



THE COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

JUNE 20, 1936

PRESIDENT ALEXANDER G. RUTHVEN

IN CHANGING the time of Commencement from Monday morning to Saturday afternoon, the University Council expressed the opinion that the President should deliver the address. I suspect one reason for the decision was confidence in my ability, gained through long experience in the classroom, to stop on time. I choose to believe, however, that another thought was involved—the desire to wish the seniors an intimate and official Godspeed. In this belief, I welcome the opportunity, and I shall remember Cicero's observation: "Brevity is the best recommendation of speech."

Members of the Graduating Classes:

In the universities and colleges during this period of the year, thousands of young people are in preparation on the side lines for entrance to the game of life. Beside them stand their coaches, the teachers, anxious to give a few final suggestions for the impending contest. The instructors cannot hope accurately to predict the course of the struggle, but they may describe and reemphasize certain maneuvers which need to be observed and evaluated.

My brief message to you who are now leaving the University is in the nature of a reminder of one of the lessons we have tried to teach you at Michigan. This lesson or precept is that you should guard against being misled by appearances into accepting statements and opinions solely on the basis of authority and into acting upon preju-

ices and emotions rather than upon knowledge and mature judgments. "Trick plays" are common in life, and they are frequently so skillfully executed as to conceal successfully the "irreducible and stubborn facts" upon which constructive reasoning and wise action must rest.

As you take up your work in the world, you will continually be called upon to distinguish between fiction and truth, between pretense and sincerity, between propaganda and enlightened instruction. You will hear an endless amount of rumor and gossip cleverly phrased to sound like truth. You will have glittering plans thrust upon you in which serious errors are carefully concealed. You will be urged to close your eyes, hold your nose, and swallow nostrums of all kinds by threats and appeals to passion and self-interest. Subterfuges will be used to keep from you facts, motives, and clear knowledge of the effect of remedies or even of the real nature of the ills for which they are prescribed. In fact full advantage will be taken of a rather natural human tendency to avoid work and trouble.

An ancient but still effective ruse which will commonly be used to make you see black as white, and to induce you to act unintelligently, is that of the slogan and catchword. I give you a few examples from among many which are current at this time.

In the past few years we have been charmed with the term "New Deal." This combination of words is calculated to ring pleasantly in the ear, especially in times of

trial and tribulation, since one can, without troubling oneself to investigate or reason, let the wish be father to the thought and interpret a new deal as a better deal. Obviously, the phrase in itself means nothing more than change. A new deal may be for better or for worse, or do no more than maintain the status quo. Quite as clearly, the results of a modification of social, economic, or political conditions and procedures can be properly judged only by full knowledge of all of the factors involved. Proponents or opponents of the "deal" we are now being served may be justified in their views if they have studied its implications, but undoubtedly many more votes have been decided upon the assumption that the changes will be favorable or unfavorable than upon knowledge and reasoned conclusions.

Another term with hypnotic appeal is "freedom of speech." "Free speech" has for long been a phrase with which to conjure. Man is a garrulous animal and craves to talk to his heart's content. If he lived in trees and had no responsibility for the welfare of his fellows, he could, probably with impunity, throw coconuts and chatter as vociferously as his simian relatives, but obviously in civilized life he must suppress both inclinations. In the realm of speech, society has already drawn the line at libel, especially at written or printed statements of a defamatory nature. Very probably, as civilization progresses, mischievous and malicious talk also will be curtailed to an increasing extent. If this be conservatism, we shall have to make the best of it. Attempts to restrain the expression of honest convictions are rightfully considered iniquitous, but when the meaning of freedom of speech is distorted to include the liberty to make deliberately false and malign remarks, it is being misused to justify a distinctly antisocial activity. One is correctly advised, then, to resist the appeal of this phrase, and its variant "freedom of the press," until it is made clear in specific applications that this independence means

legitimate freedom of statement or publication, and stops short of license to interfere with the full rights of others to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

So it is with "academic freedom," a third attractive combination of words which may have a variety of different meanings. We are sure that, especially in a democracy, we need to insist upon tolerance of expression, sanctity of beliefs, and the right to study and to teach. Mankind has struggled steadily for these privileges through the ages. But what shall we say when the phrase "academic freedom" is extended to justify propaganda and agitation which interfere with the rights of others to speak, believe, and study as they please? Does not such an interpretation stultify itself? Surely, when the term is used to excuse infringements upon the rights of others, it is a misnomer; it becomes, in a real sense, another name for discrimination. Here is to be found the real threat to academic freedom—that irresponsibility will be given protection in its name. The reactions of laymen to this absurdity in education are apt to be violent, hysterical, and misguided.

Quite often in these days, we are called upon to listen to and heed appeals and even commands to save, support, preserve, or uphold the Constitution. Some of the adjurers are, without doubt, honest pharisees who believe that in adhering to the letter of the law we may find salvation. The motives of others who mouth such phrases with a show of solemnity or thunder them with passion we have the right to question, since there is evidence that the words have been used in attempts to force regimentation to the advantage of special interests. Noisy as are the groups who profess to find the Constitution endangered, they should not be allowed to distract us from more important considerations. The discerning person will observe that such slogans are unworthy of an intelligent people, for loyalty based upon knowledge is worth far more than blind faith in any human instrument. A more logical admonition would be

to study the principles and history of our government for the purpose of understanding them.

