

Address by
Secretary of Labor W. Willard Wirtz
at the
Mid Year Graduation Exercises
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Today's Commencement thoughts cannot be separate from those we have for a month now been prisoner to. Nor should they be. Commencement is a time for summing up an education, and you in this Class have come at the end of your curriculum to know how much more learning is from events than from tomes or teachers.

You had narrowed the ultimate issues down: to whether the ideas of love and reason are valid; whether there is any Truth except in a laboratory; whether freedom is too fragile for common use; whether the individual can be an architect of meaningful purpose or is in fact assigned the part of pawn or puppet in a senseless drama of accident. But these were abstract issues.

Then suddenly, in a mad, macabre moment of history, they became starkly real. A single, seering event put to acid test the truth or half-truth, the meaning or unmeaning, the sense or sentiment, of the ideas and ideals you had been sixteen years constructing.

The immediate response for many of you was despair, even malediction. How can love prevail when hate can arm itself from a mail-order catalogue? What relevance has reason when anti-reason degenerates to lunacy? If freedom depends on responsibility and restraint, is freedom better than farce when there is even one to use freedom's license for anarchy?

It was easiest in that moment of untruth to say that if this can happen,

if the worst of men can destroy the finest of men, if a single demented creature, fed on the hate and ignorance of a few, can despoil the work of millions, demean a nation in her own eyes and in the eyes of the world -- then there is no pattern, no basis for believing in anything.

That first reaction was wrong. It was the product, largely, of self-pity. It is hard sometimes to have to live history.

To feel still, even after four healing weeks, a sense of incomparable, irreparable loss, is to realize at the same time the lessons that have been offered any who will read them.

First, that there is an infinite human capacity for meeting the onslaught of seemingly overpowering circumstance. We saw a nation's shattered faith in itself restored: by two women who had given that nation a son and a husband and who asserted silently now the quiet dignity of love; by a little girl's squeeze of her mother's hand and a little boy's unknowing salute; by the leaders of the world walking humbly behind a caisson to assert the elemental brotherhood which binds people closer than nations; by a new President affirming in resolute action and authentic statement the permanence of America's articles of faith and the continuity of democracy's purpose.

There has been given us, too, a new measure of what is important and what is unimportant, of what matters and what doesn't matter. To have been part of tragedy, to have been hurt this much, is to feel a contempt for the insignificant. Another has said, better: "A love, a grief, a loss so deep

and wide (has) left no room ... at all inside for what was sometimes harbored: little, mean, corroding thoughts; ... the sneer, ... the base untruth." There will be more than before, and hopefully a working majority, to insist that the questions before the nation be faced less in terms of narrow self-interest, ~~and more in terms of narrow self-interest~~, and more in terms of right and wrong, of truth and untruth.

There has been, most significantly of all, a new confrontation with the essential question of society's meaning: how far the human act and condition are influenced by membership in the commonwealth of Man or how far they remain essentially a matter of individual responsibility and irresponsibility.

This issue has been raised in terms of whether that incomprehensibly maniacal act in Dallas was traceable to a tragic flaw entirely inside one criminally maverick man or rather to what the forces of circumstance had done to twist his mind and make it witless and unwitting tool of the merchants and mongers of hate and bigotry.

Due process of reason permits as yet, on the evidence so far at hand no firm answer to that question. But when this is what those others sought, there is only secondary importance in whether their fulminations were a proximate cause of what happened in this particular instance.

The broader question is, however, infinitely important. For it is to the extent that what happens within a single human frame is the shared responsibility of the society as a whole that living and working have any meaning and purpose beyond satisfying the loneliest selfishness.

If years permit my commending any view to you, it is that the question is not what Man can do in the improvement of the human estate, but what he will do, and that cynicism about this is made up mostly of ignorance, selfishness, or intellectual cowardice.

How far this is true as a matter of physiology I have no way of knowing, except that the number of pieces that have been added to the jig-saw puzzles of both birth and death just while I have been watching it make me think both puzzles may eventually be completed -- and that there may not be so many pieces missing after all. Such a view is not heresy, but the highest faith.

I am thinking, however, not of what happens to the individual's physical tissue but of what he becomes and does as a participating member of the society and the economy.

My central workaday concern is how there can be nothing for four million people to do in the midst of the most successful economic experiment in the history of society's development.

The very general view is that this failure is their own fault. That view, interestingly enough, is expressed in the same quarters -- editorially, politically, and conversationally -- where the position is taken most strongly that Lee Harvey Oswald was simply a throw-back, and that the circumstances of his time and place are irrelevant.

