

File - mid year
graduation
Dec - 1964

A NEW ERA IN HUMAN RIGHTS -- A CHALLENGE

[INTRODUCTORY THANK YOU FOR THE DEGREE]

I address you today with a single but a very sincere hope -- to challenge you. I challenge you to become intellectually and personally involved in fulfilling the most noble promise of civilization, the promise that the human rights of every individual shall be secured.

Human rights do not depend for their existence merely upon the whim of a legislator or the pleasures and desires of the majority, or even the commands of a Constitution. They are derived from an individual's humanity; in that sense they are inalienable. To deny an individual his human rights is to deny part of his humanity; to ask a person why he is entitled to these rights is to doubt his very humanity.

Many human rights can be classified as the Right to Intellectual Freedom - the freedom to think, to believe in your version of the truth, to choose your religion, to express your beliefs and opinions, and to constantly ask the question "why?" This is a right in the obvious sense that all encroachments and restrictions of these freedoms -- whether it be by government or a neighbor -- urgently require justification;

it is also a right in the more subtle sense that it express a legitimate expectation that society will be so ordered and structured that the realm of intellectual freedom will progressively be enlarged. And it is a human right for it is rooted in man's most distinguishing characteristic -- his rationality. Unless every man is given the opportunity to think, to question and to speak, his development will be stymied and his greatest potential left unrealized. To regulate and manipulate an individual's thought and expression is to destroy this life of the mind and to strip him of his most essential means of identity.

Of no less importance is the human Right to Personal Security. This right is violated when an individual's physical and psychological security is constantly threatened. The threat can be created by a tyrannical government or an equally arbitrary and capricious physical and social environment. An individual subjected to the Nazi Government was no more terrorized than the individual who lives with the fear that he will be bitten to death by a rat during his sleep, or that when, and if, he wakes up, there will be no food, no medical care, no sanitation and very little shelter. Hunger and disease are as vicious as the arbitrary exercise of organized power. The arbitrary exercise of governmental power

can be curbed by negative restraints imposed in the name of fairness, but the environmental threats of hunger and disease can only be eradicated by affirmative and energetic programs. The object of both is the same, the protection of each individual's right to live with a maximum degree of personal security thereby enabling him to develop his talents and abilities; a horizon marked by fear and threats can only discourage, frustrate, impede and ultimately destroy. Happiness and achievement would no longer be possible and the human existence would be rendered meaningless and insufferable.

In addition to what I have called the Right to Intellectual Freedom and the Right to Personal Security, there is the third basic human right - the Right to Equality, a right derived from the belief that every individual possesses an inherent dignity and worth. Those subjected to the most barbaric forms of unequal treatment, to slavery, colonialism and discrimination are being denied their inherent dignity; they are being relegated to a position of inferiority and subservience and asked to ignore the humiliation, the insult, and the degradation. The right to equality is often expressed in the demand for equality of educational or employment opportunity -- an opportunity to

achieve and to improve one's position in society; in other instances it is an untiring plea that differences in treatment be justified and a recognition that certain individual characteristics - such as race, color, sex, national origin and indigence cannot justify these differences in treatment; the human right to equality also requires equality under the law.

There is nothing terribly new about these basic human rights; they have been affirmed, perhaps in somewhat different forms, in the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, the Four Freedoms, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. And these ideas have been subtly and persistently woven into your education. However, I would like to suggest that your commencement coincides with the commencement of a new era in human rights; for today we stand on the threshold of an exciting and yet foreboding, an inviting and yet awesome phase in man's endless struggle to fulfill the promise of civilization to secure these basic human rights.

The newness of this era consists of three factors: First, the technological revolution has surpassed our wildest dreams. The conquest of space is at hand; the exploration of our own planet knows few limits; enormous

buildings some stunning and others grotesque, deck our cities; countries, oceans and continents can be transgressed in a few short hours; medical research has swiftly passed yesterday's frontiers; and most of us, even those who have not yet received their Christmas gifts, are engulfed in a super abundance of consumer products. At no time in history has man so thoroughly mastered his physical environment and this has tremendous significance for the struggle to achieve basic human rights. It is a testimony to our ability to solve problems once thought insoluble, provided we commit our imagination, our energy and our total resources to the task. This technological revolution has also eliminated, at least in my mind, one of the most depressing excuses for our failure to secure these basic rights, our own economic insecurity. When we lived in an age racked by scarcity and depressions, our failure to create the type of society where intellectual freedoms flourished, where all individuals enjoyed a measure of personal security and where all were treated equal was to some limited degree understandable; i.e. each of us was so overwhelmed by the very task of remaining alive and feeding our families, that it was difficult to even think about intellectual freedom, equality and the personal security of others. I suggest that our enormous success in the

technological revolution has changed all this.

