

An Address By

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Forty-Ninth Annual Commencement Exercises

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An invitation to be a commencement speaker is a great honor. It is also a humbling experience. This is commencement season. Each year at this time schools all across the nation have graduation exercises. At each one, a guest speaker is expected to shower pearls of wisdom on an audience slightly irritated by the heat, the humidity and the dress -- an audience which sits half listening, impatient but hopeful that the speaker's remarks will be short, or that he will contract an instant case of laryngitis, or both. It is like the second game of a baseball doubleheader on a hot July fourth. It takes a no-hitter or a grand slam homerun to excite the fans. These happenings are rare in baseball; they are rarer on the commencement circuit. As the speaker goes on -- and on -- a unity of thought develops among the graduates -- "why didn't we get laryngitis and ask the dean's office to mail our degrees."

There is another interesting phenomenon to this commencement business. Just as all the hemlines on women's skirts go up -- and down -- and then up again, as the seasons change, so nearly all commencement speakers in a given season choose the same subject matter for their remarks. This means that you can pick up today's newspaper and read tomorrow's speech as it was given yesterday. But if the subject matter raises difficult and important questions which cry out for responsible and responsive answers, repetition may be forgiven. I have decided to avoid the temptation to discuss baseball, and the greater temptation of women's skirts. Please settle back in your chairs. I do not have laryngitis but I will try to be brief.

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"[W]e are living in a new world . . . .  
The Constitution is under fire, and the sanctity of contract is under suspicion. Familiar landmarks are gone. The nation is in full stride along untrod ways. Whether these paths will lead to glory or grief, no man now can say. One certainty: The old ways have temporarily at least been laid upon the shelf."

Although these words have the freshness of this morning's newspaper, they were written in 1933 by Roger W. Babson, a distinguished American and the founder of this great institution. That these words are as true today as they were in 1933 brings to mind a wonderful expression of the French -- Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose -- The more things change, the more they remain the same.

In preparing my remarks, I could not help reflecting on events in the years since I occupied one of your chairs. The past three and one half decades witnessed a remarkable development from economic despair to financial security for most. They brought rapid, revolutionary, and sometimes frightening developments in the physical sciences as well as dramatic and unexpected changes in our political and social worlds. Of greater importance, they produced legions of people with compassion for the less fortunate and a willingness, often at great personal sacrifice, to correct the injustices and the decay which threaten a breakdown of our society. The aloof and uncommitted college generation of the nineteen fifties and early sixties has given way to active, concerned and committed students of today. The campus football hero has been replaced by the civil rights worker, the playboy by the poverty worker. America's youth has become her conscience. This development is cause for hope. As an American, as a public servant and as the father of a college student who practices what his father preaches, I applaud it.

The past thirty-five years, unfortunately, have also been years of great grief. The causes of this grief surround us. At almost every turn we are faced by division and danger. We are the richest nation in the world, yet some of our citizens are starving. In a time of instantaneous communications media, we are communicating less. There are those who, in asserting their right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, deprive others of their lives, their liberty and their happiness. There are those who demand power but reject responsibility, who intentionally create false hopes of instant success and then utilize the resulting disillusionment for their own selfish ends. There are those who seek to move from aspiration to realization without recognizing or acknowledging the stops in between. And there are those who choose to sit down and be carried rather than stand up and be counted.

Part of the problem is that our sense of priorities is dif-fused. Frequently, there is more support for building bigger ships, faster airplanes and more powerful rockets than finding the means to rebuild our cities. We permit the uncontrolled sale of weapons, but we license ice-cream vendors. We establish wildlife preserves to protect animal species, but we continue killing one another at a rate which surpasses a Grade D movie thriller. In the name of progress we are poisoning the air we breathe and polluting the water we drink.

It is all of this and more which you must change. It is not a pleasant legacy your parents and teachers leave for you. In all fairness, it must be said that they did not create the situation. They were caught up and trapped in the wake of the changes wrought by the industrial revolution -- changes which are occurring more rapidly with each passing year. They have not found all the answers. You are the beneficiaries of the technological changes. More important, you have the creativity to find those answers.

