and feelings dulled by a surfeit of affluence. In most measurable things -- wealth, education, leisure -- the great bulk of Americans seem much better off than ever before. Many of our most obvious ills, even our greatest ill of racial discrimination, while admittedly very bad, are at least a little less severe than a few decades ago.

And yet the national mood runs from grim apprehension to deep despair. There is a wider sense of alienation from society than has ever existed in our country before, especially among young people and underprivileged groups. There are even voices calling for revolution.

To many members of the older generation all this is bewildering. When things seem to them better than what they knew in their youth, how can it be that their children should find things so much worse? There are reasons, I believe, for the apparent contradiction, and, if we could but see them, we could understand better the nature of the crisis that we face.

The irony of our situation is that our very progress, as progress is usually measured, lies at the root of our problems. In technological skills, in mastery of our natural environment, we are moving ahead at a tremendous and accelerating speed. Our wealth increases at a dizzying pace. So also does our strength and size. But so also do the complexity and pressures of our whole society and the size and intricacy of its problems. Our wealth pollutes our environment and entraps us in urban congestion. People are increasingly lost in the vastness and intricacy of modern society. The individual loses his sense of identity. He feels alienated from the huge system which he no longer can understand.

Technological advances bring change at an ever increasing rate. To cope with these rapid changes, the social mechanism -- that is political, economic, social,

and educational institutions -- must develop a capacity to make constantly more complicated and delicate decisions at ever increasing speeds. And values, or at least their formulation, need constant reassessment to keep up with changes in both technology and institutions. It is not surprising that many of our institutions fail to keep pace with change, or that our value system seems to become outdated. Dangerous gaps develop between technology and institutions and between institutions and moral values.

Each new generation grows up in what seems to it an entirely new world. It finds itself beset by increasing pressures of competition in an educational system that is growing rapidly in size and intricacy. The problems of choice in an increasingly complex world become ever more baffling and frustrating. The experience of earlier generations in a simpler age may seem no longer relevant, and a gap in understanding develops between the generations.

At the same time, the rapid advance of modern technology produces a demand for constantly rising levels of skill, which often prove to be beyond the capacities of the underprivileged, whose environment and education have not prepared them for the modern world. At a less advanced economic stage we had the problem of the unemployed, but now we face the mounting problem of the unemployable -- those whose skills do not measure up to the minimum levels set by an increasingly complicated and affluent society. Thus to the drop-outs produced by the psychological and educational pressures of modern society, we add the drop-outs produced by the rising technological standards of our economy.

All these problems add up to a dehumanizing of our civilization. Year by year we are all becoming less individual men and more just numbers. The human mind and soul are being subjected to the computer. Increasingly the less favored are finding no place at all in what the disenchanting call "the system." And the system itself -

the decision making process - is becoming so complex that no one can fully understand it, much less control it. Individuals everywhere cry out against the obvious iniquities it produces, but remedies are not easily found. The supposed correction of one ill so commonly produces a worse ill. We run the danger of becoming the slaves of the machine we have built, but dismantling this machine would not be the solution, as some visionaries believe, unless we are prepared for a drastic fall in economic levels and a great reduction of our vast urban population through starvation. No, the only solution is to rehumanize our civilization by putting individuals above machines and by devising better ways for human judgment and moral values to shape and guide "the system".

These problems, of course, are not unique to the United States. They are endemic in all the more advanced nations and might be called the "growing pains" of the modernization process. I am quite familiar with them in Japan, where dazzling success in economic growth and unparalleled speed of change have for long produced serious symptoms of alienation among both intellectuals and the little man lost in the great cities, and student unrest has been persistent and violent.

There may be comfort in knowing that others face these same problems, but we should realize that we probably face them in greater degree simply because of the huge size and tremendous complexity of our country. As an economic unit, we are more than twice the size of our nearest competitor, the Soviet Union, about six times the size of the next national unit, Japan, and 40 or more times the size of the middle-sized and smaller countries of Western Europe. In our geographic and ethnic diversity, in our relatively free and diverse institutions, and in our extraordinarily decentralized political system, we face vastly more intricate problems than do the much more homogeneous and centralized national units of Japan and Western Europe, or the much more closely controlled Soviet Union, which is our only close counterpart in size and diversity.

Take, for example, the very fundamental problem of providing adequate educational opportunities to all, so that there will not be an underprivileged educational minority that becomes the unemployable drop-outs of the economic system. Japan faces no such problem, because its more centralized educational system does not permit great discrepancies to grow up between urban and rural schools, or between schools in rich and poor neighborhoods. We can identify the problem, but to equalize educational opportunities between Mississippi and California or between Harlem and Westchester will take some serious reworking of the concepts and institutions we have inherited from the eighteenth century.

