

HUNTER COLLEGE
OF THE
CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS
PRESIDENT ROBERT D. CROSS
JUNE 2, 1969

It is customary at commencement exercises for the President to make one final speech of his own, - perhaps to distill the essence of liberal education in one brief, lucid, message. I am glad to speak today, not because I can perform any such task, but because, in extraordinary times like these, I can hardly wish to remain silent.

You will have noticed that my desire to speak out is matched, if not exceeded, by the desire of a number of the graduating students. In addition to wearing the insignia of their academic achievement, many are wearing armbands. I want to make clear that I gave my approval to these activities, unusual as they may seem for a commencement, for two reasons. I did so, first, because I admire their determination to affirm the continuity of what they were when they entered college, with what they have learned; what they believe about America with what they fear; what they know about our past with what they hope for our country's future. They seek not only to explain what they stand for, but to persuade others to believe as they do. These are the responsibilities, indeed the obligations, of educated people.

There may well be dispute about the time, the place, the mode, and the language of this advocacy. I know that some faculty, acquiring a partial notion of what the students might do, declined to attend graduation under such conditions, and there may be, among our invited guests, those who dislike this advocacy. I regret the absence, and I regret the discomfort. In more usual times, in times when consensus was wider among our people, these are penalties we would not have to pay. But these are not usual times; they are not times of consensus.

Furthermore, I support the spirit, if not every detail, of the expression of protest. I have no right, nor intention, to commit this college to a particular stance on a particular current issue. But I do feel as a teacher and administrator -

in short as an adult with serious relationships with young people - not to be ambiguous about what I, as a person, believe, on a subject about which many of them believe very passionately. I do not expect all of you to agree with me. But I have to say that I abhor the war now being fought in Vietnam, and would like the United States to extricate itself from it as soon as possible. I am not a pacifist. Neither am I a political scientist, nor a theologian capable of deciding with authority that this war, in some sense differently from other wars, is illegal or immoral. Some people do make these judgments, and I suspect that some written materials will be handed you as you leave; you are, I am sure, able to form your own opinion. For myself, I say only that I loathe the war, and pray for a rapid end to it.

We know that many of our graduating students will be - like other young men of their age - denied the opportunity to pursue the arts of peace. I understand why many students dislike the Selective Service system, which is arguable in principle, and sometimes capricious in execution. And I sympathize with the apprehension of students that, in the military establishment, service has usually meant some abridgment of the freedoms of assembly and expression that they have been taught to revere. I do not pretend to comment on the constitutional issue; but I do appreciate why students opposed to the war in Vietnam are especially concerned about their ability to criticize that war, should they be called into the armed services.

No doubt there are many here, - and some, as I have already noted, are deliberately not here - who deeply disagree with what I have been saying, and perhaps equally with the actions of the students. I do not cherish disagreement, especially with people whom I respect. But I believe that the health of our society, and the health of the college, and the health of the relationship between young and old - such a tortured question now in American culture - depend on the candor with which all sides express their differences. There is no need for us to agree. There is

need, - vital need - to find ways of expressing civilly, publicly, and persuasively the issues on which we differ. We must not forget that ideas and convictions may lead to actions - must lead to actions if they are not to be sterile. As with ideas, the actions some take may be distasteful to us. But so long as they are not destructive of the rights of others, we must be prepared to tolerate these actions, even when we do not admire them.

The hallmark of a civilization is its civility. Our civilization has never been in more serious condition precisely because of the breakdown of civility as divergences have developed over the direction our country must take. We must have freedom; freedom will usually lead to divergence of opinion; among free men, divergence of opinion will produce difference of commitment, and different patterns of action. If we are not strong enough to survive such differences of opinion, commitment, and action, we do not deserve to survive at all. But I profoundly believe that we are strong enough to survive.