

Presentation By

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at

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Thank you very much Dr. Fleming, Provost Frye; to the Regents, the administrative officers, and faculty; to the graduating students and their families and friends; to the special guests and to fellow recipient, Dr. Hollowell Davis:

Please permit me to say that in the past I have been similarly honored but today's honorary degree has a most special place in my heart because of the great love and respect which I hold for this University. And I wish to express, therefore, my most profound gratitude to all those who helped to bring this about.

I have been honored further by President Shapiro and the Regents who have asked me to make some remarks on a theme of my own choosing, and I am venturing to say a few words about a subject which is very, very close to my heart and I earnestly hope to yours also. Looking forward to this engagement, I have been keeping up with the remarks of other commencement speakers who have been addressing the 1,378,000 members of this year's college graduating class. The speakers whose words I have followed range from Vice President Bush to historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and from Lee

Iacocca (who spoke here at the Spring Commencement at Michigan) to Lach Walesa, who felt constrained to remain in Poland, but sent a short message through the mails to the graduating class at Harvard. The subjects have ranged from weighty foreign policy matters to a range of domestic policy issues, from the pursuit of excellence to "the drift toward Armageddon," as one speaker described our current foreign policy. In the main, I have found the speeches to be of considerable interest and presumably engaging to their listeners, but I must say that my message is far less global than those of my counterparts and is essentially personal. My aim is not so much to instruct or inspire, or to alarm, as it is to provoke some thought around the subject of what I have called "another kind of public debt." I hasten to add that the subject has nothing to do with fiscal matters or governmental policies as such. Rather, the focus is on some of the non-fiscal obligations of the individual in this nation of ours and includes not only what we owe the nation but what we owe each other.

The first question we may ask is what is the social contract that binds and holds together our people of such dissimilar backgrounds of nationality, religion and

race. What are the ties that bind the Jew in New York to the WASP in Texas, the black in Chicago with the Brahmins of Back Bay Boston, and the Chicano of San Antonio to the Swedish American in Minnesota? These are only a few examples, of course. The diversities and dissimilarities among our people are, of course, far more numerous than I have listed and the point is that with such a loosely-knit social fabric it is remarkable indeed that we remain united despite so many ethnic, religious, and even regional differences. As one writer has observed, "it is not so much that this nation has worked so well but that it has worked at all."

It is difficult to govern even in a totalitarian nation when there are great differences in cultures, religions, and ethnic origins of its people. We are told that in Russia the government deals with its Ukrainians and other minorities with a stern, if not ruthless, "russification" program. But in a democratic republic such as ours where there is no prescribed orthodoxy which the state enforces, it is nothing short of a miracle that we do not come apart at the seams from all of the perforations inherent in people differences such as nationality, race, religion, and all the others. In search of a current answer I have had a number

of conversations in recent months with several thoughtful people and I have found that even they are often at a loss to put their collective finger on what exactly it is that binds us together as a people.

We certainly are not bound together by force. There is no army or national guard standing ready to enforce the official attitude of the national government on anything. Quite the contrary, there is no Administration policy which does not have its stern critics, not just among the opposition political party, but in the press and among the people themselves.

Since the time when the South seceded and formed the Confederacy, we have had several equally explosive issues on the national agenda which sharply divided the nation such as the school desegregation decision and the Vietnam War, but our basic institutions were not threatened. If anything, they have been made stronger by the lusty debate and the conclusions which followed. So what are the ties that bind over and above the formal institutions such as the government which itself can be changed by the will of

the people? I ask you to think about this now and in the future because it is the mutual understanding and voluntary sharing of common goals by citizens in a democracy that hold us together. Most of the time, most of the people have to be moving in the same direction. These are not so much formal covenants as they are unspoken understandings, quietly held views, even moods.

