

Commencement Address of the Honorable John F. Kennedy (D., Mass.) at the
University of Notre Dame on January 29th, 1950

This is a happy day in my life. I am deeply honored in being admitted to the ranks of the men of Notre Dame.

I have cheered for old Notre Dame for most of my life, and so you can understand my feelings as I come for the first time to this great university dedicated to Our Lady of the Lake.

The University of Notre Dame, from its modest beginnings under Father Sorin, has risen steadily until now under the inspired leadership of Father Cavanaugh, it occupies a unique position in the educational pattern of this country.

You men who are graduating today carry the burden of exceptional responsibilities. You bear the responsibility that all college graduates must bear to those who taught them.

They will be satisfied and will feel repaid, I am sure, if you live as responsible Catholic men.

Your second responsibility can best be understood by recognizing the purposes for which Notre Dame was founded.

The need for educated Catholics has always been a pressing one, and they are needed even more now in these years of decision. All of those who contributed toward building this great university have a claim on you.

I am quite sure that you are willing to accept their claims on you, for Notre Dame has always placed great emphasis on a high scale of personal obligation.

With this ceremony today you are going to embark on a new life. You will go in every direction, bound together by friendship, your remembrance of your life at Notre Dame, and the doctrines that you were taught here.

The basic purpose of every Catholic college is to prepare young men and women for eternal residence in the City of God. But Catholic colleges likewise realize that they have a fundamental duty to prepare their students for life in the City of Man.

It is of your obligations to the City of Man that I would speak today.

It is, of course, axiomatic that the true function of the private university is to develop leaders for a democratic society. Certainly every educated Catholic must recognize an obligation of the most serious sort to participate — to contribute.

There are many areas to which you can bring your services, but I am concerned today with only one — the vast field of activity open to men in present day public life.

As Pope Pius XII has said, “Direct action is indispensable if we do not want sane doctrines and solid convictions to remain, if not entirely of academic interest, at least of little practical consequence.”

Certainly, without leaders of deep intellectual and moral capacity the bountiful resources of our nation will be frittered away in frustrated attempts to solve conflicts both within and without our borders.

Certainly, wherever you go, you are critically needed. The problems that require your help are many.

Never before in our history has there been a greater need for men of integrity and courage in public service. Never before in our history has there been a greater need for the people to take up willingly the responsibility for free government.

As the problems that face us have become more complex, as the function of government has become enlarged, there has been a corresponding assumption of authority by the State. It is obvious from the history of the past 20 years that whether we like it or not — whether we be

Republicans or Democrats — the government will continue to play an increasingly large part in our lives.

The theme of today — the scarlet thread that runs throughout the thoughts and actions of people all over the world — is one of resignation of major problems into the all-absorbing hands of the great leviathan — the State. This trend is not divisible — we in the United States suffer from it, if less intensely.

It is, therefore, vital that we become concerned with maintaining the authority of the people, of the individual, over the State.

The assurance must be given that “Every man shall be protected in doing what he believes — against the influence of authority and majorities, of custom and opinion”.

Charles Beard, the historian, has pointed out that the American Revolution rested on three premises: that each individual is endowed by God with certain unalienable rights, that governments are instituted to protect these rights, and that when a government takes these rights away, the people must revolt. This is precisely the philosophy which you have been taught at Notre Dame. You have been taught that each individual has an immortal soul, composed of an intellect which can know truth and a will which is free. Because of this every Catholic must believe in the essential dignity of the human personality on which any democracy must rest. Believing this, Catholics can never adhere to any political theory which holds that the State is a separate, distinct organization to which allegiance must be paid rather than a representative institution which derives its powers from the consent of the governed.

In addition, a Catholic’s dual allegiance to the Kingdom of God on the one hand prohibits unquestioning obedience on the other to the State as an organic unit.

We are faced on this cold Sunday afternoon with a world torn by devastation and struggle. We cling precariously to a cold peace, while all about we can hear the muffled drums of war. The battle is on all fronts. Even words like “freedom” and “democracy” have been encaptured and are enslaved by the enemy.

Even here in America we are face to face with possible domestic disaster. A cloud on the horizon, no bigger than a man’s hand — growing unemployment — with the possibility ever present that it may foredoom a collapse — is of vital concern.

As Peter Drucker wrote recently in Harper’s Magazine: “Prevention of depression and chronic unemployment has become an absolute necessity for any industrialized society”.

The ever expanding power of the federal government, the absorption of many of the functions that states and cities once considered to be responsibilities of their own, must now be a source of concern to all those who believe as did the great patriot, Henry Grattan that: “Control over local affairs is the essence of liberty”.

The failure to use with vigor the privilege of the secret ballot reflects a general uninterest in the affairs of government, and could have serious consequences in times of crises.

The endless variety of our economic and political problems should serve as a magnet in drawing trained citizens to the service of their community, state and nation.

The ever expanding need for men and women of integrity and competence in our political life should strike a responsive chord in educated men and women who have affection for their country.

Certainly the never ending search for peace, the ceaseless waging of the Cold War, requires a dogged persistence and determination of the highest order against an enemy whose

actions fit perfectly the dictum of Lord Acton: “Power tends to corrupt — and absolute power corrupts absolutely”.

These are only some of the problems that need to be faced. Certainly you as educated Catholics, are committed to a deep searching analysis of them. For the philosophy that you have been taught here at Notre Dame is needed in the solution of the problems we face, for it is upon that philosophy the American tradition is based.

I have described briefly some of the major problems that we face. I have related briefly the need for men in government whose actions are based on sound philosophical ground.

It should be obvious that with the decisions of government becoming increasingly more important in our lives, with the issue of war and peace hanging in the balance — the sombre question indeed of our survival at stake — each man among you can afford, in some degree at least, to answer the call to service.

I do not mean by that that you should all embark on careers in the executive or legislative branch of our government. But I do mean that you are obligated to participate in, to contribute to the national life at all levels.

In your community, your state and in your national government, widespread opportunities are before you. Many of you, without doubt, are potential candidates for political office. Let that potential become a reality!

Those among you who, because of temperament or other reasons, would not aspire to public office, can certainly be of help to responsible candidates in your own home town. Remember too, that your national government does not require the services of administrators and lawyers alone. Those of you who possess technical tendencies and abilities, whether it be in the

fields of, for example, chemistry, accounting, cartography, your talents can contribute materially to efficient and worthwhile government.

That is certainly the major challenge that any graduate of any university this year must face.

High on the wall of the House of Representatives in Washington, so that everyone can see, are written words we should remember. They were from a speech by a distinguished Senator from my native state of Massachusetts — Daniel Webster: “Let us develop the resources of our land, call forth its powers, build up its institutions, and promote all its great interests and see whether we also in our day and generation may not perform something worthy to be remembered.”