

Commencement
1942

THE ARMOR OF HONEST THOUGHT

The human race is now staging a disgraceful show. A thorough-going and irreverent pessimist might be excused for pointing out to the great director that it might be well to start over again and raise new actors for the world stage. Dark as is the hour, however, you do not need either to give up in despair or yet to indulge in another tendency of your elders and assume that some day, somehow, the good old days will return. Time cannot be turned backward in its flight. "We live, but a world has passed away with the years that perished to make us men." Your world you will make for yourselves. You can make it a better one if you will cling to the eternal verities inherent in the nature of man and of his environment. One of these is the importance of ensuring independence of thought for men who would be free.

A distinguished historian once expressed an observation of many students of mankind when he wrote: "To most people nothing

is more troublesome than the effort of thinking." In every walk of life there is a distressingly large number of individuals who will go to great lengths to avoid mental exercise. Even college graduates, who are presumably trained to use their minds, often seem either to have been born mentally tired or at least to have acquired cerebral weariness, if one is to judge by their disinclination to be intellectually independent.

Ever present and regrettable in times of peace, the evil of mental inertia becomes tragically intensified in times of trouble. When we the people are in distress, when issues are confused, when the future seems uncertain, we are prone to indulge in wishful thinking and to give up the effort to solve difficult problems. We eagerly repeat clichés, accept panaceas, and insist upon pigeonholing and labeling others as for or against us, forgetting that nothing but the truth is of any use either to you or to me. As we allow our minds to loaf, we become easy prey and effective tools for politicians, bureaucrats, demagogues, and other self-seekers--we become the serfs who make dictatorships

possible. We forget that the external control of our thought is the most complete and abject form of slavery.

In this particular period in the history of civilization, to be willing to think by proxy is exceedingly easy and dangerous. Perverse and selfish men are making a world-wide attempt to secure our proxies in one way and another. They know all of the tricks of the business. They have no respect for facts or for the sanctity of truth. They fully appreciate that appeals to the emotions are more effective than appeals to reason. They have convinced many thousands of people that their self-appointed leaders are infallible and all others owe them servile obedience. Carefully and persistently they are dividing those who oppose them into antagonistic groups and whipping up prejudices in the hope that out of the inevitable struggles the aims of certain leaders and interests may triumph.

This process has now gone so far that even in our own country it is difficult to avoid being classified and labeled. If we urge students to remain in school as long as possible, we are accused

of advocating the policy of "business as usual" for our educational institutions. If we object to extensive changes in the curricula which would substitute concentrated training for education, we are "conservative" or "academic." If we criticize in any way our defense efforts, we are "unpatriotic." If we object to certain strikes, we are "enemies of labor." If we agree that workers should have some privileges now denied them, we are "New Dealers," or even worse. Independent thinking in this land of the free and home of the brave, as well as elsewhere in the world, is being discouraged. We are, on occasion, being asked to accept at their face value the opinions, prejudices, and plans of many self-styled "authorities" and to swallow whole the generalizations of those whose chief qualifications for leadership are ambition and the ability to make a loud noise.

Obviously, we must have advisers, but we need to respect only true and intelligent guides, not Pharisees self-appointed to this role. We must have followers, but we should train with the intellectually honest, not with blind and ignorant disciples.

Admittedly, for various reasons, such as the immediate good or humanitarian considerations, we may in the emergencies of this imperfect civilization find it expedient to join in group action whose necessity we deplore. This does not mean, however, that we should anesthetize our minds to what we are doing by accepting as gospel truth propaganda designed to fool us as to the real issues and objectives which prompt the action. Our salvation as free men in the present world conflict lies only in part in our ability to preserve our national integrity; more fundamentally it depends upon the liberty and ability to examine and analyze facts for ourselves, and to arrive at true judgments. If we lose this freedom, it is not important who rules us, for "creative thought--that thought growing out of acute 'observation and insight' divorced from personal welfare and prejudice--has accounted for human progress thus far, and is the only hope for the future."

Members of the Class of 1942:

My message to you may be summarized in the words of

Schopenhauer: "We may divide thinkers into those who think for

themselves and those who think through others. -- The latter are the rule, and the former the exception. -- The first are original thinkers in a double sense, and egotists in the noblest meaning of the word. It is from them only that the world learns wisdom. For only the light which we have kindled in ourselves can illuminate others."

To be a creative thinker is hard work, and the results of the effort may often be expected to bring disapprobation, especially when they are displeasing to those in high places. Such criticism should, however, cause the conscientious citizen no deep concern. There is no disloyalty in honestly questioning your leaders. Indeed, it is the highest patriotism in a democracy to refuse to become puppets of the state, mere cogs in any machine, or superficial followers of any sect, ideology, or individual. "The kingdoms of the world may pass away, but the truths by which the mind lives endure."

As you leave the University, I give you this charge: Be neither pessimists nor wishful thinkers. Fashion for yourselves

an "armor of honest thought"; "be just and fear not; let all the ends thou aimest at be thy country's, thy God's, and truth's."