

Speech by  
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Today we hear a great deal about crisis in our society. We are told that crime has reached crisis proportions, and that we have a drug crisis; we have just lived through a crisis in the Middle East, and recently, the Panel on Campus Unrest issued a report that began, "The crisis on American Campuses has no parallel in the history of the nation."

These and the many other crises we face--the pollution crisis, the housing crisis, the energy crisis--have raised the question in many minds of whether America as we have known it can survive as a nation.

We hear people from some quarters say that our nation is disintegrating, but others contend that it is not. Who is right and how we should respond are important but often neglected questions. Most people do not know how to judge these claims; both sides in the debate have become bitter and inflamed, and society is to some extent paralyzed by resulting uncertainties.

Yet a conservative English philosopher of the nineteenth century [Samuel Taylor Coleridge] who was sometimes said to have been "a better Liberal than Liberals themselves"

has given us an analysis of times similar to ours that perhaps can be instructive. When the stable governments of Europe began to panic in the aftermath of the French Revolution, this philosopher wrote that in order to create and preserve the stability of a nation, a government had to fulfill three basic conditions:

First, a system of education had to exist which included the "one main and incessant ingredient" restraining discipline. The object of this ingredient in the educational system according to Coleridge was to train human beings to subordinate their personal impulses and aims to the goals of society; to adhere against all temptation to courses of conduct which those ends required; to control in themselves all the feelings which were liable to militate against those goals, and to encourage all those that tended to promote them. His claim was that in a stable nation, education had to be more than merely the acquisition of information and techniques of vocation.

Second, said Coleridge, the state had to have a Constitution that was settled; something permanent, something not to be called into question, something which, by general agreement, had a right to be where it is, and to be secure

against disturbance, whatever else may change. His claim was that in a stable nation, something enduring had to exist toward which the people could have a feeling of allegiance or loyalty.

Third, the English philosopher concluded, the people had to have feelings of sympathy rather than hostility for each other, of union rather than separation, for only then could the citizens feel themselves to be part of the same community or state.

If we Americans today measure our own nation by these three conditions, we will find ourselves wanting.

Although we have a system of education which is very extensive and extremely effective in training people for professions and in the dissemination of information, it lacks to a great extent Coleridge's "one main and incessant ingredient", restraining discipline. I am afraid that at all levels of education we have failed to teach our students the importance of subordinating personal impulses and aims to the legitimate goals of society; the importance of adhering to those ideals in the face of all temptation,

and the importance of developing a sense of self-sacrifice for the general good.

Although we have a fixed and relatively permanent Constitution, many of our citizens do not know what it says, do not understand some Court interpretations of the Constitution, and are therefore unable to have a true feeling of loyalty or allegiance to it. Many of our people do not know the goals of our society promulgated in the founding documents of this nation. We all have read, from time to time, of attempts by individuals to get people to sign petitions which were nothing more than verbatim copies of our Declaration of Independence or Bill of Rights. Let me read you a news release issued this past July:

[Miami (AP)] Only one person out of 50 approached on local streets by a reporter agreed to sign a typed copy of the Declaration of Independence.

Two called it "commie junk," one threatened to call the police, and another warned Miami Herald reporter Colin Dangaard: "Be careful who you show that kind of antigovernment stuff to, buddy."

A questionnaire, circulated among 300 young adults attending a Youth for Christ gathering showed that

28 percent thought an excerpt from the Declaration of Independence was written by Lenin.

The youths, mostly high school seniors, were then asked to describe briefly what sort of person they thought would make such a statement.

Among other things the author of the Declaration was called:

"A person of communism, someone against our country."

"A person who does not have any sense of responsibility."

"A hippie."

"A red-neck revolutionist."

"Someone trying to make a change in government probably for his own selfish reasons."

Next Dangaard typed up the Declaration in petition form, stood all day on a sidewalk and asked middle-aged passersby to read it and sign it.

Only one man agreed--and he said it would cost the pollster a quarter for his signature.

Comments from those who took the trouble to read the first three paragraphs [went]:

"This is the work of a raver."

"Someone ought to tell the FBI about this sort of rubbish."

"Meaningless."

"I don't go for religion, Mac."

"The boss'll have to read this before I can let you put it in the shop window. But politically I can tell you he don't lean that way. He's a Republican."

You see, when it comes to having taught our citizens the fundamental principles of American Society, our educational system has been a dismal failure. The one thing the American educational system cannot be said to have done is to have formed a national character. It seems that in many instances Americans are "Americans" merely because they happen to live here, not because they necessarily believe in the fundamental principles of American democracy.

And in a nation severed with divisiveness, when some of our nation's leaders deliberately attempt to divide our people, what hope have we for generating feelings of sympathy and compassion among our citizens rather than feelings of hostility?

When measured against Coleridge's criteria of stability, America is indeed a nation in crisis. It might be well for us to ask to what extent is American education to blame for this crisis? What is there in American educational life that has contributed to this crisis?

In attacking our institutions as irrelevant, our young people today include among those institutions the American educational system, especially the American university. In its response, the American academic community has often agreed that many of our institutions are irrelevant and yet often denies that the university itself is. But can an educational system that appears to have done so little to teach its students the goals and fundamental principles of American life, that appears to have done so little to mold a national character, and that appears to have done so little to foster feelings of sympathy rather than hostility for one citizen to another--can it escape criticism?

