

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS BY WILLIAM H. CAMERON

Well, Gentlemen, it has come to the day that never comes to graduation day, June 10, 1967. That is the fact - the warm, pleasant, satisfying fact of the matter, the seat in the sun after a long, hard winter, and a long, cold spring. You've won your seat. No one will ever take it from you, and it is a good thing to have done, and you deserve to feel warm because of it. Felicitations!

Now the truth of the matter - as opposed to the sunny fact of the matter - may very well lie elsewhere; and this unwelcome possibility tradition and the occasion compel us to pursue.

The catch in graduation day is that it also goes by the name of commencement day, and thereby hangs the tale. Our Pandora's box, suitably beribboned, bedecked, and labeled is on the doorstep and the ribband waiting to be snipped.

Now I will admit the temptation on an occasion such as this is to survey the devils thus loosed, to count their number, weigh their mass, apologize for their origin, pass the torch, and retire, hoping that a new generation thus charged will go forth and establish, if not the millenium, then at least a reasonable facsimile of it; and I may as well admit right now that I've succumbed to temptation.

But if you are looking for a formula which will have in it the force of revelation, you will be disappointed. I have no new light, and I own that this business is one which I face with considerable trepidation.

I am only too mindful of a young school boy I once knew years ago - so long ago that I'm not even sure I could recognize him if we passed on the street going in opposite directions - something not likely, for I haven't seen him for forty-two years. . . . And when, 42 years ago, I sat where you now sit, anxious to get on with it, to be off to pastures greener and larger, where fences were lower and much more easily jumped, I certainly felt no sense of destiny or of being afloat on its stormy sea. Like some of you I was a careless youth. I felt no need but the one at hand, and establishing millenia of any sort was furthest from my mind.

I will admit that I once joined a protest march led by a fullback, a hearty rough, whose indifference to danger became a legend at Bataan. The march was about food, both the lack of it and the dubious quality, particular resentment being attached to soggy hot bread, scorched oatmeal, grassy milk and thin treacle - breakfast staples hard to face even with one half-opened eye and a palate dull with sleep. The march was grand and loud while it lasted, but it lasted fewer than ten minutes. It ran into a firmly planted, slightly gray, middleaged man, twirling a gold Phi Beta Kappa key on the end of a large gold chain, as though key and chain were a headsman's axe and the block close to hand. The protestors did not disperse. They evaporated. Heaven only knows how or where. But as individuals they've been turning up in odd places wearing strange disguises ever since.

Led by curiosity and other good and valuable consideration, I went to see Calvin Coolidge, 30th President of the United States, on his way from Capitol Hill to the White House in 1925. With as much majesty as he could muster, he rode down Pennsylvania Avenue in a black limousine. His black silk hat seemed to be resting on his ears, and on his face he wore a sour little smile. If that doesn't sound heroic, please remember that the viewer's angle of vision may have had something to do with it. I saw it all from the window of a second story pool hall next to the National Theater in Washington. And there you have it. History in front of me, drama beside me, while the eight ball rolled on the table behind me. A great depression stood waiting, and Mussolini, Hitler and Stalin lurked in the wings, each in his own way contriving his sinister turn on the stage. All of which shows that things are not always what they seem, whether of graduations, or inaugurations, or other forms of commencement.

But all that was long ago, wind in the dry grass, the place where I have been and you can't go, any more than I can go where you are going. But remembering the eight ball, I wish you luck on the trip.

And none of it has much to do with our present predicament - this "now" which is our present concern. For the truth is that this "now" is a rebellion, and a rebellion is a state of affairs that demands an answer because it demands a change.

