

## The Commencement Address

Dr. Rowell paid tribute to "Your Pioneer Generation." His own generation, he said, recognized that "our fathers had conquered the continent; now we were to build in it."

**T**HEY have fought the wars that have made us an independent nation and have kept us united. Regretfully, we realized that we had no more wars to fight, as there were no more causes for which to fight. We saw a new stage opening—a stage of machinery, commerce, science and education. When that was done, our successors might enjoy ease, but could never know the thrills of pioneering. We thought we were the second pioneer generation and that there never would be another.

But we find that we were wrong. We completed the exploration of the earth; your time has only just begun the exploration of the universe. It is even within your brief memories that the eye of science first penetrated beyond the universe and below the atom and so opened the two most fascinating fields of intellectual expansion and physical conquest. The background of man's intellectual

history is largely in his astronomical orientations. From Moses to Omar there was one orientation, from Omar to Ptolemy to Copernicus another, and now in these past few years still another expansion incomparably larger than all the others combined. For the first time, we have begun to comprehend the infinite in its physical manifestations and to realize the literally infinitesimal place man fills in it. It is for your generation to readjust the world of thought and of faith to that expansion and to raise man from his physical insignificance as a miserable being on a speck of stardust to his spiritual eminence as he seats himself on the throne of the archangel and alone in the universe sees that universe whole.

**I** MAKE no apologies for speaking to you, a class of college graduates, of the things we all must do, rather than the things a few must do for us all. For your very first problem rests on the fact that you are no longer the few. You are the first generation of an educated democracy. It was the ambition of our fathers to make this literate. Thus

the leadership of the educated few could be transmitted to the literate many. But that all men should ever be learned was as unthinkable as that all should ever be rich.

Now we have very nearly accomplished both these impossibilities. Though all men are not yet rich, our relatively poor have luxuries, comforts, leisure and enjoyments to which even the richest could not aspire in any previous generation of the world. Decidedly, we are not all learned, unless you differ from all other classes of your time. I may suspect that some even of you are not learned. But the least of you has what in any previous age would have been very exceptional learning. You have all of you been at least exposed to learning. And for the first time you are a very numerous part of the community.

When my father graduated seventy years ago, a college education was the rarest of privileges. A few scant hundred a year was the total American output. When I graduated forty years ago it was only the exceptionally fortunate who were sent or the exceptionally determined who came to college. Now, what was once the privilege of the few has become the common right of all. You are a vast army, turned by the million into the stream of our American life. And the high school graduates—who are also well-schooled men and women—are almost the whole people.

Education is beyond all comparison the vastest industry in America. Counting teachers and pupils, professors and students, it occupies more people than even farming and vastly more than industry or commerce. In fact, it occupies us all during the most pregnant period of our lives, in the formal discipline of school and college, and it ought, informally, to be the chief concern of us all the rest of our lives. For even you who have here today taken the highest degree of doctor of philosophy have only just begun your education and the rest of you have only made your preliminary preparations.

**C**OLLEGES still are debating individual or mass education. Shall they still train for the exceptional places and limit their attendance to the exceptional men, or shall they frankly recognize that mass education means in most cases the training of ordinary men to lead ordinary lives and to do the ordinary work of life better than they would otherwise have done? One course leads to limitation of attendance, the other to expansion of curriculum. Both leave scholarship as a side issue.

Your problem is not so much what the University shall do to you as what you shall do to it. You go into a new world where the educated man is no longer exceptional, and into a new democracy which for the first time is on the defensive. If democracy is to survive in the world, it is you who must preserve it.

In our nineteenth century no one questioned the principle of democracy. If there were countries which had not yet attained it, they would arrive in time. If democratic government anywhere was corrupt, the cure was to reform it. If it was often inefficient, that was the necessary price of the "checks and balances" which were its safeguard. We might complain of the working of democracy in the concrete, but no one challenged it in the abstract.

Now all that is challenged. From within and without, democracy is on the defense. Bolshevism and Fascism

assail it from without in the new forms of government which claim to offer the world something better than the outworn concept of liberty. Psychology assails it from within with the tests that seem to demonstrate that most of us are morons.

The modern desire for efficiency challenges it. In this complicated age, we would perhaps like to be free, but we must be efficient. Fascism is efficient, and even Bolshevism is able to do some things administratively which we cannot. Our fathers purposely made government inefficient in order to keep it from being oppressive.

It too must compete with the multitude of distractions of modern life. It is a real question whether democratic institutions can survive the moving picture. If the people are too busy or too amused to think about the government, somebody will do it for them; then we shall have autocracy in fact, as, indeed, we have often had it, and we will have the example of Italy to challenge it, whether we shall not frankly adopt it in form.

In other things than government, we are already accepting autocracy as the less evil. Even this University, "a free company of scholars and students," is administratively an autocracy in the interest of efficiency.

A new industrial system also confronts you, to meet democratically or otherwise. If political democracy may be fatally inefficient is not our industrialism rather threatened with self-destruction by its very efficiency? The nearer fool-proof we make our machinery, the more we prefer fools to operate it.

The ideal industrial organization, it would seem, from the standpoint of production, would require a few men of genius at the top and an army of Robots at the bottom, with nobody in between. Commerce would indeed still require a middle class of sales people, but it is an

open question whether modern salesmanship does not put its moral requirements nearly as low as fool-proof machinery does its intellectual ones. Are we not developing toward a system that produces things at the cost of men?

**Y**OU are to live through the generation which must solve the problem of preventing machinery from becoming a curse and efficiency a handicap. For it is no less true now than in the days of Protagoras that "man is the measure of things." We have gone perhaps too far in making things the measure of men.

Yours is the generation that must solve the problem of leisure. Not the problem of getting leisure. That is taking care of itself. Our most rapidly growing industries are those which administer not to the necessities of but to the enjoyment of leisure.

Political democracy must meet tests it has never faced before. Our fathers, thinking it could not handle foreign relations, conferred the treaty-making power on the president and the senate, and now we have democratized the senate and it is obstructing every constructive effort toward better foreign relations.

And can democracy meet the problem of peace? So far our American republic alone among the responsible nations obstinately has remained aloof from the only hopeful efforts to organize the world against war. American leadership took the initiative in all these things, but American democracy alone among the peoples has lacked the courage to follow that leadership.



Courtesy Detroit News

**THE COMMENCEMENT SPEAKER**  
Chester H. Rowell, '88

And can democracy meet race questions? It has not done so anywhere in America. Autocracy has met it; industry has met it to some. Democracy has not.

**M**OST of all, can democracy survive its own inherent bunk? I speak feelingly—I have just come from the great bunk factory at Kansas City. This primarily is the challenge to you as educated men and women. If education cannot “de-bunk” politics, our case is hopeless.

And can democracy find place for the expert and scientific method and still remain democratic?

All this is not to say that democracy is a failure. Quite the contrary! It is to challenge you to make it a success. For you are the pioneer generation that must explore its new fields. Unless your generation in this, our America,

can make of democracy a success in a world and at a time that everywhere challenge it, then indeed our fathers will have lived and worked and died in vain, and government of the people, by the people, for the people will have perished from the earth. That is the responsibility of your generation. I for one have full faith you will meet it. You are launched today, a pioneer generation in a new world. Soon that world will be in good custody. As you make or spoil it, so it will be handed down to your children.

Here, then, is the world's challenge to you. I believe in and trust to you, not to those narrow-minded and prejudiced persons who look with horror upon your philosophy of life, your lack of reverence for conventions. Of that you may well be guilty—but so were we and so, too, the generations which preceded us.