

FEDERAL WORKS AGENCY
WORK PROJECTS ADMINISTRATION



For Release to Morning Newspapers
Friday, June 20, 1941

"THE SECRET WEAPON"

The following address is for delivery by Mrs. Florence Kerr, Assistant Commissioner, Work Projects Administration, at the Commencement Exercises of the Class of June 1941, Hunter College of the City of New York, at 8:00 p.m., Thursday, June 19, 1941:

This commencement season falls within a period of counter-revolution; a period unlike any other you or I have known. We can look backward now and trace the approach of the storm. But when those thunderheads first appeared against the sun, they seemed so unreal and so theatrical that we did not take them seriously. As recently as two years ago, few Americans really expected an all-out attack upon the foundation structure of western institutions.

But at the moment, as we know too well, a large part of the world is in rebellion; not only against the political forms upon which western governments have been built but also against the cultural disciplines by which generations of western peoples have lived.

As you wait to receive your degrees, it would be strange if you did not think long thoughts about the anomalies of this commencement. You have spent three-fourths or more of your lives in a special preparation for a special kind of world. Of course no one of us considered western civilization perfect; and we have spent hours and even years

analyzing it and marking certain points for change. But Hunter College was founded, in part at least, to defend and to help define the pattern issuing from the liberal movements of the past two-hundred years. The fact that you are here is evidence that in the main you have taken this pattern for granted and have placed its primary values above the battle. But at the end of this period of preparation you find those values within the battle. You prepared for co-operative and creative work. You find humanity divided and civilization fighting against itself.

But it would be a sad disservice were I to encourage you to feel sorry for yourselves. Of all possible attitudes, self-pity is the least useful and the least rational. It issues in resignation or in reactions that deny the intellectual techniques Hunter College has given you. I think you know that mature life on any level and in any period is not an idle drift of untroubled circumstance. The historic disciplines of which you are the heirs were not built by diletantes; nor were they defended by summer soldiers. If this inheritance is as great as we believe it is, you can not be sorry that part of its defense has fallen to you. The dead-sea fruits of self-pity are not your special dangers.

At the risk of over-simplified and obvious statements, we can name the opposing divisions into which the world has fallen.

Each rests upon an assertion as old as human history. Each has been philosophically defended. Each, for different reasons, has delivered less power at the social drawbar than its apologists have promised.

These opponents are, of course, free labor and forced labor.

You and I are on the side of free labor. But we must realize that our side is in the minority. Persons who should know the facts tell us that, as lines are now being drawn, the populations within the orbit of forced labor outnumber the free peoples of the world by a ratio of two to one.

Political slavery and chattel slavery are not identical, but they do have certain factors in common.

The old slave empires lived long; and in the sweep of human history bondage seems to have been the rule and freedom the exception. The weight of precedent is upon the side of subject societies. This need not trouble us too much; but it is a reminder that freedom, either as an ideal or as a fact, can not be taken for granted.

A few moments ago I made the statement that neither forced nor free labor has delivered as much power at the social drawbar as its proponents have promised.

Forced labor rests upon the assertion that people are unequal; that inferior persons have no social rights; that governing power belongs to those who can hold and use it; that strong leadership makes a strong nation.

The government of forced labor is a professional matter, with pride in its professional strength. But it has to be a repressive process, under which few creative powers are developed among the people

governed. This effect upon the people is an effect and not a cause; for the destroying force of chattel slavery strikes first not at the slave but at the master. Abraham Lincoln stated part of the case against slave society when he said that no man is wise and good enough to govern another man without that other's own consent. The remainder of the indictment is that any qualities of wisdom and goodness the masters may once have had are progressively lowered by the functions native to the masters' role. A slave society breaks first at the point of its supposed strength. It breaks at the top.

Free labor, too, has its philosophical background; found in a principle announced in the Mediterranean world some three-thousand years ago. This principle, often called the Great Tradition, asserted the supreme value of individual human life. It was stated first in theological terms; that life has high attributes because it is born of divine life. Whether or not we accept that special explanation, the Great Tradition holds its old pragmatic place. When society defends and elevates the dignity of human personality, civilization is high. When it debases human values, civilization is low.

Forced labor begins with professional group strength at the top. But its creative power is lowered by its own repressive methods. Free labor begins with amateur, individual strength at the bottom. But this strength is dissipated unless, by free processes, it is drawn into a pattern of national unity.

