FOREIGN POLICY, POLITICS, AND THE UNIVERSITY

An Address Given at the Commencement Exercises
April 30, 1966

BY JOHN KENNETH GALBRAITH

THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

To the Members of the 1966 Graduating Classes:

As we were leaving the Yost Field House on Commencement Day, a number of you asked when the Commencement address would be printed. Other requests for copies of it have been coming to my office from students, alumni, and members of the faculty. In answer to your wishes, we have had the address "Foreign Policy, Politics, and the University" printed in time to include a copy with your diploma. The address will also appear in the fall number of the *Michigan Quarterly Review*.

Please accept this preprint of Dr. Galbraith's address with my best wishes to you for your success and happiness.

Sincerely,

Harlan Hatcher

President
The University of Michigan

FOREIGN POLICY, POLITICS, AND THE UNIVERSITY

By John Kenneth Galbraith

Our pride, that of my wife, my son, and myself, in this double-ring ceremony is nearly complete. I have an honorary degree in law. My son has an earned degree in the same subject. The first degree does wonders for our vanity. The second does even more and promises, in addition, to have sound financial advantages. Truly, one can say, this is a beautiful morning.

I have said that the pleasure is nearly perfect. There is a slight alloy for me, as well as for you, for now I must make a commencement speech. In our time and culture the commencement speech is our least successful art form. And I believe James Reston, from this platform, quoted me to this effect a year ago. The audience is invariably indifferent. At best it is using the occasion to reflect on the pleasures and accomplishments of the recent past and the horrors of the immediate future. At worst it is enjoying a well-earned respite from thought. And it is informed by all experience that there will be little in these proceedings that will interrupt its vacation.

In addition the speaker has the troublesome problem of a topic. I can tell of this by parable. Some years ago I was campaigning in Massachusetts for a candidate for Governor who was running on the platform of personal honesty. In Massachusetts this is not the utter commonplace it might seem. But after a long television session in which I had iterated and reiterated with slight variation our basic theme which was, "Vote for Peabody. He don't steal," my man asked if I couldn't introduce a new idea or two. I replied that this required that he have a program. He looked at me in the way impractical intellectuals are so often eyed by men of the world and said: "That isn't so easy. There aren't a great many noncontroversial issues in this Commonwealth." The same terrible scarcity faces the commencement speaker.

However, I am in Michigan. And here, as in Wisconsin, Minnesota, and California, the state universities have long had their most intimate and sophisticated relation to the political life of the community. Nor will historians overlook the leadership of members of The University of Michigan in the discussion of foreign policy in the past year and the highly consequential changes in public attitudes which followed from this lead. I have thought that all this might justify attention to a mildly disputatious theme—that of the role of the modern university community in politics. And how the university community should bring its views and beliefs to bear on public issues.

Of one thing, in the future, we can be quite sure. Universities and colleges will be an increasingly powerful force in our public life. The question is not one of neutrality, but how they will participate. In 1900 there were approximately 24,000

college and university teachers in the United States and in 1920 there were 49,000. There will be 480,000 by the end of this decade. In 1900, 238,000 students were enrolled in colleges and universities. In 1969 there will be 6,700,000. No community of this size with so many members of energetic age and with many attitudes or beliefs in common can be without political influence.

Nor is it now. A strong foothold in the university and college community — and with access to its ideas, capacity for expressing them, and its volunteer workers—is already recognized to be of great advantage to the aspiring politician. And, I venture to think, what the country believes about a man or a policy is likely to be what the universities believed a few months ago. The chance, last year, of a consensus in support of our policy in southeast Asia was lost when the universities could not be persuaded. The reaction in the Congress followed.

There is a nostalgic view of the American political process which holds it to be largely exempt from intellectual influences. Here is a rough-and-ready professionalism in which knowledge of machine organization, ethnic eccentricity, money-raising, back-slapping, the more juvenile folk habits of the American people, and the more stylized forms of political oratory is what counts. The practitioners of these arts are greatly admired for their earthly accomplishments by reporters and television commentators right up to the moment of their political extinction. And this comes very early. Their place is taken by men who have some relation to issues. This type of leader turns naturally to the universities and colleges. And to this type of politician the university community has easy and natural access.