Thus we see that our size and diversity, while giving us great advantages economically, also give us greater problems than those faced by most advanced nations. This alone, however, is not enough to explain the very special sense of crisis of this year 1968. I believe that our present crisis is the product of the fact that, on top of the world-wide problem of the dehumanizing of civilization that I have been describing, two very special American problems have come to a head at this time, each drawing further heat from the other and both accentuating this broader problem. One, of course, is the foreign policy disaster in Vietnam, about which I wish to speak in some detail, since it comes closer to my own field of specialized knowledge. The other is the problem of race, which has been so shamefully neglected for a whole century that it has now reached explosive proportions.

To some young people, these two special problems both seem so inexcusable that they find it hard to believe that they are just the product of ignorance, prejudice, and sloth. Instead they see in them proof of a fundamentally immoral society that must be destroyed by revolution. I sympathize with their moral indignation, but my own historical perspective does not permit me to agree with

assumptions that what would replace the society they wish to destroy would be better, rather than worse, than what exists. My own study and experience convince me that constructive reform, rather than destructive revolution, is the best way to build a better society.

Be that as it may, however, we face today two very great and specific crises in our national life, and neither will be quickly solved. Equalization of opportunity will take a great restructuring of our educational facilities and our patterns of urban and rural life, and only after this is done can we begin to overcome the real problem, as new generations grow up with more equal opportunities. Better race relations also require so fundamental an alteration in attitudes that they can be accomplished only through the most basic of all mechanisms of social change -- a change in generations. The tragedy of our present situation is that, while we must work hard to ameliorate our domestic crisis immediately and on a crash basis, we can hope to solve it only over the course of decades.

Our foreign policy crisis, in so far as it is the specific problem of Vietnam, is more open to quick solution, but the underlying problem of our relationship with Asia and the rest of the less-developed world will take even longer to solve than our domestic problem, because it is so much bigger.

Those who have for the first time become conscious of Vietnam and the broader problem of our relationship with Asia only at this time of disaster, cannot really be blamed for jumping to the conclusion that our policies have been so bad that they could only be the product of evilly motivated men making immoral decisions. But this, I believe, is a serious misjudgment, which can only further confuse the issue. Having lived through the last few decades of shifting American attitudes toward Asia and having seen our policies developed step by step, often in ways

against which I have argued, I believe that I have a clearer concept of what has gone wrong. The whole story, as I see it, is not one of evil intentions but of ignorance, wrong judgments and inadvertent steps. Small and seemingly innocuous decisions led to unexpected results and new and more difficult problems. To put it another way, our Vietnam fiasco is essentially the product of a decision making process that has fallen behind the realities of the situation.

We also might say that our Vietnam crisis is, in a sense, a product of our size. We were the only major country to survive the Second World War relatively unscathed, and as a result we found heavy responsibilities resting on our shoulders. We responded in good spirit to this challenge, but without a sufficient depth of knowledge or experience, especially in the less familiar parts of the world. The situation demanded decisions and action by us. We did many things well in Europe and Japan and in pioneering the concept that advanced nations should give aid to the less advanced. Our successes helped produce in us a false sense of omnipotence. And since we took the major actions in the world, we also made the major mistakes. Smaller countries have by their lesser size been spared these problems.

If we look more specifically at our errors in Vietnam, we will see how they grew primarily out of our ignorance and our unfamiliarity with the responsibilities the Second World War left on our shoulders. In 1945, because of our concern about the sensibilities of our friends in the war-ravaged lands of Western Europe, we condoned and even aided the restoration of the colonial empires of Asia, when all people who knew much about Asia at that time could see that the age of colonialism was passing and that our national instincts and our interests in Asia both called for support for revolutionary nationalism. But being a country oriented primarily toward Europe, rather than Asia, we made unsound decisions about Asia based on concerns over Europe.

Subsequently, we drew an analogy from what we thought to be the problem we faced in Europe and applied it and the solution we designed for the European problem to a fundamentally different situation in Asia. In Europe, we saw the danger of a militarily powerful Communist movement under unified Soviet control seizing mastery over a potentially powerful but temporarily disrupted Western Europe and thereby turning the balance of power in the world drastically against us. Our answer was a unified defense through NATO and a rapid restoration of Western Europe's economic and political viability through the Marshall Plan.

Whether or not this "cold war" view of the problem was correct in Europe, it was a serious distortion of the problem in Asia, and the counter measures that proved so successful in Europe have proved disastrously wrong in Asia. The less-developed countries of Asia were not a potentially significant factor in a world balance of power. Nationalism was a stronger force than Communism, and as a consequence there was no unified Communist movement that could sweep the continent. Less-developed nations, once fired by nationalism, were capable of a guerrilla resistance that made outside control and exploitation impossible. This is the meaning of the failure of the Japanese military juggernaut in China as well as our own agony in Vietnam. There is no reason to believe that Chinese and Russians would be any more successful than we or the Japanese if they attempted to overrun Asian nations, which in any case they have not tried to do and are not likely to attempt.