Surely, our educational system must share the burden of responsibility for the attitudes--from one extreme to the other--of our people. And it may be worthwhile for us to look at some of the more obvious forms of irrelevance

in the American university and try to pinpoint their causes.

A historian has recently noted, for instance, that more space is devoted in our textbooks to Poncho Villa's miniscule invasion of New Mexico than to all the social injustice in American history. Is it a wonder, then, that so many Americans deny that social injustice exists? How many books have been written about battles in the Civil War? But how many have been written about the paradox of slavery in the land of the free? How many biographies of rich and successful men have been written? But only novelists tell the story of our impoverished masses.

And all of you are at least as aware as I am of the standard comments about dissertation titles that circulate both in and outside of university circles. The irrelevance to modern life of dissertations such as the following is apparent:

"Allusions to the private life of Louis XIV in the dramatic literature of the seventeenth century."

"Low comedy acting styles on the London stage, 1730-1780."



"The concept of Amon-Re as reflected in the hymns and prayers of the Ramesside period," and

"Isolation and differentiation in the canyon tree frog." Or how about the

"Genetic basis of Flower abortion"?

Given the enormous problems that man now faces in this world, such research surely seems trivial and irrelevant.

What attitudes within the university community promote this kind of irrelevance? I would like to mention two that I think have a lot to do with it. One is the doctrine of the worth of so-called "pure knowledge, knowledge for its own sake." You all know how the doctrine goes: pure knowledge is worthwhile regardless of whether or not it has any use, or any immediate use. This doctrine makes most sense, of course, in the basic sciences, for in the sciences, the discovery of knowledge often comes long before anyone has any knowledge of its usefulness. But I ask you to consider whether or not this doctrine makes any sense when applied elsewhere in the university community, in the humanities, social sciences, and the fine arts, for example.

The other doctrine is that of "publish or perish," the idea of the university professor as an original researcher, regardless of his field of learning. I ask you to consider

whether or not this doctrine does not breed the narrowness of interest that gives rise to studies or irrelevant events, obscure persons, and trivial knowledge.

How much of our university life is taken up by the research and teaching of such useless information? And can we afford to continue to waste the minds of our professors and scholars in this way when the world in which we live has so many urgent problems that need solutions? Isn't this practice a waste of great minds which might, if they turned their attention to the problems of our time, solve them?

Now I did not come here today to be just another critic of the university community, and I do not intend these remarks as criticisms, for I realize the complexity of the questions I have raised and recognize the enormous good that the American academic community has done for the quality of our life. Of course, I realize that research is important to the life of every professor--it may not even be possible to have good teaching without it. Certainly, no student would want a professor to stand before him who was not also constantly learning.

But I also believe that "publish or perish" is not a faultless doctrine, for it causes professors not only

to develop narrow interests but often also causes them to neglect their students and to view classroom teaching as a necessary evil. And I realize that the worth of pure knowledge has its defense; yet the overemphasis of both of these doctrines has perhaps brought us to the brink of educational disaster.

You might ask then why I raise these issues here tonight? The answer is that I see our nation confronted with problems that must be solved if our nation, as we have known it, is to survive and which can be solved only by you in the academic community. The problems I have touched upon cannot be solved by Boards of Trustees, state legislatures, the Congress, or the President. We live in a free society, a society that must be self regulating if it is to retain its free character. The day when by necessity boards of governors, state legislatures, or the federal government must dictate to the academic community will be the day when freedom on the campus will be lost, and the freedom of all American society will be lessened everywhere because of it. But that freedom will also be lost if the orderliness of our society degenerates into anarchy.

If the problems of crisis that our American civilization now faces are not solved, our society as we know it today may not survive, and if it does not survive,

the freedom of our institutions may very well be lost. What will become of the American university if that happens is anybody's guess.

If the academic community is to protect itself from this kind of uncertainty, then it must respond now and begin to get its house in order. You must find ways of balancing research and teaching, pure knowledge and its application. You must find ways of reintroducing discipline into the academic experience, of re-educating the American people in the legitimate goals and ideals of our society, and of reestablishing a cohesiveness within our society based upon mutual respect and sympathy among our people.

A recent defender of the American university has written that "the primary function of higher education is the quest for knowledge, wisdom, and vision, not the conquest of political power; that the university is not responsible for the existence of war, poverty, and other evils; and that the solution of these and allied problems lies in the hands of the democratic citizenry and not a privileged elite." [Sidney Hook]

I would like to suggest, however, that since the university is chiefly responsible for the

production of the leaders of our society, and completely responsible for the production of the teachers in our society, it must to some extent bear the responsibility for the attitudes, practices, and problems of our society, and that it cannot escape this responsibility by withdrawing into those ivory-towers of learning which are divorced from the realities of this life. It is obvious, I think, that the university today cannot limit itself to the discovery and dissemination of information or to the teaching of vocational techniques; it must to some extent be the moral and ideological conscience of our nation.

As a concerned citizen, I would hope and urge that you would devote your trained minds to solving these problems, for the good of our society as well as for the good of our colleges and universities. If these problems are not solved by you, I think colleges themselves will not only be the prime target of student unrest but perhaps also the target of political repression.

Needless to say, repression in any part of our society goes against the grain of those ideals our founding fathers blessed this nation with. I am sure that neither you nor I want to see this happen.

Although citizens everywhere must show a concern for the educational activities of our institutions of higher learning, you, the faculty, must take the responsibility for them. I urge you to take this responsibility now before it is too late, before our society disintegrates into anarchy or becomes petrified by repressiveness.