As every schoolboy is aware, the Constitution of the United States is man-made, it has been changed many times since it was written, and some of the changes have been considered mistakes. Since modifications will continue to be made from time to time, and, indeed, in Article 5 we are charged with the responsibility of making them, the Constitution is correctly to be interpreted as the embodiment of certain principles rather than as a purely legal document, and it should take no great mental effort nor wisdom to conclude that the essential to be preserved is the spirit rather than the letter of the instrument. James Truslow Adams has endeavored to make this clear in a recent essay: "What I have wished in part to point out . . . is that a constitution is not merely a written document or a set of inherited rules but that an important part of it is that vital force in it which comes from the genius and character of the people. I have also wished to emphasize the fact that, before any of us can pass judgment on any specific suggested change, we must arrive at some considered judgment as to the larger problems of what government is for, what the goods are in life which it should help to provide, and, above all, that we must think through to the end, as well as we can, what the future effects, and not merely the temporary relief afforded, may be of any action taken."

It is quite proper to regard the Constitution as a bulwark against attempts to introduce dictatorial forms of government and to insist that changes shall be made only in an orderly way, but it should be apparent that the foundations of government cannot be preserved by the simple expedient of compelling our citizens to execute affidavits of loyalty. In short to swear to abide by the Constitution is little more than an idle gesture unless the oath applies to the principles which it epitomizes and the ideals which it expresses, and includes

the understanding that these principles and these ideals will always be influenced by the character and needs of our people.

Finally, may "angels and ministers of grace defend us," we have recently heard the term "merit system" used to designate and justify the principle of survival of the strongest in business competition. This would be an amusing, if it were not a sinister, perversion. If the noun *merit* and the adjective *meritorious* are to have the same application in social and nonsocial living, then democracy and social justice are only meaningless terms. In solitary animals a self-centered individualism is necessary to survival, but in social groups individual activities are properly to be considered successful when they exhibit self-control and contribute to ordered management related to the common welfare.

As with slogans, so with words, the meaning is often twisted and stretched unjustifiably to sanction actions and points of view. "Freedom" is to be desired but it must stop short of license in a social group, or it is not freedom in the large sense. "Individualism" is a choice quality of intelligent beings when it means the development and full use of the individual for the good of society, but a reprehensible trait when it becomes synonymous with selfishness. A "democracy" which permits social injustice is nothing more than an oligarchy based upon the self-interest of the favored groups. "Collectivism" may mean thoroughgoing coöperative effort in a social group, but the term has been subtly used many times to cover the debasement of society to a low level.

Fellow students, the practice of extending and warping the meaning of words and phrases which apply in their generally accepted sense to things desirable, is of more than academic interest. In fact, the custom is of very great practical significance. It is calculated to conceal motives and to deceive ignorant, unwary, and unthinking persons. Your education should have prepared you to withstand the appeal of emotive oratory

and to resist being carried away by a single article, book, or speech, and we hope it has also made you alert for the deceptions practiced by clever phraseologists advocating social panaceas. You may guard yourselves against these Pied Pipers only by eternal vigilance, poise, knowledge, the capacity and desire to weigh evidence and to draw logical conclusions, and the courage to express sincere convictions—in short, by ability, determination, to see things as they are in forming opinions or taking action.

This ability and the determination to use it we hope you have developed in the years you have spent on this Campus. We trust you will foster it carefully in the years to come, for otherwise you cannot reasonably expect to avoid being the tools and dupes

of others or hope to contribute your share to our civilization—in other words, to be intelligent citizens. The price you will pay for your efforts to resist the appeal of half-truths, falsehoods, gossip, and wish-fulfillment propaganda will be to suffer criticism and abuse from the exhibitionists, the self-seekers, and the shallow-minded. Your compensation will, however, be ample. In the first place you will preserve your self-respect, for, to paraphrase Montaigne, you will become rich in yourselves, rather than in your borrowing from others. Finally, you may probably expect to receive the esteem of wise and good men, which is founded, we are told, on confidence and respect, although this reward, I warn you, may come after you are dead.

TIDEWATER—III

From *Sonnets of Virginia*

Beneath this green sea water is the clear
 Clean curve of your cool body next to mine.
 Slight circumstance has made your arms entwine
 Around my neck, and brought your dark eyes near:
 An ever mounting sweep of billows here,
 A little breathlessness from swimming long
 Where you no more may feel secure and strong
 Within safe reach of sand or hidden pier.
 I lift you when the waves come riding by,
 And you are bold to meet them, but I sense
 With secret joy your helplessness to try
 Such strength as theirs, except that you rely
 In sweet dependence on my power. Whence
 Has come my right to whisper, "You and I."

JOHN MILLS TURNER