The second aspect of this new era in human rights is a growing awareness that our mission is world wide and that the struggle for human rights has become internationalized. No longer can we be content with the fact that in some parts of the United States these human rights have been secured; the struggle for human dignity in the South has become the concern of those in the North and East; religious persecutions in distant parts of Europe and Asia have become a cause for our distress; the suppression of liberty in South Africa affects us just as much as the suppression of liberty in Mississippi.

[TALK ABOUT AFRICAN EXPERIENCES IN THE
DENIAL OF HUMAN RIGHTS]

Great advances in transportation and mass communication are in part responsible for our broader perspective; it is also a feature of our economic prosperity, permitting us to see beyond our own dinner table and to be concerned with something more than our own individual rights. The establishment of the United Nations and the formulation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in part ushered in this international perspective to the struggle for human rights; but it is only

within the last few years that the problem of human rights in Europe, Africa, Latin America and Asia has become meaningful to all Americans.

The third aspect of newness in this era of human rights is that the commitment of society has been finally obtained. Previously the struggle for human rights was "tolerated" and "accepted"; the "do gooders" were allowed to keep pressing for the goal, provided the apple cart was not tipped. But today, society seems to have moved beyond this stage of resigned indifference. The magnitude and sincerity of our contemporary commitment is not difficult to document. The courts have become the defenders, not of property interests, but of these human rights; they have vigorously sought to protect our First Amendment liberties from subtle and vicious encroachments; Brown v. Board of Education supplied the legal and moral foundation for the struggle for equality in America; the courts are vigorously struggling to curb the arbitrary exercises of power, especially in the criminal processes where this power is brought to bear most directly on the individual; and the courts have even made some initial gestures of dealing with the problem of poverty, such as requiring counsel for indigent

criminal defendants. And at long last, it does not seem that the courts are alone in this struggle; the other organs of government supposedly the more representative organs, have joined in. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 stands as the first and long overdue affirmative Congressional response to the struggle for human rights in at least a century; the ability of this Act to eradicate the discrimination and injustices inflicted on the Negro in America remains to be seen, but I interpret its very enactment as a strong and unequivocal reaffirmation of one of the basic human rights. Within the last few months the war on poverty appears to have become a major national goal, while the foreign aid programs and such daring endeavors as the Peace Corps, reflect a deep understanding of the international scope of egalitarian phase of the struggle for human rights.

But let there be no mistake. Even though society seems now to be deeply and sincerely committed to the struggle for human rights, the unfinished task is monumental and herein lies the challenge. We are entering a new era in human rights because the struggle is now set in context of great technological achievement, because the struggle has taken on a global dimension and because the society has finally

become committed to this struggle. Yet I am awed by the magnitude of what remains to be done in this new era -- and this is true even if, for the moment, we focus on the United States.

An individual's right to intellectual freedom is always exposed to that latent and omnipresent threat -- the fear of dissent and criticism. No one can predict with any degree of confidence that this fear, picked and prodded by our local hate groups, will never again rise up to paralyze our thoughts and feelings as it had done during the McCarthy holocaust. This fear cannot be suppressed, but only uprooted by the development of firm ^{traditions} ~~traditions~~ of self-criticism, by learning to respect differences of opinion and belief, and by recognizing that the progress of a society is inextricably linked to a diversity of opinions and beliefs and the freedom to express them.

Moreover, in order to see what is required to insure a full measure of personal security for all one need only to walk through the ghettos of New York or Chicago, or to visit the home of a Mississippi sharecropper, or to see a migrant farm laborer stoop to the level of strawberries days at end for \$2 a day, or to stand alongside the factory worker

opening his paycheck that contains the pink slip informing him that he has been displaced by a machine. If our attention were to shift to the denial of personal security in Africa, Asia and Latin America, the so-called developing countries, the picture would only become more overbearing. It also seems to me that we have a great deal to do in curbing the arbitrary exercise of power, whether it is by governments, mammoth corporations and unions, or for that matter, the fairest of all institutions, churches and universities; the magnitude of the power possessed by each of these institutions cannot be matched by any individual and the personal security of those subjected to this power ultimately depends upon the elimination of all arbitrary, capricious and willful abuses. I am often confronted with a case where an individual can show that his home was searched or person seized without the slightest pretense of legality, or that he was beaten by police officers whose zeal for "solving" a crime obscured the most elementary standards of human decency. The human right of personal security is threatened by tyrannical government action on both sides of the "Iron Curtain," and in those not so innocent but supposedly neutral countries.