If free people are to have a working pattern of national life, they must follow a guidance that does not change with changing

leadership. They find this guidance in principles. We sometimes call these principles constitutional rights; but they are older than the Constitution. They include the landmarks of the historic cultures from which western institutions have been drawn; the Greek tradition of discoverable truth, the Roman tradition of natural and administrative law, the religious tradition of the value of human life.

We may say that a principle, once correctly stated, does not change. But it is only a glittering generality until it is correctly applied to the going pattern of social life. The principle may not change, but the pattern of social life changes continually; hence the application must be something of a tensor formula, remaining true to the constant principle but changing to meet the inconstant pattern. If it fails in either contact, the flow of creative social power is interrupted.

Perhaps I can illustrate this fairly abstract statement.

The counter-revolution now in progress has not been created wholly by the will of a self-nominated master race. It has been produced in part by changes in the world-wide social pattern; changes brought about by technology, transportation, specialization, interchange of goods and services and by a hundred other factors. Old political and economic watertight compartments, suited to an earlier day, do not fit this newer pattern.

When counter-revolutionists propose to open these compartments and to remove these obstacles, they indicate an understanding of this pattern. They have done things that, measured against a different

political purpose, would be admirable. They have done much for their own working people. Through youth movements and by other means they have raised the health and strength levels. Through industrial organization they have eliminated waste, inefficiency and cross-purposes. They have restudied finance, utilized pure science, raised management to high levels.

But this efficiency must be judged in broader terms of purpose and effect. While opening frontiers to the shipment of goods, it has closed frontiers to men and to the human spirit. It declares that one ruling class is God, and God is one ruling class. This Hegelian philosophy has destroyed all the old human ties and all the old common standards of religion and of behavior. Myths of racial superiority are used to create an Axis unity by introducing nihilism and destruction into Europe as a whole and into the world. This Axis efficiency must be measured in terms of terror, starvation and broken spirits in defeated nations. It must be judged by concentration camps that have been Golgothas of crucifixion for helpless and hated peoples.

In a narrow sense the counter-revolutionists know the pattern of the present. But they denounce the abiding verities of the past. When they pour contempt upon principles of liberty and when they jettison the painfully won knowledge of the human spirit, they no longer stand in the present. They have turned back the clock to the ancient horrors of Nineveh and Tyre.

Free peoples respect principles of liberty and of human verities. Their difficulty lies in a daily, rational application of

these verities in practical living. Too often they hold that it is enough merely to proclaim these great principles. But when they neglect to renew and to reapply their principles to the going pattern of life, they simply stop the clock of free progress while time marches on.

Counter-revolutionists in their own ghastly ways see and deal with the current pattern. Free peoples loudly assert inherited principles. But these half-measures simply will not do. Privilege without moral responsibility becomes a racket. Knowledge that does not issue in a living pattern of conduct becomes a rock of offense. Unless principle and pattern are rationally and morally joined, the flow of creative social power is stopped.

If you tell me that liberty is a moral value and beyond argument, I shall agree. But too many people make the strange assertion that if liberty is beyond argument it needs no human underwriting. We know that electric power does not flow from a distant generator to the lights in this hall without a transmission cable. Neither does the abstract principle of liberty suffuse the pattern of life with value unless it, too, is transmitted by rational understanding and by moral attitudes.

As educated young women, heirs to the culture of the ages, you have a special responsibility. All of us, of every class and group, have the duty of weaving daily the working garments of freedom. Yours is the added obligation of weaving into these garments the crimson threads of the great human verities spun for us by saints and heroes, sages and philosophers; the master craftsmen of the laboring years.

Some months ago it was my fortune to hear Lord Halifax make an informal speech, in which he said in effect that as disasters multiply and as material possessions grow less, there is forged a secret weapon; the spiritual unity of the British people.

We accept the old adage that in unity there is strength; and I hope you agree that upon the formal side this unity is composed of principles articulated with social practices. We can not hope too much from a unity woven only of fear and of passion. That unity is the unity of the Gadarene swine which, possessed of devils, rushed violently down a steep place into the sea. The British unity, forged by danger and disaster, is not forged of danger and disaster. It is the unity of a common purpose, a common will, a common body of knowledge, a common faith.

We can not take free unity for granted. We dare not look upon it as a sentimental formula. It must reach all the way back to principles of free life and all the way forward to practices of free life.

But as we make our approach, suppose for the moment we accept the principles and look at a few quite simple and even commonplace personal items from which the house of unity must be built.