THE GREATEST effect of the growing power and participation of the university and college community will be in the field of foreign policy. This is evident from the experience of the last few years. In much of Washington, I would judge, this university involvement is, perhaps rather hopefully, regarded as a passing phase. At various times in the past students have been given to swallowing goldfish, crowding into telephone booths, and going on fifty-mile hikes. Their discovery of Viet Nam is a similar manifestation of juvenile high spirits. It will pass. Professors, by their gullibility, have added to the difficulty. They haven't been able to appreciate the quality of the institutions we defended. But, in time, they too will learn.

This is much too optimistic. The questions affecting peaceful survival or conflict have a natural interest for a young community of better than average intelligence. Additionally, the draft arouses a measure of interest in foreign policy even among the more evangelically apathetic. (It is a paradox of our time that the government, while unquestionably yearning for a greater measure of acquiescence in its foreign policy in the universities and colleges, provides through the draft the greatest single inducement to penetrating thought by the normally immune.) Students and faculty also have resources for informing themselves on foreign policy which are not readily available to the general public. As sex everywhere and football in the Big Ten have long shown, the American student is capable of a highly durable commitment. Politics in general and foreign policy in particular will also be durably a part of the university scene.

THE EFFECT of this is that foreign policy, in the United States, will for the first time acquire what the political scien-

tists call a client group. The farmers have long kept a scrupulous eye, sharpened by a natural concern for pecuniary well-being, on the Department of Agriculture. The UAW and its sister unions are believed to watch with interest the work of the National Labor Relations Board. One hears that the drug manufacturers keep a similar eye on the activities of the Food and Drug Administration. The automobile manufacturers are said, as befits an alert citizenry, to scrutinize public developments in the field of automobile safety. Similar surveillance of the state, in their area of immediate interest, is maintained by sportsmen, oilmen, tax lawyers, and pornographers.

By contrast our great foreign policy establishment has been answerable outside the government only to the Foreign Policy Association and the Council on Foreign Relations. Neither is calculated to inspire alarm in the mind of the average policy-maker. Much of what is called discussion of foreign policy is really the passing of information on what has already been done. A critical study is one that divides equally as between description of past action and *ex post* ascription of the reasons. One consequence is that the permanent establishment in the field of foreign policy—the State Department, Pentagon, other foreign policy agencies—has had unparalleled freedom from organized pressure based on organized information. And it has enjoyed, as a consequence, very great autonomy of action. The habit has also developed of expecting the public to accept the official truth on a very large range of matters.

With the rise of the universities as a client group, these basic conditions are undergoing rapid change. The university community is far from monolithic and this I do not imply. But much of it reflects, inevitbly, what may be called academic and educational mood in matters of government and foreign relations. This mistrusts force. It is deeply committed to collective action and the rule of law and regards conflict as a manifestation of failure. It is strongly committed to social and economic determinism; social revolution and communism are the consequences of social and economic deprivation. It mistrusts the simplicities of the cold war. It is also taught to be skeptical of official truth. Indeed merely to mention these matters is to get perilously close to the catalogue of platitudinous belief that is offered in the commencement address.

At all these points there is conflict with numerous official habits or tendencies. The cold war went far to justify and even enshrine expediency in our foreign policy. In dealing with wickedness we needed, as necessary, to be wicked ourselves. Principle we still enunciated but often as a fig leaf for expediency. An improbable application of principle was often reinforced by a special note of righteousness.

The commitment to collective action has been partly oral or expedient. Professor Schlesinger has noted the tendency for the United Nations in Washington to fall between the State Department, which prefers bilateral negotiations, and the Pentagon, which prefers none. For an older generation of Washington officialdom, communism is not a problem of social or economic deprivation but of moral degradation. The world can then be divided, simply, as between the moral and the immoral. Wickedness is susceptible to physical correction—indeed it may only understand force. So there is a disposition to military action. All large organizations operate within some system of official truth. The foreign policy establishment has never differentiated sharply between what it expects its members to accept and what it can expect the country to accept. Thus at every point there is a measure of conflict between numerous of the official

foreign policy attitudes and those of the new client group in the universities.