The tasks which you face are similar to those which a generation of college graduates faced in the great depression of the 1930's. When I attended Brooklyn College, I lived at the edges of Bedford-Stuyvesant. Parts of that area were ghetto then, as they are today, and we faced many of the same problems, frustrations and fears. Our political system was under attack then, as it is today. But there was a difference. Our economy was in serious trouble. Our gross national product was a fraction of what it is today. There was a consensus that the first order of business was to put our national house in order, to get industry on the move again and to restore public confidence in our economic and political institutions. Successful completion of this job was as critical to the survival of the nation as the challenges you face today.

Searching and comprehensive investigations were undertaken and accomplished, but not without great controversy. It was commonplace to refer to the people who tackled the challenges of those days as radicals -- or worse. They were, for the most part, however, possessed of the same qualities of concern, intelligence and vision that characterize the best efforts of your generation. They too, felt, and with some

justification, that their parents had made a mess of the world. They, too, had a revulsion against the callousness, the selfishness, and the cruelty of some. They, too, faced charges that the new ideas, approaches, and laws which they helped to develop would "destroy our way of life." But, as I look back upon it, despite all the charges and the countercharges, it was essentially a period of conservative reform, not revolution. Then, as now, there was difficulty in establishing priorities and finding sufficient human and financial resources to deal with seemingly insoluble problems. Then, as now, there was a need for dedicated people with confidence in their ability to meet the challenges successfully. And, with a certain amount of experimentation, error and waste, the challenges were met and overcome, albeit imperfectly. Those imperfections flowered into some of today's problems. The important point, however, is that many people, within and outside government, moved vigorously and effectively to deal with critical and complex problems which threatened the foundations of our society.

The need for such people is greater now than ever before. Solving the problems of poor housing, inadequate education, abject poverty and unemployment, rising crime and juvenile delinquency, and racial conflict is extraordinarily difficult. But, solve them we must if we are to remove the decay from our urban and rural areas, if we are to grow stronger as a nation dedicated to the democratic principle of fair play for all, if we are to bring society closer to realization of the promises embodied in the Bill of Rights.

Most of you will be embarking on a career in business, or as professionals serving business. I need not remind you that the businessman is being asked more and more to devote his special skills, his time and his energy to those problems. This is as it should be. Businessmen and their advisers are skilled in the analysis of complex problems, in the balancing of priorities and alternative solutions, and in the efficient allocation of limited resources. Through the techniques of advertising and marketing you are able to make the unknown known and acceptable. You have been trained to make people feel comfortable with new things -- ideas as well as goods. And, without in any way minimizing what I consider to be a moral obligation, it also makes good business sense to work

vigorously towards improving the lot of the nation's disadvantaged. Books cannot be sold to the illiterate, furniture to the homeless, dishwashers to the hungry, or banking services to the penniless.

Business must do a good deal more. But the business community cannot do the job alone. Solution of the problems and fulfillment of the promises requires a generous allocation of manpower and other resources by all branches of our government. Your support as citizens as well as businessmen is essential. I am persuaded that we will meet the problems if we as citizens, as students, as businessmen and as professionals are prepared to join in the common effort. I am heartened by some of the developments which seem so dangerous and difficult today. The unrest on our campuses, the rising activism of our citizenry, the growing recognition by business and others of an obligation to the whole community, will in the long run solve the problems, bring peace to a troubled world and relative tranquility to a restive society.

An aspect of the overall picture which is receiving increased attention is the recognition and protection of the interests of consumers. It is particularly appropriate to speak to you about this. The wholehearted support and cooperation of the business community is essential to the success of consumer-protection measures. And the continued health of the business community is dependent upon that success.

Consumer protection has long been recognized as a necessary and appropriate basis for legislation at the state and local government levels as well as by the Federal Government. In 1938, Roger Babson co-authored a book entitled "Consumer Protection," in which the following observations appear:

The present profit system may be facing a death sentence unless something is done for the consumer.

It may be possible to establish as a definite division of the government, a Department of the Consumer, with its secretary a member of the President's Cabinet.

In sounding a call which was not answered until the adoption, last month, of the "Truth-in-Lending" Act, Mr. Babson also stated that:

Evidence is available that either directly or indirectly customers have been accepting credit at a higher rate of interest than they would care to pay if they were informed of the true costs.

In recent years a determined effort has been made to improve the protections available to the consumer and to develop some new ones. President Johnson has sought to highlight the urgent need to strengthen existing consumer safeguards. Last year and this, he sent to the Congress important and carefully detailed special Consumer Messages. He has had an Assistant for Consumer Affairs in the White House for some time and recently appointed a Consumer Counsel within the Department of Justice. We have a Department of Commerce, a Department of Labor, and a Department of Housing and Urban Development, all of which in one way or another, administer programs designed to assist the consumer and those who do business with him. And, as Roger Babson predicted, we may one day have a Department of Consumer Affairs.