Time and again I have seen health clinics change whole groups of dispirited candidates for charity into self-supporting, self-respecting workers. Time and again teachers have told me that hot school lunches have raised standards of class-room work and have reduced disciplinary problems to a minimum. Adult education has widened horizons; sewing

rooms have taught mothers the skill and have inspired in them the pride to clothe their own children not only against the cold but also against the inferiority complexes children feel so keenly; bookmobiles have brought a new world to the isolated; music has added another dimension to life.

If I mention projects with which I have been associated, it is because I know them and have seen their results. The important function of these undertakings lies in opening ways people can travel on their own power. With opportunity and with some guidance, human morale creates itself.

What I shall say of the Work Projects Administration with which I have been associated is not for the purpose of defending or even explaining that agency. It is for the purpose of illustrating this matter of morale which must be at the heart of national unity.

When congress created the WPA, no responsible person looked upon it as a desirable part of a permanent economy. No one does now. It was created to meet an emergency; and if there has been some satire about an "emergency" that continued for years, it is but fair that the reason for this continuance be understood.

Traditional business and industrial policies took form in the period when the natural wealth in the public domain was being exploited and utilized. The transfer of this wealth from public to private ownership poured a huge tide of unearned purchasing power into American markets; adding a margin not produced by the operation of business, itself. This great surplus paid the costs of business

expansion, experiments, mistakes and waste. It may have helped standardize wasteful methods; for, with this unearned surplus pouring into the markets, less than efficient methods could be continued without bringing business to bankruptcy. Industrialists could take markets for granted and center upon production and competition.

But when the wealth of the domain had been transferred to private ownership and fully capitalized, this reserve cushion was gone. Markets could no longer be taken for granted in the old way. Business, if it were to operate at full volume, must meet a new problem. It must not only supply goods but must also take a larger responsibility in creating a diffused buying power. The economic pattern had changed. But business methods did not, and perhaps could not, change as rapidly as the economic pattern changed. As diffused buying power decreased, markets declined. With smaller markets to supply, millions of workers found themselves unemployed.

It should be stated, for the record, that the WPA had two basic purposes; first, to offer employment and wages to those whom private industry did not hire and, second, by putting out these millions of dollars in diffused purchasing power, to support the markets and to give private industry additional time in which to adjust its own methods to the facts of current economic life. The WPA was created to deal with the results of a crisis. The crisis itself lay within business and industry; and in that field the WPA was given neither authority nor responsibility.

Congress gave the WPA responsibilities and legal limitations in relation to the unemployed. The agency was to save these people from starvation; preserve and increase their morale; salvage for the public the values latent in their unused labor; maintain their marketable skills so that if the opportunity were created by private industry they could return to private employment. Workers who came to us included a certain number of trained and capable men and women. They included also the elderly, the handicapped and those without skills.

The agency at once met its primary obligation of getting wages to needy people. As fast as the personal limitations of the workers and the legal limitations of the agency permitted, it approached efficient production.

Meanwhile certain people, feeling that the need for the agency was an indictment of the American way, chose to visit a cruel and fairly stupid resentment not upon the failure of industrial management to keep abreast of the changing economic pattern, but upon the victims of that failure. You know as well as I that WPA workers have been showered with morale-destroying epithets of which "shovel leaner" is comparatively mild. Several corporations adopted the astounding policy of refusing to hire any person, no matter how able and well equipped, who had ever been on the WPA rolls. The specious reason given was the assertion that a worker who had once been on the rolls was never after a good worker.

But the matter of efficiency is aside from the point I have in mind. I call your attention to another fact. These workers were

pushed out of organized industry; the industry that has a virtual monopoly of tools and materials of production. They were detached and left adrift. They were made the targets of personal attacks whose destroying cruelty I must believe was thoughtless and not deliberate. But even after these experiences, the workers have not responded to their tormentors in kind.

They have accepted their small opportunities. They have reacted as American workmen react; have developed leadership and inventiveness in their limited spheres; have shown the pride all workmen show when their gangs swing into the rhythm of production.

If I have a special interest in any one sector of the agency's work it is the sector of the woman worker. For single-minded devotion and self-discipline, I would undertake to match the morale of any business or public leader with like qualities among women on the WPA rolls.