THE PREDICTABLE consequence of these differing views, in the context of the rising political power of the college and university community, will be a sharp debate on foreign policy between the universities and the government in the months and years ahead. It will perhaps be evident that I do not think this is a bad thing. On the contrary, the effect of the new client group on foreign policy will be altogether healthy. Our foreign policy will not suffer from being subject to the scrutiny of a politically influential clientele.

In the end also most of the view of the universities will prevail. It is the universities that train the people. They also can adjust more rapidly to changing circumstance than those who adhere to an official line. They have a much greater capacity for affecting the ultimate climate of belief which, ultimately, will be the determining influence on action. The government, much fear to the contrary, has little capacity for affecting this climate. Anyone who has watched its efforts to affect belief on our policy in Viet Nam—including the deployment last year of cadres of tongue-tied salesmen to the universities—might well have concluded that it would have been wiser not to try.

But the university community is not without its own shortcomings in public affairs. And its members will not be effective unless they abide by a few rules of sound political behavior. On these let me say a final word.

First, men of substantial intellectual and scientific qualification should not imitate the tendencies of those in whom error is a good deal more forgivable and allow their wishes or their imagery to guide their thoughts. For a long while last year it was assumed by many academic people that we had only to offer negotiation in Indo-China and the offer would be accepted. Accordingly, negotiation became the goal of policy. The hope or imagery did not allow for the seemingly obvious possibility that the other side could reject negotiations. It also left advocates at the mercy of those who, by presenting the offer of negotiations in acceptable or unacceptable form, could have a considerable effect on the outcome. We should expect university people to set an example in their resistance to wishful thought and in their submission to the discipline of reality.

The modes of thought of the university, at its best, and in public affairs, at its necessitous best, are also very different. And it's important both for the university and for effective participation in public affairs that this be recognized. In the university the best is meant to triumph over the good. The individual rightly defends what he considers the ideal. His tendency to do this in university affairs is what often makes the faculty meeting a less than fully proficient instrument for discharge of business. But, other than to shorten the lives of those selfless but suprisingly willing citizens who become college presidents, no damage is done.

In politics, however, the best is the enemy of the good, and the one-man party on behalf of the best enacts no legislation at all. A familiar figure on every campus is the refugee from the bureaucracy or the professor back from Washington who continues to accommodate all his thoughts to what is politically feasible. He is an academic incubus. But the professor who, in the field of public affairs, declines to intervene on any public issue unless it conforms to his ideal is an equal loss. Businessmen making the transition into public affairs are likely to be told that some accommodation is required. Precisely because the accommodation for the academician is less, he is much less likely to realize the need.

Finally, all members of the academic community, faculty and students, must make a clear distinction between public action and political catharsis. The first seeks to lead public opinion and encourage or win political result. The second serves only to affirm dedication or passion. Let me illustrate the point.

For winning public acceptance of an idea one can have resort to normal political channels. One can work with legislators and one can work to get legislators with whom one can work. And one can undertake the even more tedious tasks of public persuasion. And one can, of course, insure that legislators and officials are fully aware of one's views. And one can seek to create the organization by which all of these activities can be made more effective. In all of this there is much work and little drama.

There are also the more dramatic forms of political activism—the demonstration, march, and picket line. These are emotionally far more satisfying. I frankly doubt that they are a fraction as effective.

I hasten to say that my reaction here is wholly functional. I have no moral objection to marching—even though I have always personally been a jarring note in anything even remotely resembling a military formation. I think that people can be won by argument. The persuasive value of a picket line, the field of labor relations apart, is I am convinced very, very slight. It is better I would suggest to have one intelligent and sympathetic senator in Washington than a thousand marchers trying to persuade two hostile ones to their duty. To identify one's self dramatically with an idea is not to serve it. That is because of the difference between catharsis and influence.

I have indeed always been puzzled by a curious contradiction in attitudes of the university community on public affairs. To the goals that he advocates, the good scholar or the good pupil gives the closest attention. He rises in holy anger if you tell him, however tactfully, that he doesn't know what he is about. And usually, in fact, he does. He has given his objective a lot of thought. But then he signs a petition, grabs a sign, or joins a delegation without giving a moment's consideration as to whether this is an effective way of advancing his goals.

If I am right that the university community must, by its nature, be a force in public affairs, then let it be equally concerned with the wisdom of the goals it pursues and the effectiveness of the methods by which it pursues them.