While this effort on the consumer's behalf has benefited and will continue to benefit all of us, it is particularly important to the disadvantaged. As is so often the case, the persons least equipped to gather or to insist upon relevant information, to recognize the alternatives and to make informed decisions, are the people most likely to be the victims of overreaching.

Many of the consumer-protection measures which have been enacted or proposed in recent years rely upon a basic requirement that the consumer be given the facts about a product or service in understandable form. The "Truth-in-Packaging Act," enacted in 1967, is designed to give the consumer simple, direct and accurate information necessary to a rational choice among competing packaged products. The "Truth-in-Lending Act" requires lenders to provide borrowers with the actual amount of their commitment and the true annual rate of interest they

will be required to pay. The effectiveness of this "disclosure" technique depends in great measure upon the cooperation and the willingness of the businessman to comply with the spirit as well as the letter of the law.

Judged by past experience, consumer-protection legislation will also benefit the reputable businessman. Confidence that he is receiving a reasonably complete description of the product or service involved, and that the persons with whom he deals or whose goods he buys are treating him fairly, will enhance the consumer's willingness to exchange a portion of his savings for the businessman's wares.

Of course, there will be some who will create a specter of unbearable burden and irreparable damage to private enterprise or raise a cry of invasion of privacy. When the bill which became the Securities Act of 1933 -- the earliest of six statutes administered by the Securities and Exchange Commission -- was under consideration, there were persons who charged that "grass would grow on Wall Street" if the legislation were enacted. Those prophets of doom were correct about one thing -- there is an abundance of green in Wall Street; but it is not grass. The growth of the securities markets from the depths of despair to their present position of strength, vitality and affluence is, in part, a result of the continued cooperation between private industry and government in safeguarding the public interest. And it was achieved without unduly burdening the industry. As one who has spent most of his adult years on one side of this relationship I take pride in this record of cooperation and achievement. The system of cooperative regulation which made it possible may well commend itself in other areas where it is simple self-interest to avoid unfair competition from those whose low standards create the risk that the public's confidence in all businessmen may be diluted.

Having mentioned some of the things which the business community should do, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the many excellent programs which business has already undertaken -- some in partnership with the government -- to improve the lives of the disadvantaged. Job training programs for the



unemployed and unskilled have created new hope. Construction of office buildings in urban ghettos has produced new job opportunities. Scholarships sponsored by business have enabled many to leave the ghetto. Graduate schools of business and law are starting to offer courses dealing with urban and racial problems and they are encouraging their students and faculties to volunteer their services to the residents and small businessmen in the ghetto. The latest systems techniques are being employed to develop specific recommendations for bringing better housing, jobs, medical care and other attributes of a decent standard of living to the less privileged in our society. Many of the nation's largest corporations have contributed a portion of their resources -- both manpower and money -- to these endeavors. Just as members of the Bar represent indigent defendants and contribute their services to legal aid societies and civil liberties unions, other professionals and businessmen should devote some of their time to answering the challenges and dealing with the social and economic ills which surround us.

When you leave school there will be a great temptation to turn your backs on the problems, to devote all your efforts to furthering your professional careers, to permit your concern for those less privileged to decrease as your ability to effect meaningful change increases. Vested interests develop -- in your neighborhood, your children's schools, the community swimming pool.

It is an easy transition from an alert mind and concerned spirit to a round figure and complacent attitude. In the words of Henry David Thoreau

"The youth gets together his materials  
to build a bridge to the moon,  
or, perchance, a palace or temple on the earth,  
and, at length, the middle-aged man concludes  
to build a woodshed with them."

You must avoid the temptation. You must accept the challenges and be generous in contributing your time, your energy and your heart. You must accept a broad view of the objectives and a tolerance for the views of all no matter how critical or unsympathetic they may appear to be. You must develop a flexibility in approach, and a willingness -- indeed a desire -- to subject to continuing review the basic premises, the scope of coverage and the effectiveness of the measures -- political, social and economic -- adopted to deal with problems which become more complex every day. You must share the task of finding ways to secure housing, food, clothing, education and jobs for the disadvantaged. You must do these things because in many respects you are better prepared than most to get the job done.