

HUNTER COLLEGE OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK

Commencement Address Delivered By  
Dr. Harry J. Carman  
February 5, 1952

OPPORTUNITY BECKONS

Mr. President, Members of the Class of 1952, Colleagues and Friends:

I am greatly honored to have this opportunity to address you briefly on this occasion. First of all may I extend to each of you who is being graduated from Hunter College tonight and to your parents and friends my warm congratulations.

Almost a half century has elapsed since my own graduation from college and in that half century those of my generation have witnessed many changes on the material side. Our own nation has undergone a veritable economic transformation. The South, for example, a land of agriculture in my youth, is now a thriving and rapidly growing industrial area. Our population has not only mounted steadily but has shifted from rural to urban centers. The automobile and the airplane have revolutionized our mode of transportation. The motion picture, radio, and more recently television, have likewise transformed our means of communication beyond measure. A thousand and one gadgets ranging from toasters to deep freezers have almost completely altered the material aspects of our daily lives. Increasingly in this last half century we have become an urbanized, mechanized and standardized people and apparently the end is not yet.

But there is another side to life which in my opinion is fundamentally far more significant for us individually and collectively than all the material advantages, important as these are. I have in mind the realm of mental and spiritual development. It is in this realm where it would seem we should have made greatest progress in the last half century that we have made least. The reasons for our failure are not difficult to discern. If I may borrow a phrase from my friend Julius Stulman we have been too animalistic--too much concerned almost exclusively about food, clothing and shelter, with self-preservation and reproduction; with the search for pleasure of the eat, drink and be merry type; too many of us have been satisfied to remain hedonistic children, as it were, and never grow up.

If the United States is to survive as a citadel of freedom and a place where men as individuals may seek the truth, if it is to be a respected leader among the nations of the world we must rise above being a nation of clever, pleasure-seeking animals. The worthwhile achievements of every great civilization are those of men and women who have risen above the hedonistic pattern of life and have become great teachers, artists, writers, scientists, statesmen, or public servants. The evils which afflicted the world when I was graduated from college are the same evils which plague the world today. Then as now, ignorance, bigotry, hate, selfishness, corruption, the love of power for power's sake, the worship of mammon, and human exploitation beset mankind. These are the items that make for international misunderstanding and war and becloud our national life. These festering sores on the body politic, some of



which have been aired in our newspapers and magazines and over the radio in recent months are the very antithesis of those intangible inner traits upon which human greatness is founded, namely, integrity, uprightness, breadth of vision, a deep sense of responsibility, unselfishness, self-restraint, fair play, excellence of thought and action, right against wrong in terms of human welfare, faith in a social order which cherishes freedom and opportunity for human betterment, and an absence in one's soul of irrational prejudices against those of differing views, of other cultures or of other races or religions.

Please do not think that I am sermonizing. Such is not my intent. I am a realist and very much of a pragmatist. I do not believe in undue theorizing nor am I sympathetic with those who would live in ivory towers and cut themselves off from contact with the world. My plea to you tonight--and it is a plea--is to realize that you have an opportunity and a responsibility, individually, as did my generation to keep on growing mentally and spiritually. Delve ever deeper into those inner resources of your life. Refuse to be a mere hedonist. Remember that when we stop growing intellectually and spiritually we have already begun to die. Do not die young. And what is true of each of us individually is true of us collectively. Of our culture and of our nation.

This is no time for pessimism. We face great tasks--perhaps greater than man has ever faced before. Challenge and opportunity for service beckon. Hope, imagination, determination, faith in ourselves and others, right-minded people, and above all, a non-corrosive optimism should prevail.

With our own country in mind we need to put our own house in order. We have reached a time when our ship of state--meaning our federal government--to use a figure of speech, needs to go into dry dock and have the barnacles removed. Whether we like it or not big government is here to stay. It is imperative therefore that our government posts, irrespective of character and at all levels, be filled by those who have high qualifications and who regard public office as a public trust and not as a means of personal material enrichment of themselves, their relatives and their friends. Those concerned with the character of our several governments--and that should mean all of us--should give thought to making government service as rewarding materially and psychologically satisfactory as law, medicine, nursing and the other professions.

