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Commencement Address by Walter Lippmann

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At this time of year in all parts of the Union large masses of people gather together in order to take part in exercises like these. They march. They sing. They wear strange costumes. They make speeches. There are sentimental reunions of the old graduates, genuinely delighted to see old Bill and sometimes just a little hazy as to what old Bill's last name is. Among the seniors there is packing and moving and catching trains and a downpour of good wishes and good advice, and some polite wondering <sup>on their part</sup> as to whether the speeches are going to be very long-winded.

These occasions have become a kind of national festival in which with pomp and circumstance the American people celebrate one of their deepest and oldest convictions. They believe, as no other nation has ever believed, that they must educate their sons

and their daughters. Since the first settlements three centuries ago, long before there was an American nation, long before the Republic was imagined, before there was wealth or security, the American people began to tax themselves to build schools, and colleges and universities. They have subscribed to many noble declarations about the liberties and the rights of man, and have embodied them in their constitution and their laws. But it has been by their willingness to support schools that they have made these declarations significant.

The American people believe that the people can be educated. On this faith our civilization rests. They have believed that with opportunity there would emerge from the people leaders and thinkers, inventors and organizers who would know how to make democracy work. They would not have built these schools had they not had this faith in their fellowmen, had they not believed that wisdom breeds wisdom, that men will

respond honorably to honorable treatment, that in the long run men, if they are trusted, will be worthy of trust, that when things are expected of them they will rise to the expectation.

There is much disillusionment in the world to-day. But on this fundamental article of the American faith, that the mass of men are good enough to be educated and that they can be trusted, we still stand and by ceremonies like these affirm our faith. Let other nations, if they choose, put their hopes in tyrants and self-selected superior men. Our hopes are in free men making their decisions by open debate. Let others, if they like, try to achieve a glorious destiny by burning their schools into barracks, their teachers into drill masters, their learning into instruments of policy. Our destiny is in the hands of the young men and women, a million of them a year, who come out of schools and colleges that are dedicated to freedom. From them will come genius and enterprise, courage and wisdom, a capacity to b

responsibility, and a fitness to survive, that will be lacking, when the <sup>TEST</sup> ~~time~~ comes, <sup>IN</sup> ~~on~~ the regimented youths of other lands.

I do not know how anyone who has lived through the past twenty-five years can have any doubts as to the folly of attempting to prepare men for the future by drilling into them the notions of middle-aged people. I was graduated from college four years before the outbreak of the World War. No one told me - because no one knew - that I should spend my life in the midst of war and the consequences of war. Nobody to-day can tell the members of this graduating class what will be the problems that they must deal with when, ten or fifteen years hence, they become actively responsible in affairs. There are no books of prophecy in which one can read what the future has in store for them. <sup>R</sup> That is why it is necessary to educate men. If we knew just what is going to happen, if all the problems and all the solutions were known, men could get along very nicely,

by being drilled and told just how to act. But because we do not know the future, because we cannot foresee its problems, because we do not know the answers, we have to develop in men their capacities for dealing with the unfamiliar and the unforeseen and the unexpected. ← That is education in the modern meaning of the art.

A friend of mine who has <sup>D</sup> spent some time on the small islands that form the outposts of the West Indies was telling me recently how the natives find their way for hundreds of miles without charts or compass or any knowledge of the art of navigation. On clear days, he said, the sea is as transparent as glass and a man can see the bottom almost as clearly as if there were no water at all. The natives are as familiar with the appearance of the bottom as we are with the roads and hills and houses and signs in our neighborhood. To find out where they are, all they have to do is to look at the floor of the ocean. In those waters and on clear days no

pilot however carefully trained he may be could be as sure of himself as are these native fishermen. They really know their way about.

Now suppose that some of the sons of these fishermen, instead of paddling around with their fathers and learning their way about, were to go to colleges, and that they then came home with a collection of marine charts, compasses, and radio beacons, a knowledge of trigonometry and of how to calculate the position of a ship at sea by means of the sun and the stars, the force of the currents and of the winds. Would they be better men to run the boats than their fathers? It would depend, would it not, on where they wanted to go in the boats. If they wanted to sail only in the familiar fishing grounds, the old fishermen who know every reef and rock and channel by sight would undoubtedly be better navigators than their sons who did not know them by sight. And if they <sup>older fishermen</sup> cried out that a lot of inexperienced theorists and college professors had

been let loose upon them there would be some reason in their complaint.

But then suppose that somehow or other the water became murky so one could no longer see bottom with the naked eye, and suppose too that it became necessary for the fishermen to go in their boats to far distant places where they had never been before. Then perhaps the academically trained men and even <sup>the</sup> college professors would be called upon for advice. For then the practical acquaintance of the old experienced fishermen with the look of the bottom would not be enough to steer a boat. It would be necessary to employ compass and charts and the mathematics of navigation.

