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President Ames' 67th Commencement Address

Oakes Ames
Connecticut College

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Members of the graduating class - Louise and I have enjoyed being a part of your Senior Week, and it is good to be with you once again today. I can feel the excitement rising as tomorrow draws closer.

Parents, relatives, and friends of the graduates - welcome. With you we salute our seniors.

In thinking about what I would say this afternoon it occurred to me that although you, the students, have been here to learn from the faculty (and each other), we have learned from you too. So I must tell you that in trying to gather my thoughts and put them on paper, you and your achievements have been an inspiration. If my exhortations sound ambitious for you, I think you have demonstrated that you can reach these goals.

We hear much these days about the need to educate young people for the new high-tech age. The United States mustn't fall behind in the competition of the technological marketplace. Schools are installing computers faster than they are learning how to use them effectively. The information revolution is upon us with all its fascinating new technology. Useful it is (this speech benefited from the word processor), but we mustn't concentrate so much on technology that we fail to attend to the development in young people of some human qualities that matter far more.

This faith in technology is especially evident in the current efforts to control the arms race. Those who advocate the strategic defense initiative, commonly called "Star Wars," argue that even though the technology seems to be far in the future and prohibitively

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expensive we should strive for technological miracles. After all, people used to doubt that man could ever reach the moon. I say, though, that we should be working even harder for another kind of miracle, the possibility of successful diplomacy and negotiation. It is communication between human beings rather than new weapons that one day will make the world a safer place in which to live.

What, then, are these human qualities whose development should not be neglected in the technological stampede? I've alluded to one already, the ability to communicate. Along with that we want you to have vision, ideas about how to make the world a better place. We want you to believe in these ideas passionately and not to be afraid to go out on a limb for what you believe in. We want you to have the highest standards, intellectually, morally, aesthetically.

These qualities are closely related: they are needed for leadership. They are basic to the College's philosophy. Keep them with you when you leave this place and make them grow.

People who have vision are always seeking better ways to do things. In looking at an organization, a community, or their place of work they imagine possibilities for improvement or for creating something new out of what is there already. A musician visits a park and imagines a tent seating hundreds or thousands for summer concerts there. The mayor of a city dreams about working with its citizens to improve both business and the quality of life for everyone. But what about a builder who looks at a patch of woods cut by a stream and dreams of putting condominiums there? We hope he will realize that this particular spot should

be saved as a natural area. So our visionaries must have what Northrop Frye calls an "educated imagination." Their dreaming must be guided by a sense of values, and informed by history.

In order to make the world a better place you will have to be dreamers and practical, down-to-earth, problem-solvers. Whether in your jobs or serving on the local school board, look upon problems as challenges, as opportunities to be creative. Having vision means seeing possible solutions that have eluded others. It requires approaching problems in fresh ways. A style of thinking is needed, an openness of mind and a curiosity which I believe your education at Connecticut College has fostered.

You must also be skillful at working with others, at understanding their perspectives and ambitions, and then be able to articulate your vision. I have heard many of our graduates say that being able to work with people in these ways is a prime by-product of their liberal education here. They are better at it than others who were less fortunate. So go forth into that "real world" with some confidence that you have what it takes to make a difference.

To solve problems and make things happen you have to persuade others. There has to be a spark; call it passion. We all know people who are deeply committed to their projects, causes, and organizations. They are willing to throw themselves totally into what they believe in, whether it's their work, or what they do as volunteers. Our College is fortunate to have many alumni and others connected with it who, in their work as volunteers, show that quality of commitment. There is an element of generosity in such people. They are not simply interested in what they can get to improve their own lives; they are interested in how to improve the world for others too.

Do we take too much for granted the freedoms and benefits that our democracy provides? In a survey of high school and college students conducted in 1979, the students were asked to rank in order of importance various rights and obligations that we have as citizens. The right to trial by jury was ranked near the top, but the obligation to serve on a jury was down near the bottom.

Suppose, though, that you would have put this duty high on the list and want to commit yourself to working on some issue. You may still despair that your efforts will never make a difference. The issues seem too complex to understand. And anyway, you say, who will ever hear my voice?

A man named Earl Kim might have asked that question. In 1945 he flew over the city of Nagasaki shortly after it was destroyed by the second atomic bomb dropped on Japan. Later he became a composer and a professor of music. But the horrors of what he had seen stayed with him and was reflected in his music. In 1982 he had the idea of benefit concerts that would raise money for organizations working for a nuclear weapons freeze. The seventeenth such concert was held in Hartford just two months ago. Organized through the efforts of a violist, a cellist, and the Assistant Manager of the Hartford Symphony, the benefit raised over fifty thousand dollars. All the concerts together have raised more than \$1.5 million.

A Connecticut College graduate who lives in Old Lyme, and who is a mother and a translator of German texts into English, was a key organizer of the citizens of the town a few years ago when it became the first one in the State to go on record for a nuclear arms freeze.

Like Earl Kim and these people who care passionately about an issue, you, too can make a difference.

If you believe that strongly in some idea, you will set the highest standards for yourself, and will expect the best of those who work with you. Nowhere are high standards more important than in our thinking, in the process of deciding where we stand on issues, in trying to judge the validity of arguments. How easy it is to turn off our critical powers too soon, and how hard sometimes to stand up for what we believe is right. In Neil Simon's new play Biloxi Blues, the soldier Eugene Jerome wants to be a writer, and keeps a journal. One day his friend, Arnold Epstein, sees him tear out a page and throw it away. Epstein chides Jerome, saying, "Once you start compromising your thoughts, you're a candidate for mediocrity."

It can be lonely and difficult to maintain a position that may separate us from friends or associates. There is much comfort in being part of the crowd, but often the people who contribute most to their society are the ones who are able to stand apart. Emerson, in his essay Self Reliance, wrote that, "A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within, more than the lustre of the firmament of bards and sages."

There will be many times when you will have to make decisions based on incomplete information. It will take courage to act when you can't be certain of the outcome. But you have reason to have confidence in yourselves. You have learned to think independently at Connecticut College, to examine questions from different points of view. You've learned how to draw inferences. You know what it means to get beneath the surface of a subject and to think deeply

about it. In your studies you have become acquainted with the world's great thinkers, artists, writers, men and women in public life. They have helped you set your standards. You have been challenged and have found yourselves equal to the task. And, finally, you have made many choices in your undergraduate years, and have lived with them and learned from them.

Someone once said that there is only one kind of decision - the difficult one. So when you have to decide don't lose courage; don't be afraid to take risks. If you find yourself playing it safe, think twice. Not much would have been accomplished in our world unless lots of people had taken risks.

Two years ago the College community was fortunate to have a visitor of great courage. Helen Suzman in the 1960s was the only member of the South African House of Assembly to stand in strong opposition to Apartheid. In 1959, she and ten other progressives defected from the United Party because it had ceased to be an effective opposition to the National Party. A few years later Mrs. Suzman was the only one of the group of eleven left in office. She never compromised in her opposition, and in 1974 seven fellow progressives were elected to join her. By 1979, the number was up to eighteen, and today it is twenty six (out of one hundred seventy eight). There is a person with vision, passion, and standards - and courage.

Be like the Helen Suzmans of this world. Your families I suspect, and certainly the faculty and administration, look to you graduates as the educated leaders of tomorrow. Our expectations for the Class of 1985 are high and, we believe, well founded. A poem by Galway Kinnel is entitled "First Day of the Future." Tomorrow is that day, and may the future be bright for each of you.