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President Ames' 64th Commencement Address

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After four years of study on this high hill, and of learning about yourselves and others, you are about to enter what many of you call "the real world." After the countless hours you have spent reading in the library, attending lectures and classes, writing papers, suffering through exams, the faculty has decided to wish you on your way; it does so with pride.

Yours has been a life of reflection, of attention from faculty and deans, of playing on teams or cheering for them, of many a good party, an abundance of friends close at hand. The scene on our hill is one of stately trees, open greens, surrounding forest, a view of the river flowing into the Sound, and of a city dotted with church spires. Will the "real" world beyond our lanterned gates be similar?

A faculty-student research team is measuring the levels of acid rain in an arboretum pond. The submarines in the river remind us of the arms race. Reductions in funding threaten to curtail the efforts of social agencies serving the needs of the elderly and unemployed in the City.

On the international scene, there is conflict in Central America, the Falkland Islands, Lebanon; a cross made of flowers was reconstructed in front of hostile soldiers in the center of Victory Square in Warsaw during the sixth month of martial law.

Have the hinges of Pandora's box been sprung? Perhaps I should suggest what some commencement speakers advised seniors a few years ago about leaving college and going out into the world; they said, "Don't."

However, I want to say this afternoon that I see reasons for hope and optimism. I don't think for a minute that the world is spinning out of control. Furthermore, I believe you can do much to make it better and safer for yourselves and for future generations. One of my reasons for optimism is the growing public reaction to the most dangerous threat of all, that of nuclear annihilation. This threat has been growing since the end of World War II; now, at last ordinary citizens are realizing the absurdity and danger of the arms race, and their voices are being heard. The New London City Council and the entire Connecticut congressional delegation, for example, have endorsed the proposed bilateral nuclear arms freeze. The President seems to be approaching the problem in a new way.

Back in December of 1948, J. Robert Oppenheimer, who had directed the laboratories in which the first atomic bombs were constructed, began a talk with the following story:

"A few weeks ago the president of a college in the prairie states came to see me. Clearly, when he tried to look into the future, he did not like what he saw: the grim prospects for the maintenance of

peace, for the preservation of freedom, for the flourishing and growth of the humane values of our civilization. He seemed to have in mind that it might be well for people, even in his small college, to try to take some part in turning these prospects to a happier end; but what he said came as rather a shock. He said, "I wonder if you can help me. I have a very peculiar problem. You see, out there, most of the students, and the teachers too, come from the farm. They are used to planting seed, and then waiting for it to grow, and then harvesting it. They believe in time and in nature. It is rather hard to get them to take things into their own hands."

We are finally beginning to "take things into our own hands," as citizens of a democratic society must do, even though it may seem unsettling to some national planners and officials. A few months ago one of them publicly stated that the strategic arms situation is too complex for policy to be determined by the votes taken in town meetings. That person should remember what Thomas Jefferson had to say:

"I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion."

Why have we been so slow to speak out on the issue of nuclear weapons? Surely one reason is that we suppress the thought of nuclear war because of the horror of its destructiveness. The complexity of the issue, much of which is technical, discourages many. Until recently, it was difficult to obtain the information needed to make judgments, and some of what we read is contradictory. We ask "what difference will my opinion make?" and so we leave it to the "experts."

The trouble is that some "experts" are saying very disturbing things. One position we've heard frequently is that the United States is "behind" the Soviet Union, because if they struck first and we retaliated they would still have enough to hit us again. That assessment seems to imply that the side which inflicted the most damage would be a winner; but there can be no winner in a nuclear exchange. Does it make sense to think of one side being "ahead" and the other "behind" when both now have such tremendous power to strike back if the other strikes first? I think not.

An historian friend of mine, concerned about the arms race, recently talked to some Defense Department specialists and told me, "They'll talk you down every time; they hold all the cards. They have all the arguments." One of these has been used by Eugene V. Rostow, Director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency. Rostow said, "We thought the Soviets would settle down if they achieved

equality and recognition as a great power. We discovered that once they had achieved parity, they went right on at the same rate." Compare this with a statement by Paul Warnke, Mr. Rostow's predecessor in the Carter Administration: "If we could get an immediate freeze, it would be much to our advantage, because we're ahead."