Our second great problem, as I see it, is not so much Russia per se but the vicious concept of the Marxian dialectic which Russia has introduced into international affairs and which has done so much to breed conflict within and between nations, and to make, as President DeKiewiet of the University of Rochester so well puts it, "contradiction and incompatibility the measure of human relationships and to delude men into the belief that human welfare is a destiny that can only be achieved by violent assault." <sup>1</sup>

---

1. C. W. DeKiewiet, "Russia, The World and Us." Address delivered before the Middle States Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools, Atlantic City, November 26, 1948.



The Russian Politburo, composed of a little group of closed-minded, unyielding men, authoritarian in spirit and outlook as ever were the most autocratic Russian Czars, seek not only to control men physically but spiritually. With them violence is a state of mind; compromise and concession are foreign to their nature. We can meet this danger to all that we hold dear not merely by arming to the teeth, or by Congressional witchhunts and regimentation or by adopting a mental attitude of antagonism, suspicion and fear. Rather, the "cold" and at times "hot" war will be won by putting our own house in order--by ridding our own land of poverty, slums, crime, corruption, private and public, and our other shortcomings. We need to understand better than we now do the nature of Communism and how it works and how it tyrannizes the human mind. We need, as President DeKiewiet says to defend ourselves "by vindicating our political institutions, by affirming our morale, by developing a sense of confidence in our social organization and especially by drawing upon our political heritage for the spirit of innovation, the habits of concession to needed reform, the dedication to human and democratic values, which alone can give the lie to the charge that through its decadence the non-Communist West has forfeited its claim to the future."

Expressed differently, too few of us have any clear conception of the term "The American Way of Life." Too many of us live in the dominion of the immediate. We need to discover the ideals and the essential features that lie beneath the outward characteristics of American life and history. This involves an understanding and an appreciation of the ideas, institutions and traditions which are the background and substance of a free society. We need to examine our historic past, not merely our political history but our economic development, our literature, art, music and folklore. More of us need an inventory of what constitutes the warp and woof of the American life. Unfortunately in the hurly-burly of life, of ceaseless motion, of disquiet, of drifting, of chasing after superficial pleasure and the almighty dollar, we have lost the art of contemplation. My thought is admirably expressed by President Hancher of the University of Iowa:

Competition, activity for its own sake, the lust for success and power make difficult the art of self-mastery. We are slaves and not masters. "Things are in the saddle and ride mankind." The newspaper, the radio and now television interrupt our days and disturb our nights. Everyone is a little tired, a little distraught, a little below par, a bit inaccurate in judgment.

And, I might add, too indifferent to be overly concerned about "What is the American Way of Life?"

I promised myself that I would not speak for more than twenty minutes. I fear that I have already exceeded my time. But before I conclude may I suggest what I believe will assist each of us to put our house in order. It is this: To take inventory of ourselves in order to discover more fully what kind of human beings we are ethically and whether we are growing in



intellectual stature. Here are the questions I would have you and indeed every American ask herself or himself not once but frequently:

1. What are my standards of thought and conduct?
2. What are my ideals?
3. Do I have a philosophy of life, and if so, do the concepts of excellence and self-perfection have a place in it?
4. In terms of what is good and bad, individually and socially, what is my capacity wisely to evaluate, to select, to create, to control, to sacrifice?
5. Do I emphasize quantity at the expense of quality?
6. Do I think only of self?
7. Do I mentally erect a defensive barrier which cuts me off from those of different racial extractions, color, creed, party and nationality?
8. What of my daily life? Is there conscious direction to what I think and do?
9. Am I a slave to a self-satisfying though inefficient and meaningless routine?
10. Am I the victim of passing whims and external pressures, which in the long run makes for a haphazard, purposeless, futile existence?
11. Am I losing perspective and ceasing to grow intellectually?
12. Am I ceasing to be a curious, questioning, contemplative human being living in a little routinized world of my own?

Once again may I extend to you my congratulations and thank you for inviting me to be with you on this occasion.