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## **A Meaningful Commencement Address**

Remarks by Honorable Thomas M. Rees of California  
House of Representatives  
August 1, 1967

*Mr. Speaker, I would like to present to Congress the address by Mr. Michael S. Josephson, who was the graduate student valedictorian at the recent UCLA commencement in June. This statement is, I believe, an excellent analysis and demonstrates the need for greater participation of college graduates in the area of politics and government. The address follows:*

**Commencement Address by Michael S. Josephson  
Graduate Student Valedictorian  
UCLA Commencement  
June 14, 1967**

In delivering the commencement address to the 2,600 men and women who will officially receive advanced degrees today, I feel like a man trying to give Noah a lecture on the dangers of floods.

During six to ten years of college, one becomes tired of the traditional praises and platitudes of graduation speeches. We have already heard that we are among the world's intellectual elite, that we are the leaders of tomorrow and the hope of the future. Such proclamations, however, have been neither convincing nor encouraging.

The first thought, that we are part of the world's intellectual elite, is almost depressing. The idea that we are the hope of the future is definitely depressing.

If both of these statements are true, what does that mean for the future? If we are the smartest this world has, why don't we know how to solve the problems of poverty and civil rights? Why don't we know how to attain world peace? And if these questions seem only rhetorical, we must ask: If we can't provide these solutions, who can?

We have spent years educating ourselves to increase our abilities of judgment and understanding. We have distinguished ourselves in our society on the basis of these abilities. But ironically, this extensive training does more to hamper than to help our decision-making abilities.

The fewer the variables, the easier the decision. The intellectual, on the other hand, is burdened with knowledge of the inherent defects of people and society. He knows all the reasons why certain problems are insoluble – all the reasons why things can't be done. We know there are no panaceas and that *deus ex machina* hasn't worked since Sophocles.

Unfortunately, the cynicism that we invariably develop during our education often creates the illusion that nothing significant can ever be done. As a result, the cynical intellect does nothing – not because he knows too little but because he knows too much.

Yet the fact remains, if we do not solve the problems of our society, no matter how difficult, we leave the task to lesser minds and their simplistic solutions.

It is a tragedy that today so many bright and capable young people are only too eager to abdicate their positions as heirs apparent to a troubled world. They justify their attitude on two different grounds.

First is the idealist who realizes that his ideals can never be fully attained. He knows that any attempt to achieve them within our political system leads to compromise and failure. Rather than tarnish his ideals, this intellect drops out.

Second is the intellect who disassociates himself from the problems of the world by assuming the role of the pragmatist, deciding that since he can't change society, he might as well make the best of it. This intellect digs in.

I suggest that both of these approaches are selfish rationalizations that evade the obligations of education.

This country cannot afford the luxury of a self-indulgent intelligentsia, a silent intelligentsia.

The consequences of such silence are evident. Where was the voice of reason in the 1940s when this nation, overcome by paranoia, plucked Japanese-Americans from their homes and carted them off to internment camps? Where were the intellectuals? Where was the voice of reason in the early 1950s when Joe McCarthy turned our country into an arena for fear, suspicion, and persecution? And where is the voice of reason now that we have committed over 450,000 of our young men in an unjustifiable war?

The requirements of reason and the obligations of the educated extend beyond a duty to protest. Objection to an unreasonable policy is not enough. Affirmative alternatives must be posited.

The present Vietnam situation provides a case in point. It is undoubtedly valuable to dramatically demonstrate opposition to the present fruitless policy of the Administration, and I hope many of you will join in that endeavor after these ceremonies, but we should recognize

that the demand for an immediate, unconditional withdrawal from Vietnam is as shallow and deficient as in the hawkish policy of total annihilation. Neither position is feasible.

The intellectuals of this land must develop workable solutions or they surely will not be developed.

The burden of assuring that this nation is ruled by reason falls upon every person who has the ability to discern rational policies from irrational ones. No intellectual can avoid his responsibilities by hiding in some remote corner of the groves of Academe. One can drop out in a laboratory on a university campus as well as a pad in Haight-Ashbury.

At the very least, every one of you must demand more from a political candidate than an Ipana smile and an empty slogan. [**Ipana was a popular toothpaste at the time.**]

You must keep informed, you must question, you must probe. You must needle the candidates and force them to think beyond the basics to the subtle ramifications of their positions. You must demand more than simplistic solutions to serious problems.

If you fail, the result is clear: Our nation will be run by men like Sam Yorty, George Murphy, and Ronald Reagan. I don't think this country can long withstand the impact of such leadership. [**At the time of this speech, Sam Yorty was the Mayor of Los Angeles, George Murphy was a U.S. Senator from California, and Ronald Reagan was the governor of California who had just imposed tuition for the first time at University of California colleges.**]

Our system cannot tolerate illogical and inappropriate solutions to real problems. While we can endure the argument that there should be tuition in the University of California because the state needs the money and the students can afford to pay, we cannot tolerate an argument supporting tuition on the theory that it will punish undisciplined students and rid the university of undesirables.

The minimum responsibility of each member of the intelligentsia is to serve as watchdogs to prevent the effectiveness of such sophistry. The greater task, however, is to take an active part in the shaping of our society.

In January of 1961, a young and vibrant President ripped the cobwebs from political idealism. He articulated the issues of our time and pledged to confront them with vigor and tenacity. With the inauguration of John F. Kennedy, the nation was made to feel the potential power of a committed, concerned, and intelligent generation. With the inauguration of President Kennedy, the intellectuals were induced to channel their cynicism toward constructive ends, to discover solutions as well as problems.

When Kennedy was assassinated less than three years later, the whole world was moved with the realization of the mortality of youth. His death brought home, with brutal eloquence, the meaning of unfulfilled promise.

The shock of this event is something we will always have in common. It was made more dramatic by the transition from President Kennedy to President Johnson. While we could identify with Kennedy, whether we agreed with him or not, we feel alienated from Johnson. Where Kennedy's style and charisma commanded confidence, Johnson's approach and character breeds doubt and distrust.

As a result, there has been a tendency for intellectuals to withdraw from their active roles and resume their positions as critics. Their confidence was shaken by the vivid proof of their human frailty. It is absolutely essential, however, that all intellectuals recover from this violent blow.

We must not sulk and mourn the passing of an all-too-short era. The complexity of our world requires, more than ever before, the leadership and impetus of its intellectuals. The phrase "leaders of tomorrow" can have no application to any of us after today. Our time is now. The burden is ours.

Although we know the world will never be perfect, we know it can be better. Within our heads is the power to make it so. For the sake of all of us, use that power.