Of course, rebellion has its trivial side - and trivial origins - to which there is no answer because essentially none is needed; when superficially it is simply the young animal asserting himself by repudiating all customs and conventions valued by his erstwhile keepers. It is trivial, though this is not to say that youthful rebellion can't go deeper than that. In such an hour, those who are with it - whatever "it" may be - wear "elf pants" - whatever they may be. Beards grow, hair lengthens and is combed with infinite care in intricate patterns. Thus, the peacock struts and spreads his finery. The girls look pleased, and an older generation groans. The new is delighted. It thumbs its nose, turns up its amplifiers and beats its guitars with a savage satisfaction. One could swear the Fifth Angel, whose address is Revelations IX, 7,8,9 had in fact sounded his trumpet, pulled the plug of the Bottomless Pit and loosed therefrom that company of locusts "whose faces are the faces of men, whose hair is the hair of women, whose tails are like unto the tails of scorpions . . . And they have stings in their tails . . . and they make a loud noise"!

But rebellion also has another side, a side anything but trivial. It is the side of a yesterday in which a precedent generation, seeking to ameliorate the human condition, has so altered the operative facts of existence that old structures no longer work, old explanations are inadequate, old belief seems absurd; or promises have been made which have been only partly met or have not been met at all. And all

this in a world which grows steadily more complex and interdependent, so that little ills, possibly tolerable once, become vast wrongs, unendurable, and no one is left untouched. Those who suffer because of the change, the wronged, the disappointed, say "You promised us freedom; you deny us a vote." "The table is loaded, but where is my seat?" "Liberty for you; where is mine?"

Eventually they say: "To Hell with your laws (and your churches!)" for it is also characteristic of rebellion that rejection, as a cause and as an answer, tends to be complete, that positions harden and become absolutes. Reason is replaced by slogans. Moderation perishes in a demand for a great and immediate leap forward. Everyone advocates, no one listens. Protest becomes riot, and the fat is in the fire.

And that or something like it is what we see today. It needs no documentation. It is as close as Central Park, as distant as Egypt or Viet Nam. Television has brought it into the living room. That it is there seen in its most sensational and hysterical form is to be expected and beside the point. Television, like the Press, lives on sensation, and what is sensational about a student bent over his books? For all that, something is there in all its ugliness, demanding an answer, demanding a choice.

And if there is any virtue in it, it is this: that it does demand a choice.

It is the kind of choice which forces us to examine the very basis of belief, to ask ourselves what we believe in, what we value, what we think of as good and bad, what we reject and what we affirm; for it has to do with our lives, with living, not just with ourselves alone but with our neighbors. In this respect the question posed is primarily a moral one and only secondarily a practical, intellectual or scientific one. Please do not believe that "secondarily" is used in any but a sequential sense. It would be nice if all one had to do was to accept an impeccable moral position, cry "boo" and see all his problems run like frightened children. But an attitude is not a solution. It is only the start of one. It is one of the reasons why you spend twenty years or more learning to begin. And yet without a start - a beginning - there can be no end at all.

Upon what grounds then do we affirm or deny? What do we value? What do we consider good? I think there is little doubt on this score. Some men may deny the existence of God, but no man denies his own existence. In fact, under normal circumstances, there is nothing men value more - certainly for themselves - than life itself - which is odd because life is something no man asked to have, and nothing he deserved to have. And it is not odd because life is something man holds on a tenuous lease, which when it expires is not renewable on any terms resembling

those he has held. If what men consider most of value in life is life, then what is good is what extends and enlarges life and makes it the joy it can be, and what is bad is what diminishes life, lessens it, or makes a sorrow of it.

If it were this and only this, the right or wrong of things, the good and bad would be easy to determine, the way smooth.

But it is never smooth, and no formula will serve.

Man is a fallible, self-centered creature. The life, the liberties he wins for himself he is loathe to extend to others. In fact, he often erects elaborate legal and extra legal structures to prevent extension, and the Birmingham, the dogs, the tear gas, the clubs, the hate, bud and bloom in part because of it and the humiliation it implies.

He deliberately and systematically deceives himself. He convinces himself that what is bad is really good by giving the bad a lovely name. "States Rights" has a noble ring and good men have died for it; but too often nowadays it is little more than license to perpetuate state wrongs.