Now for the greater part of human history most human affairs have been conducted by men who are like the old fishermen, by men intimately acquainted with their own neighborhood and able to get about if they can see familiar landmarks. But in recent times it has been borne in upon us that this kind of practical knowledge is not sufficient. We cannot see all the

familiar landmarks. We have to steer our ships in strange deep waters. On dark days as well as on clear days. And we cannot find our way simply by looking over the side of the boat at the floor of the sea beneath us. We have to navigate great oceans, and find our ways by charts and reports from other ships and by complicated calculations on observations of the heavens and of the angles of the stars above the whole horizon.

The necessity of resorting to intellectual processes rather than of being able to depend upon familiar habit and practical knowledge is one of the greatest changes in human behavior to which modern men are compelled to adjust themselves. It is an important part of the explanation of the difficulties of the past twenty-five years. In attempting to make peace after the great war, in attempting to reconstruct the economic system which was broken down by the war, the old practical knowledge of politicians, business



men and bankers was not good enough to make a good peace and a safe reconstruction, and our intellectual knowledge was not reliable enough nor trusted enough to guide us.

My generation, therefore, is struggling with the problem of making practical knowledge enlightened and of making theoretical knowledge practical. And when you hear from Washington that the business men distrust the professors and the professors distrust the business men, you can, I think, make up your minds that those are the pains of a great readjustment. Plato, you will recall, said that states would never be well-governed until kings became philosophers and philosophers became kings. He was not thinking of the kings he knew about or of the philosophers either. For a king who was a philosopher would be different from an ordinary king and a philosopher fit to rule a state would be different from an ordinary professor of philosophy. So it is with the theorists and the business men in Washington today. Before

the adjustment is completed neither the business men nor the professors will be able to recognize the men they used to be. In your generation the development will be carried much further than it is now, and the really successful men of affairs in the Twentieth Century will possess a theoretical knowledge of political/economy that surpasses their present knowledge as much as the intellectual training of the captain of a great ocean liner surpasses that of the West Indian fisherman.

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I am trying to indicate to you how theoretical training, such as universities provide, fits into the scheme of practical life in modern times. And <sup>that</sup> then may suggest to you what are the new opportunities open to your generation. The old opportunities, to invent, discover, create, <sup>and</sup> adapt, organize will remain but along with them there will be the opportunity, because there is such overwhelming need <sup>of</sup> for it, for men who can conduct great affairs in

government and in business with an <sup>intellectual</sup> ~~ingillectual~~ grasp of their elements and of their relation to a much larger scheme of things.

I do not say that the day is over when a man can achieve great success by specializing in some field and attending strictly to one job. On the contrary, it is certain that to be effective and to be independent a man must be able to do a particular job well. But I do say that the highest satisfactions will be reserved for those who, as in old teacher of mine used to say, know that the world is round and know it all the time, who can see what is under the hood of the engine and why it runs, and where the road leads beyond the next mountain range, who, starting with their job, can see the whole plant, can see the plant in the whole industry, can see the industry in the national economy, and the national economy in the world. If, by seeing all this, they lose sight of the job in front of them they will, of course, be of little use, but if they can keep their eye on

the job and yet be aware of its relationships to other things, they will be equipped for careers in this century that lies before us.

We cannot foresee the events, the measures, or the men with which the next generation will be concerned. But we can see, I think, that the purpose which inspires those who are now in active affairs will continue in some form or other to be one of the great purposes of your generation.

That purpose is not merely to bring about a recovery from the depression which began in 1929. That, to be sure, is our immediate purpose, and I am confident to-day that so far as this country is concerned we are now achieving it. But we cannot be content with that. We want something better than a few years of prosperity followed by another crash. Our deeper purpose therefore is to make secure in America the standard of life which our resources, our technical knowledge, and our industrial ability entitle us to expect, to make it secure, however, not be

not by a benevolent despotism but by democratic methods and without the sacrifice of individual freedom.

That in a sentence is the meaning of the whole vast and complicated effort in which this nation is now engaged. For a generation men have been desperately insecure. They have been called to go to war. They have been thrown out of work. They have been losing their farms and their homes and their savings. For twenty years we have drifted from one crisis to another. We now propose to master these crises and to use intelligence and a resolute will to protect ourselves. We have made mistakes. We shall make more mistakes. But for my own part I am now confident that the day is past when helpless and in despair we must be swept hither and thither by the uncontrolled forces of human society. We can begin to control them if we have the will to control them. And to those who say that we do not know enough to control these forces, our<sup>R</sup> answer must be that only

by making the effort can we learn how. For the wisdom required to make our society stable and ~~prosper~~ prosperous will not be presented to us ready made. It must be required by persistent work. It must be wrested from chaos by the will of men. It must be refined by experience. It must be clarified by debate. It must be animated by an imperturbable faith.

That, ladies and gentlemen, is the great enterprise in which this nation is now engaged. There is a place in it for every man and woman who understands it.