

(Address given by the Reverend Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C., President,
University of Notre Dame, at the Alumni Federation of Columbia University
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THE MODERN ALUMNUS

The alumni are the butt of an inordinate number of academic jokes, and fare no better in the rather sparse literature that depicts life in the groves of academe. Perhaps this caricaturish prototype of the alumnus did really exist in some vague yesteryear - in the day of the racoon coat, the hip flask and the really rugged individualist. No doubt, he still exists today as rare specimen, but this hardly justifies the constant image that still persists of the alumnus in our day.

What bothers me most is that the alumnus is mostly portrayed as a stupid type, which is hardly a compliment to the mother institutions that educated him or her. The alumnus is also portrayed most often as one completely out of touch with those realities about which one might expect him to be most enlightened: be they intellectual concerns, current issues, the high aspirations of his alma mater, the values most to be cherished in modern life. He is generally depicted as a wealthy individual with no concept of the obligations of wealth, but more concerned with wealth's inherent power, which he is expected to wield for the wrong purposes, unless his alma mater by some shrewd chicanery tricks him into doing some academic

good almost without his knowing what he is doing. Nor is all this merely an American phenomenon. It even gains greater credence in the portrayal of life at Cambridge in one of the popular novels of C. P. Snow.

Personally, I believe that it is high time to lay this myth to rest. Our alumni are the finest personal projection of what our universities are doing, and the most cogent reason for their important place among the many other institutions in our land. The modern alumnus is anything but a perpetual sophomore. If he were not, we should close our doors.

If you agree with me, I trust you will not object if I address you today regarding some of the larger issues that should command your attention as intelligent and well-educated members of alumni federation of this great University. We often boast that the fruits of a good education are these: the critical mind, the discerning spirit, the higher values, the sense of commitment, dedication and service. I assume that these are legitimate components of a more adequate modern alumnus type, closer to the truth of the matter than the caricature mentioned earlier.

What are the larger issues that should concern the modern alumnus? May I generalize by saying that they are the same issues that should concern any intelligent and responsible member of our society. They are issues amenable to solution by intelligence and responsible action, issues that certainly cannot be solved by blind emotion, automatic reaction, or inertia.

Anyone in this room could compile an extensive list of such issues, and this would be an enjoyable enterprise, especially if we could do it together. However, there are other activities on the agenda for this day, so I shall exercise my prerogative as speaker to list three concerns that to me seem eminently worthy of brief discussion.

These are the three I have chosen: the quality of life in America today, Civil Rights and equal opportunity, and, finally, America and the world. Any one of these would merit a full length speech, but I assure you that both from limitations of time and my own personal limitations, I shall only open a few windows, ask a few questions, and retire from the field leaving ample work for each of you, for thought and action.

First, the quality of life in America today. Is it good or bad? Is it getting better or worse? I begin with this issue because, as Plato once said, if you wish to reform the world, you had best start with yourself. How are we doing? At times, I think badly. I recall one bad Sunday last June when I was en route to the Commencement at the University of Rhode Island. First, the weather was bad so that the airplane could not fly beyond New York. I went to the 125th Street Station to take the train. The Station was littered. The clerk was surly and snarled when I asked him a simple question. The coach was pre-World War I vintage, it seemed, and possibly without cleaning since those distant years. I had missed dinner so I bought a sandwich. It was overpriced and under-made with stale bread and bad meat, very thinly sliced. The rest room was a swamp. As I rode along, I was reading Cornell's Clinton Rossiter on the Aims of America. He had some doubts, as I recall, about our clarity of purpose. All I could think was: He would have attained certainty if he were on this trip. We may be the most affluent, the most powerful of all nations, but what a way to run a railroad!

Well, this doesn't really answer the question, because we do not live on railroads, thank God, but what of the larger issues. What

kind of books do most of our people read? What is the general level of conversation? How much tolerance do we have for insane TV programs? What is the general level of values: in business, in marriage and family life, in recreation, in education, in politics, in professional life? Are we really more interested in making money or achieving status at any cost than in realizing some meaningful sense of justice, charity, understanding, wisdom or compassion in our lives? I cannot answer these questions, except for myself, and if Plato was right, that is the best place for the initial answer. To go beyond and answer on a national scale is a difficult, if not impossible quest, yet any intelligent and responsible citizen or alumnus of today must give it a try. For quality of life ultimately depends upon the quality of persons, and if persons generally lose a zest for excellence of performance in whatever they do, then a nation is in trouble, indeed, if Toynbee is right, a nation is on the way out. John Gardner put it succinctly when he said that if our plumbers and our philosophers do not cherish excellence, then neither our pipes nor our arguments will hold water.

Maybe we should begin by realizing that quality for persons is a spiritual rather than a material equation. Communications may be excellent, but what is being said really is the important issue. Fine buildings are an achievement, but the real achievement is what goes on in them. Transportation has reached a zenith in speed, but where are we hurrying and what do we do when we get there. If we need pep pills to excite us, and tranquilizers to calm us, modern chemistry has made these crutches possible, yet there is still a potent chemistry of dedicated service, true love, and the passion for justice that allow man or woman to walk, run and almost fly without artificial crutches.

When matter gets out beyond the spirit, the externals of life may glitter and impress, but the glory may be only that of a monument to inner mediocrity, inanity or sham.