The experts don't agree. Could it be that the Soviets are continuing their build-up so vigorously because they recognize our very considerable technological lead in weaponry, or because they are frightened by such developments as the MX? Could it be that because of serious internal problems, such as poor agricultural performance, the Soviets would be eager to spend less on the production of expensive weaponry? Could it be that because the USSR lost over 20 million people in World War II compared to 350,000 lost by the United States in all the wars since 1900, their leaders are far more frightened at the prospect of a nuclear war than we realize? There is evidence that this is an important element in the psychology of Soviet leaders.

It is clear that our "experts" must take a very broad view of the problem. They must not limit their considerations to the technical questions of numbers and accuracy of warheads; in addition there must be a far greater effort to understand the thinking of our adversaries.

In an article that appeared in the N.Y. TIMES on April 18, that remarkable historian, Barbara Tuchman wrote: "Given nuclear weapons and their consequences, one thing is clear: there is no military solution to the problem. The confrontation of their system and ours has, I repeat, no military solution." She goes on to say: "That they must have the weapons anyway is the position of the Soviet and American governments. This policy can only be deactivated, I think, by public rejection. There can be no real progress toward arms control until public tolerance of existing policy ends."

To find the best course to disarmament and greater understanding will require far more than the efforts of the relatively small number of planners and policy-makers in Federal agencies. However, it cannot be set by noisy protest based mostly on strong feelings and little on understanding. All of us must be informed on the issues, and promote a vigorous national debate.

You are well prepared to participate in this debate. Your education has sharpened your ability to question, to think critically and analytically. You have gained perspective and understanding through the study of history, philosophy, psychology - many subjects. You have learned to work out your own positions and to express them effectively.

Now you must continue your learning, and it must encompass the major issues of our time. Choose one to understand particularly well. I hope many of you will choose nuclear disarmament. The information is available. The arguments may be complex, but you are prepared to analyze them and reach your own conclusions. And when you have done that, speak out. Ask that your public libraries gather and exhibit material. Write letters to your local newspapers. Join the League of Women Voters or the American Friends Service Committee or other worthy groups to assist their work. Write your representatives and senators for the most recent information. Your interest will help give nuclear disarmament the high priority it must have among their other pressing concerns. Our President and his planners may have altered their thinking, but there are still disturbing and unanswered questions surrounding the latest arms limitation proposal. And furthermore, the issue is too difficult for a quick solution; a steady, long-term effort will be needed.

Tell your elected officials what you think. Suggest what you believe ought to be done, be specific. If you think a bilateral and verifiable freeze on the production, testing and deployment of nuclear weapons is a good idea, say why. Remember that your vote is a powerful persuader.

All well and good, but I am sure several of you are thinking "what about the Russians?" It takes both sides to stop the nuclear madness. We can pressure our elected representatives, but they can't challenge their leaders.

Dissent is dangerous in a totalitarian state. The people are uninformed or told only the party line. Soviet leadership seems to propagate itself with a total rigidity to change. How do we crack that armor? How do we reduce the mutual distrust and antagonism that divides our two nations? We certainly won't do it by building the MX and the B-1.

But, there are some alternatives. We might dramatically increase cultural and intellectual exchange programs to promote better communication and understanding. Scientists have long formed a community which knows no ideological or national boundaries. Art, music, and poetry, if not exploited for propaganda purposes, bring people everywhere together. Barbara Tuchman has suggested trying to stir up anti-nuclear feeling in Russia just as they have encouraged the "peace movement" in Western Europe. Economic inducement and sanctions may create pressure within the Soviet Union for change. It is important that we think at least as hard about strategies like these as we have about weapons planning and working out scenarios of nuclear war.

The Russian physicist and Nobel laureate, Andrei Sakharov, has written, "There is a need to create ideals even when you can't see any route by which to achieve them, because if there are no ideals, then there can be no hope, and then one would be completely in the dark..."

You should go forth from this college with ideals and with hope. The real world out there is the sum of what people bring to it; you have a lot to give.

Oakes Ames
President