Furthermore, man, young men in particular, is an incurable idealist abroad in a world in which perfect solutions are impossible for anything for very long, if indeed they are possible at all. When he sees his idealisms compromised or is himself defeated, he assumes an air of cynical superiority or sinks to nihilistic despair.

He declares the whole absurd and senseless and the world without meaning and without hope. Commonly in this day the defeated romantic idealist gathers up his sandals and his songs of protest (most of them born of a misery the singers have never known), loads his pockets with pot, and heads for San Francisco or other imagined havens, there to seek mystical experience in a sugar cube soaked in L.S.D. or in other etcetera. That in itself is a kind of choice, but it seems to me a dusty and sterile one, self pity served on the half shell, rather like the small boy's threat to go out into the garden and eat worms, because his mother has spanked him and therefor can not love him. She must be shown by one horrible/^{wormy} act how horrible her rejection is.

On the other hand, if our idealist is powerful, he forgets, as he pursues his idealisms, that he is a man. He behaves as though he were a god. He arrogates to himself powers he does not possess and pursues his ends with a ruthless fervor. ~~He comes to think of himself as landlord of the universe with every man's destiny at his disposal.~~ In consequence of his Messianic delusions millions rot in concentration camps, or die in bloody wars.

But of all moral dilemma war presents the most difficult. War negates our most basic assumption: that life - our life and the lives of others - is of all things the

thing most to be valued. It involves the negation as well of all concepts of good deriving from that assumption. War evokes heroism; but that should not obscure the fact that war is a witches' sabbath in which foul is fair and fair is foul - that it postulates a moral position in which the end - annihilation or capitulation - justifies any means calculated to achieve that end. No cloak of glory can obscure the fact that war is a nightmare of anxiety, pain and horror.

I am sure you do not need to be told that. Nor do you need to be told that for all its horror war is an abnormality which men have chosen to accept as an alternative to a lifetime of repression. Nor do you need to be told that no one who goes to war likes the going, or who dies in war likes the dying. In fact all that makes those who go accept the going is the determined hope that no one who comes after will have to accept the alternative pacific refusal offers.

In late March of 1964 I happened to visit the ruins of Fountains Abbey, a remote place lying in the west riding of Yorkshire. In the great hall of the Manor next to the ruins I saw a stained glass window set in a bay flanked on either side by the crude stone figures of a girl, obviously a WREN, and a boy dressed in flying gear. Written there was this:

When you go home
 Tell them of us
 and say
 For your tomorrow
 We gave our today

and below, this

Elizabeth Vyner WRNS
 Died on active service
 June 3, 1942
 Aged 18 years

Also her brother

Charles de Grey Vyner, Sub Lieutenant,
 Reported missing from air operations
 Off Rangoon May 2nd, 1945
 Aged 19 years.

All of that was twenty-two, twenty-five years ago this spring, before any of you who will graduate today were born, though that in itself is hard to believe. It does well once in awhile to take a backward look: For older people to remember amid the beating of guitars, ~~that the world as we have it today,~~ that the world as we have it today, for all its faults June 10, 1967, was not built exclusively by those who had grown old in it, but by young people too, some of whom like the young Vyners gave their todays that this today might be: And it does well for young people to consider yesterday's distant faces: To remember that if there were Hitlers, there was also a Churchill, a man who said "NO" and made it stick even though he had little but courage and a little nation of stubborn people with which to say it. You might remember, too, that your fathers were Vyners who came home.

I can't pretend that every decision you are faced with will be one you will like having to make or that will be easy for you to make, or to live with once made. But I do know that you will have to choose. In choosing - if it is the kind

of decision we have been talking about - remember: There is a right and a wrong;

that what you consider right is no right unless you are willing to extend it to all mankind; that you are a man. Live, and live like a man, with fortitude and confidence, but not with arrogance (though the line between the two is often hard to draw).

And that is all the light I have, old or new.

God go with you and good luck, good traveling companions both. They serve to remind every man that he is a man!

So be it.

6/10/67