An even broader view of the unemployment situation is that there is nothing that can be done about it -- or at least that needs to be done.

The theme, or thread, for the thoughts I try to leave with you today is that the current waste of human capacity in this country is very largely the consequence of public, not individual fault, and that it is completely curable by common consent.

There is only a little oversimplification in identifying five causes of unemployment: taxes, inadequate education, poverty, racial prejudice, and careless automation. The first of these presents a separate problem; the others are closely inter-related.

Although the matter of taxes is of primary importance, it must be left, charitably, for another speech. It is enough to note the error of trying to push an economy at a faster and faster rate, but with the brakes on. It appears reasonably certain now that within a matter of weeks Congress will take the brakes off, releasing consumer purchasing power and increasing incentives to production to the extent required to bring the rate of job growth in this country back in rhythm with the growth rate in the

population and the work force.

So far as the other, so-called "structural," aspects of unemployment are concerned, the dominant characteristic is inadequate education. The school system is no longer preparing enough people for the jobs that need to be done. The job needs have changed, the educational system hasn't. There are no longer enough unskilled jobs to take up the schools' failures. The usual price of a lack of education used to be commitment to common labor; now the price is frequently unemployment. There probably won't be full employment until we make education our No. 1 industry.

Most lack of education is related not to stupidity, which is a more personal matter, but to poverty, which is not. We think of poverty as a result of unemployment. It is equally, perhaps more, a cause of unemployment, for the poor are fathering a new generation of inadequately motivated and inadequately educated boys and girls. A recent study disclosed that more than half of the men aged 35 to 44 who failed to finish high school were sons of men who had not completed elementary school. This lack of education is directly related to unemployment -- the unemployment rate for those with less than 5 years of school is $7\frac{1}{2}$ times that for those who completed college.

More and more we are realizing how much of unemployment is inherited -- not through the physical genes but through the social genes of slums, broken families, constant moving around the country, and the like.

It hasn't been popular to talk about poverty in America. Yet at a time when the gross national product increases by 30 billion dollars in

a single year but leaves 30 million Americans in families with annual incomes of less than \$3000, there is reason to recall Pericles saying almost 2400 years ago: "Wealth we employ more for use than for show, and place the real disgrace of poverty not in owing to the fact but in declining the struggle against it." That was, said, ironically, in what proved to be the first year of the decline of Athen's Golden Age. That there will be a more favorable turn of history this time is presaged in the fact that President Kennedy called as almost his last act, and President Johnson as almost his first, for a war on poverty. As long as millions of Americans are impoverished in spirit as well as in body, as long as millions of Americans lack the rudiments of an education, we make a mockery of the high ideals of the American tradition.

The relevance of racial discrimination to unemployment is written in the figures which show its incidence as being roughly three times as high among non-white as whites.

This year 1963 has seen the substantial winning of the hundred-year war against racial discrimination; but only the start of the necessary war now against racial disadvantage. This is the fall-out problem from that other war. We have established the right to equal opportunity; but now we must guarantee the right to be ready -- for opportunity is a delusion if it means only that a person not prepared for it is given the same offer as the person who is prepared. The only way to meet this situation is to assure equal preparation.

I think, in this connection, of the new exchange program which is being worked out between the University of Michigan and Tuskegee Institute.

There is recognition now that color marks neither capacity nor incapacity within the individual. But it is the responsibility of the commonwealth to compensate for a century of its own blindness to this fact. The plain truth of it is that a child born into a Negro family which carries the scars of a century of discrimination is not created equal with the child born into a family which has not been so marked and stunted. Ours is the larger responsibility to see to it that men who are not created equal are given the opportunity to achieve equality.

The remaining factor in the employment equation is this development referred to, loosely, as automation.

To some, "automation" is only a new name for a continuing process of man's mastery over technology that began when he attached a stone to the end of a club. And there has been, surely, ever since that time, a persistent ambivalence about whether this process has been a good idea or a bad one.

When the Don Quixote of Cervantes' imagination tilted at windmills in the seventeenth century, he was not applauded for his hostile gesture at a potential evil, but was ridiculed rather for lashing out at a harmless thing.

Nor did the folk singer weep when Casey Jones was killed by his steam locomotive, for Casey loved his engine as an extension of his own manliness -- and did not resent it as a competitor. His legend was one of triumph, for he died with the throttle in his hand.

But in the main, our literature, our folklore, our art and philosophy have reflected a deep concern about the relationship of men and machines.