If we are not bound together by force, is it by fear of a common aggressor? Is it inertia or simply because we cannot escape to another country that we stay here? Or is it just a matter of rallying around the flag and singing the Star Spangled Banner? That may suit many, but probably would appear too jingoistic for others. To some, apparently, what binds us together is simply a hope and expectation that we may share in the rich material blessings which the abundant life affords most people in this nation. Even our poor are relatively well off when judged by international standards. In that connection, I was struck by a news story which appeared in The Detroit Free Press the day after the 4th of July ceremony at Hart Plaza in Detroit in which 142 immigrants were admitted to citizenship. The news reporter sought to elicit from one of the newly-minted citizens an

expression about the events of naturalization day. On camera and before the reporter's microphone the man uttered formal expressions of happiness about his becoming a citizen, but "off the record" the man said that he would always be a national of the country of his birth. Then he added that his real reason for becoming an American citizen was because he had three sons and the financial opportunities were and I quote "too big for them to miss." Are you here just because the financial opportunities are too big to miss?

In my talks with thoughtful people in the last few months, as I mentioned before, the answers to the question of what binds us together were not so sharp and clear. All answers seemed to have had in part, a spiritual or mystical quality and yet each seemed to respond in a highly personal manner. On the one hand, the answers pointed out the great belief in our scheme of government, the balance of power shared by the three branches of government, our First Amendment freedoms of speech, press, religion, and assembly, and so on, but in each answer I detected a deep down personal satisfaction with the way the system has allowed the particular person to grow and develop. In the coming years you may

well ponder the question yourselves and I hope that your answers are equally satisfying to you.

But, whatever the ties that bind, and which have bound us through such earth shattering events as the American Revolution, through depressions and wars, and through several modern political and technological revolutions, we all know that we owe a great personal debt of gratitude for the men and women who have gone on before to develop this nation and its institutions. One thing is for sure, the Constitution of the United States has not been self-executing; it has taken a world of selfless labor to bring us to our current state. Great sacrifices have been required of the Washingtons and Lincolns, but even more has been required from millions of unheralded citizens who have done the selfless scut work of democracy. Although we do not blink at the unresolved problems in our nation, we can agree that the noble experiment is working reasonably well. Unfortunately, many of us take this for granted as if it couldn't be any other way, but only a glance at the daily news of remitting strife and pestilence in many parts of the world will tell us that we are all possessors of a most

highly-prized birthright, and for this each of us owes another kind of public debt.

The vacuous notion that we discharge all our debts by the paying taxes and the tuition and fees and the like will not stand scrutiny. How do we pay for the lives that were lost in our behalf during the American Revolution or the Civil War, or the war against Nazi aggression? How could we ever pay for the vision of those constitutional framers who fought to have the Bill of Rights specifically included in the Constitution? What is the incremental worth of an economic system which by international acclaim affords the greatest freedom of opportunity than any other on earth? How do you measure the value of an educational system that provides opportunities for the gifted and the not-so-gifted? The Michigans and the Yales and the Harvards did not just happen on the scene but were established by people of vision and nurtured by many more with great energy and determination.

For these and other gifts which have been bestowed upon us we owe another kind of public debt which cannot be measured in dollars, but only in service. John Stuart Mill

wrote in his essay On Liberty that the "worth of a state in the long run, is the worth of the individuals composing it." The way we may prove our worth and, in part, repay our debt is by selfless service to the nation, to our communities, and to each other. Whatever may be your station in life, there will be much to do. Madison and Jefferson believed that universal public education would result in an informed citizenry who would keep a watchful eye on the health of the nation and its institutions. We, all of us, have that duty. Some of you will lead reform movements, others will be involved in the special problems of the disadvantaged, the poor, the disabled, the aged, and, yes, even the problems of the middle class. All of us will be called upon time and time again to make intelligent decisions at the ballot box. Even if we only engage in daily acts of civility and courtesy, we are providing the lubricant for our society. The list of things to do is endless.

Whatever we may do, we should never forget the debt we owe to the past and in active discharge of this great debt, we insure the future for ourselves and our children.

In the timeless advice of Shakespeare, "Be just
and fear not; let all the ends thou aimest at, be thy
country's, thy God's, and truth."

Thank you.