You can read the signs for yourself: never more words with less meaning, never more power with less direction, never more pleasure with less satisfaction, never more seeking with less finding, never more wealth with less richness of spirit, meaning, or true security that spells

peace and inner confidence. If these are discernible trends, then only educated, intelligent, and responsible people (another word for alumni) can reverse the trends and ransom our times and our nation. ✓

So much for quality of life today. I think it is an important issue that universities should qualify its alumni to confront. How you pass the test personally is of ultimate importance in any assessment of what your university expects of you in confidence and hope.

Civil Rights is my second issue. In a sense, it is subsidiary to the first issue and introductory to the third issue of America and the world. In our response to this issue, we demonstrate to ourselves and to the world that we do or do not believe in the inner dignity of each human person as a child of God endowed with inalienable rights, worthy of our deepest respect. Here is the test case that no one can avoid. /

In the present deep conflict that divides the world, one might personally adopt a variety of stances. One may say that Communism is the greatest of evils, and then look for Communists under every bush, to exterminate them when suspected or found. But this avoids the true issue which again is of a deeper, spiritual dimension. Why is Communism evil? Mainly, I believe, because it denies God and degrades man. If this

is so, then we who oppose it on a worldwide front should have some clearly definable notions about God, and about the nature and destiny of man as a child of God. Without such a spiritual conviction, there are no inalienable human rights, no real human dignity, no immortal destiny for man, and we are helpless, intellectually and spiritually, in the face of a zealous and militant philosophy that knows what it believes and practices what it preaches.

What I am saying here is that the true crisis of our day is not what the Communists are doing in Cuba or Laos, but what we are doing at home. We do little good combating Communism on foreign and distant fronts if we erode at home those principles of human dignity and human rights that most truly give us our strongest ideological stance vis-a-vis the Communist world menace. We are presently losing most of our domestic battles for human rights in New Orleans, Birmingham, and Montgomery. Those who worry so much about Communistic subversion at home might well give equal energy to the task of making democracy come true here for all Americans. The most dangerous subversion for America is that which denies in practice here at home, the human dignity, liberty and opportunity that we profess in our conflicts with Communism abroad.

Is there any positive, simple program that insures our being true to ourselves and to America in this important issue? I believe so, and I also believe that it needs to be implemented everywhere in America, not just in the South. The program I suggest for mature, intelligent, and responsible alumni is as simple as the special genius of America: equal respect and equal opportunity for all. As we say in baseball, everyone may not hit a home run, but everyone gets a chance at bat.

Where would the problem of civil rights be if every American were given a respectful and equal opportunity to vote and to hold any political position, equal opportunity to be educated to the fullness of his intelligence, motivation, and ability, equal opportunity to work and to be advanced on the basis of talent, education, and performance, and, finally, equal opportunity to live where his heart desires and his means permit. This would not mean a complete end to hatred, to personal prejudice, to crude or subtle inhumanity. But if every alumnus of every good university believed and practiced this program as a matter of deep personal conviction, America would be much closer to the dream of our Declaration of Independence, our

Constitution, and our Bill of Rights. I insist that we should do this because it is right, and any other action is both wrong and hypocritical. I add that a deepened moral fiber at home would greatly strengthen our cause abroad, which must seem both incomprehensible and ridiculous in view of recent headlines: freedom fighters backed by American arms in Latin America, Asia, and Africa, while American arms stand idly by watching American freedom riders beaten bloodily by Americans in Alabama.

This brings us rather pointedly to my third issue: America and the world. First, may I venture the view that while intelligent and responsible Americans are and should be interested in the world as never before in our history, the issue here is not that we should by some divine right become saviors of all the world. Witness a few facts: our performance has not been exactly stellar to date, excepting where money was joined to nature, civilized and existing human talents, as in the Marshall Plan. But the rest of the world is not Western Europe. In Latin America, which I have visited twice in the last nine months, I am appalled at the result of our bungling efforts. In Africa, which I have seen from top to bottom, we

have hardly begun, and at times I am aghast to think what will happen when we really get started with the advance guard of coca-cola, chewing gum and guns. This may all sound very negative, but I do want to present a positive thesis. The universities, under the perennial and enlightened leadership of your own very talented President, Dr. Grayson Kirk, are becoming increasingly involved in the world, in a reflective, studious, educative, and often imaginative manner. Somehow there must be a wedding between the universities' intelligence and the governmental programs abroad. This, I take it, can only come to pass in large and most fruitful measure when our more intelligent, more educated, and more responsible alumni are willing to sacrifice a few years of their lives to combat man's ancient enemies of ignorance, hunger, grinding squalor and hopelessness which are the daily lot of millions of human beings around the world. The answer to these problems is not money, as much as men. Not the mediocre, unimaginative, arrogant and preposterous men who look upon themselves as the saviors of mankind by promoting some kind of third-rate American dream, but compassionate, dedicated, hard-working, humble men and women who can learn as well as teach, serve as well as preside. If alumni

can fulfill such a role in our day, they will truly enrich the world as well as themselves.

Here then are three problems, three among many that might well attract your reflective thought and dedicated action: the quality of life in America, civil rights and equal opportunity, America and the world. To the extent that these and the other burning issues of our day command the attention of the good human qualities you have learned here at Columbia, to that extent Columbia may measure its pride in you, its alumni.