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GRADUATION AND COMMENCEMENT

INTRODUCTION

I am honored by the invitation to be present at your graduation and deliver the commencement address. To come home to the community in which I was born and reared -- as well as my ancestors on both sides of my family -- the community in which I have lived so long, and to be with people

that I love so well is an humbling experience. I was born here in the Neill's Creek neighborhood and spent most of my life here. But over the years it has been necessary now and then, both for financial and political reasons to dwell or travel in other parts of the world -- whether serving in the Armed Forces during two wars, living in Washington or traveling in Russia or the Far East as your Senator. But wherever I have gone, wherever my footsteps have wandered, I have always returned home -- home to this area

and to Neill's Creek Church.

Now, upon your graduation, I congratulate you. You and the thousands like you around this great country of ours, who are graduating this spring are, in my opinion, the best educated the world has ever produced.

This school, Harnett Central High, stands in a community where almost no schools stood before the turn of the century. Then young boys and girls in this State who lived even in the

most populous areas attended school only three months a year for that was all that was available.

To many young people in this area no public schools were available.

Today every boy and girl in this State and nation and in this community has access to a school for nine months a year all the way through high school.

This beautiful and magnificent physical plant provides dozens of air-conditioned classrooms, learning laboratories, drama rooms, athletic

facilities, shops and almost every available teaching tool.

In the memory of many here tonight, the school plant consisted of only a one-room framed building located at Pleasant Union or other nearby areas.

The teachers then quite often possessed little more training than they obtained in the same school. Your teachers are amongst the most learned in the nation. They hold

undergraduate and graduate degrees from many of
the leading colleges and universities in America.

This moment in your life is not only a time for retrospection and for introspection, but it is also a time for looking ahead. A commencement exercise is, as the term implies, a preparation for a new beginning. Most of you will have looked forward to this watershed in your life, finally leaving the world of presumed adolescence, and anxiously entering the world of adulthood, of full legal responsibility and full citizenship rights.

But let us pause for a moment and let us compare our expectations with the realities which will confront us.

The school, our home and our small town have been security for us, but this security will in many cases be exchanged with insecurity, the uncertainty of the new life. In the past, we could rely upon the daily counsel of our parents, our

teachers and our preachers, but you may soon be settling in a new environment where guidance, assistance and safety will not come automatically.

Our is an individualistic world where self-reliance and independence are the key words. It will be, whether we like it or not, a world of insecurity.

The uncertainty of employment:

The time has come for you to apply what you have learned and the very first reality which you will encounter is that the ideal employment may not be available. Many opportunities will require more than a high school diploma. An acceptable work offer may force you to move elsewhere. And any job will demand of you further training, perhaps evening school and

various apprenticeship schemes.

But the stark reality is that 17% of our teenagers are unemployed today and among black teenagers, the unemployment rate is almost 40%.

Our productivity rate is less than 2% a year and despite various governmental initiatives, our economy is not expected to recover quickly.

Consequently, employment insecurity will prevail

for some time.

The uncertainty of financial well-being.

Here again, your past life was one of relative security. Food, shelter and clothing were provided, schooling was free, many of you even have your own car. But now at the age of legal maturity, you are able to sign your own contracts, to enter into your own business arrangements and

-- you must pay for your own mistakes.

Inevitably, your expectation for an initial income must be minimal; although salaries have been increasing rapidly, the increases have been below the inflation rate which means a net loss in income. Prices, and not just gasoline, are sky-rocketing; and, if our current inflation rate persists throughout the year, it may equal 13%. Of course,

public assistance programs are available and tax relief is granted, but for a young and healthy wage earner, many of these programs are beyond his reach.

The uncertainty of the world situation:

Wherever you will be living, you cannot help but be affected by a rapidly changing world scene. The huge trade deficit will have an impact

on our production which means employment.

Protective tariffs can safeguard some industries,

but others will have to close by not being able to

compete with cheap imports. Foreign oil prices

will increase and so will our consumption. Refugees

will flow into this country and will compete for

jobs with the domestic labor force. A strained

economy will cause labor-management conflict

and further aggravate employment. And, finally, there is the physical insecurity of America, which demands of young and old to make a contribution of service.

But it is not my intention to draw a bleak picture of the future. What I want you to be is realistic and to regard the uncertainties of your personal independence as a challenge. And I am

here to assure you that you will not be alone. As parents, teachers and preachers, we can continue to provide understanding and encouragement. Yet there is something more important which we can offer you: a framework for stability and conditions for security.

The familiarity of tradition:

Some of you may want to reject the idea of tradition as being incompatible with the ideas of the young generation. But let us pause for a moment and look at its advantages. Wherever your employment will take you, English will be spoken. You will be kept informed by the newspapers and the radio and can continue to watch your favorite shows on television. In any town, there will be

the familiar cornerstore and the discotheque where young people will gather for socializing. You will be able to find the comfort of a local church and the recreational possibilities to which you are accustomed. In other words, wherever your future home may be, you will feel at home.

The certainty of our institutions:

Equal comfort will be derived from the knowledge that any of our towns will offer an institutional framework with which we are familiar. There will be public schools and parent-teacher associations, there will be playgrounds for children as well as boy scout and girl scout organizations for them to join. You will find a representative structure at the local and state levels and means

for you to participate in the political process. The judicial institutions will be guided by common law principles and our constitution.

The continuity of America:

What I am saying to you when I am stressing the elements of tradition and institutional custom is that regardless of the uncertainties ahead of

you, you will be living in America, with familiar rules, familiar people and familiar living conditions.

This will give us a measure of security difficult to find anywhere else in the world. For 200 years,

this nation has prospered along a moderate, evolutionary path, and any scholarly prediction will tell us that we can expect the same during

our lifetime. It is this security which we pass on

to you and not the hardships which your elders experienced. From now on, you will have to fight your own battles; but, even if they seem to be insurmountable to you, remember that we are still better off than any other people on earth.