Our generation has become particularly identified with

the struggle for equality; however, for this identification to become lasting and permanent a great deal remains to be done. Although since 1960, almost 30 countries have freed themselves of the yoke of colonialism and become independent, millions of persons have not been so fortunate. Discrimination based on race, religion or national origin exists in almost all areas of life both North and South, East and West. The desegregation of public education has been painfully slow, and I fear that the desegregation of public accommodations has even been slower; the Negroes' effort to obtain the right that is most clearly his, the right to vote, has been met with devious delaying tactics and brutal force. In March 1964 the unemployment rate for whites was 5.3% while for non whites it was 10.4%; in 1961 the median income of a non white family was under \$3000 and for white families more than \$5000. These staggering statistics are the casualties of bigotry, hatred, discrimination in all forms of public and private life and I doubt whether Brown v. Board of Education and its progeny or the Civil Rights Act of 1964 can fully cope with this.

*much can be done unless
non white willing to work*

Society has committed an enormous amount of resources to the arms race and the space race and I challenge it to make

this same intense commitment in the race to achieve a full measure of human rights for all within our lifetime. The moon will remain ripe for conquest whether it be in 10 years, or 15 years, or 25 years. But the scars left from the denial of human rights can never be removed or forgotten; fear, bigotry, hatred, manipulation, tyranny, coercion, violence, terrorism, lawlessness destroy and dehumanize now, today.

The achievement of human rights cannot be postponed and put off unless we are willing to turn our backs on millions who are struggling today to achieve the dignity necessary to make their lives worth living.

This is not the occasion to make a challenge to society at large; but it is more than appropriate to challenge you. I challenge you to not just care about the condition of human rights in our civilization but to take an active part in bringing us one step closer to their full realization.

I am not just addressing myself to the lawyers, to the social workers, the future statesmen, or the potential Peace Corps volunteers. I suggest that in every profession and field of human endeavor, that the scientist, the newspaperman, the industrialist, the academician, or the doctor, can all play a more meaningful role in this struggle; at least part

of his professional efforts can be devoted to answering the question, to paraphrase that memorable inauguration of 1961, not what can you do for me, but what can I do for you, what can I do for you to insure that you will enjoy the basic human rights. There is no more noble task and, in the long run, in terms of the things that really count, no more rewarding experience.

But regardless of whether you shape and mold your career to enable you to professionally participate in this struggle, there is no end to what you can do in your most personal capacity - as citizens of your local communities, as fathers, as mothers, as members of the parents-teachers associations or simply as educated and enlightened individuals. The challenge lies in asking you not to settle for half when human rights are at stake; it is easy to become insensitive to the injustices woven into the status quo and to turn your back on the suffering and the plea for help. The established patterns of the sweet and comfortable life tend to discourage, and certainly do not nurture a devotion to the cause of human rights. But to think that your life could be satisfying and meaningful while millions are denied their basic human rights is illusory; for, as the late President Kennedy put

put it "When the rights of one man are diminished, the rights of all men are threatened."

Yes, the challenge I put to you requires a measure of courage. The cause of human rights has its opponents and enemies - those who move with the perverted conviction that they alone are entitled to be treated as human beings. Hatred and intolerance know few limits, and the army of the status quo is relentless. Yet there is an enormous reservoir of courage and idealism within each of you. This was made so painfully clear to me - and to all the world - by the cruel and senseless murders of the three civil rights workers in the swamps of Mississippi; no astronaut has been lost in our space race, but we have lost these three young boys in their attempt to achieve human rights in one small but horrible corner of the globe. Their devotion -- their courage -- their idealism -- and their willingness to leave their homes and to go forward to do what they believed right these are the noblest of all human qualities. These three young civil rights workers - and all the others that risked their life and liberty - are a profound tribute to their generation; they are a moving symbol of idealism and courage and hopefully are merely representative of their generation, of you. Perhaps

others will not be asked to make this same bitter sacrifice. But if these young boys, or young men and their parents could give so terribly much, is it unfair to hope and to expect you to make some small but genuine effort in this new era of securing the basic human rights? I think not. "We cannot," as President Johnson has declared, "be content until we commit ourselves to massive support for the cause of human rights everywhere." Good luck.