The problem the countries of Asia faced was primarily one of internal stability and development, not of external aggression. They needed economic and technological aid from us, not defense. Mutual defense alliances proved to be empty except for a unilateral American commitment, often to a status quo which needed changing. Our resemblance to erstwhile colonial masters sometimes made our military help more

weakening than strengthening. The same was true of the massive economic impact of our military intervention, which tended to corrupt local societies and distort their economies. There could be no quick economic and political recovery, as happened through Marshall Plan aid in Europe, but only the start of a long, slow climb from a pre-industrial form of society to a more modern one. Our chief efforts thus were misdirected to the building of defense alliances and the supporting of politically friendly regimes, when they should have been devoted to long-term growth and development.

It is not surprising that, with such a serious misconception of the problem and of our capacities to affect it, we have ended up in a great disaster in Vietnam. The tragedy of the situation is that our very size now makes it all the harder to correct our mistake. If we were a smaller country, say like France, the error, once perceived, could, with resolution, be quickly corrected. A sharp reversal of course might be humiliating, but the damage would only be to our pride. But, given our size, the problem is much greater than this. Most of the world depends on commitments by us or at least on our predictability, and, if we were to prove erratic in our actions, the whole world would be seriously shaken. And if in our humiliation we withdrew into a sullen isolationism from the less-developed parts of the world, we would be withdrawing from them much of the economic aid and sympathetic concern that this underprivileged two-thirds of the world so desperately needs. The faith of other nations in us and our own faith in ourselves, so that we will be able to aid constructively in the development of a better world, are what are primarily at stake in the current negotiations in Paris.

This is not a good year for political predictions, but I will admit to a relatively optimistic view of the possibilities of ending the Vietnam War through negotiations within a reasonable period of time -- say six months to two years.

I am even optimistic that we shall be able to learn through the bitter experience of Vietnam what we should have realized much earlier -- that conditions in various parts of Asia are very different from those of Europe and require much more study and understanding on our part if we are to develop wise policies and avoid further disasters.

I must confess, however, to considerable apprehension that in our revulsion from the Vietnam fiasco and in our realization that the immediate strategic stakes in Asia are much less than the "cold warriors" of the 1950's assumed, we may relax into indifference to the very real but long-range problem of our relationship with Asia.

To understand our true interests in Asia, it may be helpful to draw an analogy to our great domestic crisis. In a simpler age, great discrepancies of wealth and opportunity, far from undermining society, constituted its very foundations. Once the lord could live in relative opulence in the manor house on the hill, while his tenants clustered miserably in their huts at its base. Even in the nineteenth century, our society proved stable and viable though the majority of the people remained seriously underprivileged by contemporary standards. But today, in the closer integration of contemporary society and in the whole equalitarian ethos of our contemporary system, the existence of an underprivileged, undereducated fifteen or twenty per cent of the population is not only an affront to our ideals but a threat to the very existence of our society.

Similarly, vast discrepancies in wealth and opportunity between the various regions and nations of the world proved no great problem even into the early decades of this century. Distances were too great and contacts too tenuous. But the world is shrinking rapidly, and interrelations are multiplying. Common attitudes and aspirations sweep the world. Under these circumstances the great

imbalance between the rich one-third of the world and the poor two-thirds is clearly a mounting problem. With each passing decade it will become more severe, until it too may reach the explosive proportions our domestic imbalance has reached. If this should happen, the problem will be much greater, because the proportions are very different. It will not be an underprivileged fifteen or twenty per cent as opposed to a privileged majority but an underprivileged two-thirds of the world against a privileged minority. The gap between the two groups is still growing bigger, rather than shrinking. If we ignore this problem, the way we ignored our problems of race and the underprivileged at home, we shall be bequeathing to the next generation even greater problems than we face today.

These comments on our great crisis of 1968 have been very brief and fragmentary, and they are, of course, limited by the necessarily narrow angle of vision of a single individual. I hope, however, that my approach may have thrown clarifying light on at least some aspects of the problems we face.

I trust that I have, at least, shown that a major aspect of our Vietnam problem is the inadequacy of our decision-making process, resulting in part from its complexity but, in this case, even more from ignorance and inattention.

We inevitably will continue to be, if not one-third of the world economically, at least the largest single unit in the world and, therefore, a nation that must undertake large responsibilities. To do this successfully, we must have more understanding of the complex realities of other nations - especially those of the less-developed parts of the world which we understand so little. This demands a great, conscious effort on our part - not only at the college level but throughout our educational system and throughout adult society. The same need for more study and more understanding, I believe, lies at the bottom of our domestic problems, too.

In closing, I wish that I could give you the reassuring prediction that we shall certainly overcome our great looming problems, but, in all honesty, I cannot do so. We have no assurance that we shall be able to handle adequately the two immediate crises of Vietnam and the race problem. We have even less assurance that the seemingly inevitable growth in size and complexity of our society and the resultant building up of pressures on us as individuals and on our collective institutions will not eventually overwhelm our civilization, either through some unmanagable catastrophe or in the form of a long Roman twilight. If we are to extricate ourselves from our two current crises and go on surmounting the rising difficulties of the whole modernization process, we will need to bring to bear all our powers of analysis and understanding; we will need all the clarity of thought and balance of judgment we can muster. Whether we can do so successfully depends on our combined efforts, but in the long run it depends much more on people of your generation than on mine.