More characteristic than Casey Jones was the Ballad of John Henry, which set an attitude of hostility to machinery that became a basic theme of American folk songs:

"John Henry said to his captain,
"A man ain't nothing but a man.
"An before I'll let your steam drill beat me down,
"I'll die with the hammer in my hand."

Diego Rivera's oils are of machines that degrade and devour mankind. Rousseau and Thoreau planted the roots of anti-technology deep into our culture, with a pastoral negativism not unrelated to what you have more recently read in the literature of the Beat Generation.

It was Rudyard Kipling's couplet:

"What I ha' seen since ocean steam began
"Leaves me na doot for the machine: but what about the man?"

And there was Ralph Waldo Emerson's poignant cry:

"Things are in the saddle and ride mankind."

The citizens of Samuel Butler's fictitious land of Erewhon destroyed all of their machines, because a philosopher pointed out that the machines were improving faster than the men, and might eventually take over. That's what happened in Karl Capek's play of 1923 named RUR; and at the end of the third act, Rossum's Universal Robots came plodding in from the wings of the stage, stolidly, solidly, forming in phalanxes and advancing on the audience -- on people -- and just as they reached the footlights, the lights went out and the play was over.

Yesterday's fiction finds its parallel in today's fact. A century which dawned on an industrial revolution that saw men concerned about becoming slaves has reached its high noon in a revolution of technology haunted rather by the spectre of becoming robots.

A few miles from this hall, ten employees man a machine that makes automobile motor blocks 400 men worked on ten years ago.

Fourteen operators attend the glass-blowing machines that make 90% of all the glass light bulbs produced in this country.

Two workers now turn out 1,000 radios a day -- the product of 200 workers a few years ago.

A machine translates an issue of Pravda into English in a half an hour. Another traces precedents in the law library. At Cal Tech, a computer reports at the end of three hours the results of 80 million calculations required to trace the evolution of the sun over its 4.5 billion year lifetime.

Among the more athletic set, one machine plays now an excellent game of checkers, another a good game of chess except for the end play, and a third a relatively good hand of bridge. And there was last month's report even of cybernetic sacrilege -- the Scottish computer that has proved that St. Paul was the author of only five of the fourteen epistles attributed to him in the New Testament.

It is only a matter of time, surely, until some clanking robot will draw itself erect and announce: Cogito, ergo sum.

Between now and this time tomorrow, 4,400 people will have stepped aside from their jobs, or moved on to others, because machines will be doing what they are doing today.

Yet any philosophy or policy about automation must necessarily start from clear recognition that unrestrained technological advance is not only inexorable, but essential to the maintenance and elevation of the standard of living. Full employment in this country is completely dependent on our being more efficient producers than our competitors in a world where the competition is tougher every day. The alternative to automation would be economic stagnation.

It is equally clear that the prevalent myths about automation are narcotics dulling the national sensitivity to the necessity of averting men's mastery over machines.

The myth that automation is only a new stage in an old process is akin to the thinking that splitting the atom represented only an evolutionary development in the dynamics of war, a projection of the first use of the cross-bow or the Trojan horse. Technology has wrought as large a change in the necessary thinking about the future of work as about the future of war -- but the answer here is obviously not to stop it.

The comforting myth that we can always pull the plug of a machine out of the wall disregards the fact that we won't. And the companion piece about "nothing coming out of machines except what men put into them" disregards the fact that this is probably no more true now of some machines than of some men.

The most dangerous myth, in immediate times is that machines produce as many jobs for men as they destroy and therefore represent no threat to workers. This is a half truth, and therefore a half lie. The truth is that machines permit the extension of men's work activities. The implied lie is that this will happen automatically or without the exercise of full human responsibility.

The machines now have, in general, a high school education -- in the sense that they can do most jobs that a high school education qualifies people to do. So machines will get the unskilled jobs, because they work for less than living wages. Machines are, in the most real sense, responsible for putting uneducated people out of work.

The jobs the machines create, furthermore, are usually for different people from those they displace. This doesn't matter if labor is viewed as a commodity. What it means, however, in more understanding terms is that the bargain a machine strikes with a man is that it takes one job and offers in return another -- stripped of the worker's seniority accrued vacation benefits, pension rights, and the value of the skill he had spent a lifetime developing.

The answers are not to smash the machines. They are to recognize that the individual versus the machine is as unfair a match today as the individual versus the corporation was in the last century, and that advancing technology requires the exercise of collective -- public and private -- responsibility for its effects and collective measures to carry out this responsibility.

This is not the place for a programmatic development of a full employment policy. I have tried here only to lay the basis for suggesting what seem to me the two elements in such a policy, which emerge particularly in the kind of thinking that has characterized these last four weeks.

One of these elements is a renewed commitment to the idea of full employment, as a matter of human right.

There are those, and too many, whose sensitivities about the inhumanity of unemployment are dulled by the realization that it keeps wages down. There are others, and too many, whose tolerance for unemployment is increased by the realization that it does discourage inflation.

There are far too many who, being themselves employed, never develop much concern about those who are not.

There has been over 5% unemployment -- meaning four million people -- in this country now for over six years. There is a very real danger that serious unemployment will become a permanent reality because it was first permitted to become a habit.

If there were as much public emphasis on balancing the manpower budget as there is on balancing the economic budget, as much editorial concern about unemployment as there is about the dollar balance, we would be better able to accomplish all of our purposes. And if you feel this is too general, I would answer that democracy works well enough in this country that the priorities in people's minds do get translated into national policy.

My central emphasis here today has been, however, on the different point that a key element in a full employment policy is the recognition that its victims are for the most part casualties not of their own fault but of circumstance outside their control.

There are those, and too many, who seek balm for their conscience about unemployment in the conclusion that it is a state most of the unemployed deserve, or even prefer. This is callous, cruel, untruth.

It is our fairest judgment from the studies and experience we now have that probably about one person in two hundred, or perhaps three hundred, has some flaw within him that condemns him to dependence. This would be a half percent, perhaps, of the work force. All the rest have the capacity to work meaningfully, and at least the potential desire to do so.

Let us start by breaking the cycle of poverty, ignorance, unemployment, and then back to poverty again. The best place to do it is at the point of education.

Let us make no assumption that the boy who drops out of school and moves on then to unemployment, juvenile delinquency, or worse, acts free of his environmental circumstance. About eight out of ten of you in this graduating class are, according to a recent study, the sons or daughters of parents who at least attended college. We interviewed last month in New York a group of 2,500 boys about your age who are already having a hard time of it. It turns out that 70% of their fathers didn't get beyond the eighth grade.

Let's recognize that the ending of racial discrimination in employment is not enough. The 20% unemployment rate existing today among younger Negroes looking for work represents in large part a problem of discrimination fallout. Because there was discrimination, a good many of this 20% group never developed the motivation to get a good education. They

and we better recognize our mutual problem, and develop the salvage programs this group would welcome.

As for automation, I think the answer lies in the recognition that a man replaced by a machine is entitled, assuming the exercise of full responsibility on his part, to another job either in the same enterprise or elsewhere, without reduction in earnings or loss of benefits and with full training provided if new skills are required.

This is easy to say, and hard to implement. It requires a revision of managerial policy, the relaxation of union restraints, a different collective bargaining attitude, a more enlightened vocational education training policy in the schools, a great deal more higher education, and probably an enlarged public retraining program.

This is, however, the direction in which we are moving. The major labor relations development this year has been the almost sudden acceptance by large segments of labor and management of the "attrition principle" -- that so far as possible, present employees will be protected against the effects of technological development.

I suggest, finally, that the rate of technological development will be greatly increased as provision is made for the recognition and protection of the individual, human interests which are affected by it.

In conclusion:

You will realize that I have been seeking here to serve what is I think our shared hope, and perhaps the commonest hope in America today: to find how to keep the murder of John Kennedy from going down in history as a brutal irrelevancy.

Others, seeking to serve this same hope, see in that assassination principally the exposure of fundamentally deep weaknesses in American life. But fear -- hate -- bigotry -- vituperation -- these are not our characteristics, and no ugly minority or madman will make them so.

The central point seems to me only a little -- but essentially -- different. It is that whatever there is of individual human fault or failure -- or achievement -- is part of the common responsibility. I want it that way, so that I can find the fulfillment of my purpose, someplace other than in a mirror.

The other element of relevancy I can sense is the encouragement of the resolve to pursue the issues of the day in terms of the balance between vulgarity and decency, between fear and courage, between hate and love, between deceit and honor. The longer I live, and the older I get, the less I find the narrow clash of political ideologies meaningful, and the more I find that the struggle between these opposites reflects a large part of what life is all about, since life is essentially a moral struggle.

So shall we seek, each in our own way, to find the meaning we know is in the eternal flame that will henceforth light our paths from a hillside above the Potomac.

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