Many had never worked for wages until bereavements made them the supporters of their families. Few had technical skills. But a young widow, say, with the haunting picture of grandmother and the babies dependent upon those little checks, learns and stays by what to her is often a terrifying job. As she timidly faces for the first time a raging dragon of a power sewing machine geared at factory speed, no Saint George ever choked back his fears with a steelier will; and if this is not morale I do not know the meaning of words. Her lasting dread is not of weariness or monotony or vanishing youth or the pitiful expedients of the poor. It is the fear that "they", some portentous, remote, indefeasible "they", may close down the sewing room. She

prays for work; prays with mind and heart and laboring fingers. And this, young women, is American home defense in its most immediate and heroic aspects.

Without these personal qualities of will and purpose and without this readiness to sacrifice for that which is larger than oneself, there is no such thing as building a living national unity.

But even these high, individual qualities, standing alone, are not enough. They must be articulated and focused; given cleared ways; crystallized by social policies; guided by the great landmarks of liberty into a national pattern.

You are a peculiarly responsible group. It may be that on your long journey to this hall you, too, have met inordinate difficulties. But the fact that you have arrived marks you as privileged persons to whom much has been given. Much, in the nature of things, is expected of you. It is the call that comes to the surgeon, the engineer, the navigator; the call to use for society your special training and your special abilities. If I could do so, I would give you a talisman against the college graduate's most insidious danger; the danger that education may make you merely articulate without adding the gifts of wisdom, understanding and moral responsibility.

Social changes are in the air. It will make much difference who wins the military phases of this war. But because it is a war, with war's inescapable upheavals, we may be certain that social changes will follow.

America is not afraid of changed patterns. But America asks and has the right to ask that any change shall pass two tests. The first is the test of working efficiency at society's production bench. The second is the test of personal, social and spiritual freedom for you and me and all of us. We can support no established technique, no matter how familiar and how long established, that fails to pass these tests. We want no change, no matter how fascinating the prospectus, whose feet take hold upon the downward spiral to the hopeless hells of human bondage.

Thoughtful persons are working over the form and direction of these changes to come. You have been thinking of them. I hope you have been thinking boldly and honestly and positively. You can not meet and defeat an affirmation, not even of a monstrous perfidy, with a mere denial. You must meet and defeat it with an honest and positive affirmation.

While London was being bombed nightly, Mr. Geoffrey Crowther, editor of the Economist, dared to think of the post-war period. He declared that, if and when a military victory were won, peace could not be established without an affirmation that would place democratic freedom and democratic processes in advance of their competitors as a way of life.

Political rights of the eighteenth century were crystallized rather than created by the events of that time. Most of these rights were already known; but they needed to be codified and co-ordinated.

The Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights performed this service for Americans.

The time seems to have come for a Bill of Economic Rights. While I would not presume to outline such a document in detail, it seems reasonable that it should include the right to work, the right to sufficient food, clothing and shelter, the right to education and health, the right of children to live without bringing to their families the burdens and despairs of poverty.

Many of these rights, too, have been recognized; but they are waiting to be codified and co-ordinated. Rights always carry co-ordinate duties; so a Bill of Minimum Economic Rights should be accompanied by a Bill of Minimum Economic Duties. These are the two faces of the medal; the duties of society, the duties of the citizen.

You and I will not be asked to prepare this bill of rights and duties; but we shall be asked to witness for it.

This crisis in national unity is a call to service; but it is a conditioned call. It is conditioned, first, upon an unforced sympathy on your part; an understanding of simple and lowly people and their great human potentials, the people who are so much of America. It is conditioned, second, upon an honest, working knowledge of the historic cultures from which American institutions have been drawn; the cultures which are not parlor tricks but which are the refined ore from the living crucible of the ages.

The great jurist, Oliver Wendell Holmes, once made the astonishing statement that his long service in the Supreme Court had brought him to hate the word "justice"! He explained this seeming heresy by saying that the Supreme Court is a court of law whose decisions must rest upon constitutional and statute law and judicial precedents. When an attorney before the court began a passionate plea for justice, it was clear he had avoided the hard, primary work of preparing his case in terms of law and was trying to win by tearing a passion to tatters.

When you respond to the call to serve American unity, as I believe you will respond, you can not discharge your task merely in terms of passion. Yours will be hard and anxious work among the laws and precedents both of human nature and of human culture. So I charge you, by the life and hope of America, that you continue to take your education and its implications seriously.

There is a high survival value in altruism. But it is high, and it survives and is valuable only as it holds with one hand to proven verities and with the other to homely, human, sacrificial ways of life.

In his great biography of Abraham Lincoln, Mr. Carl Sandburg pays a poet's tribute to the Second Inaugural. He lingers over those "delicately shaded passages" in which this tall prophet of the American dream "wept over the cost of doing by violence what might have been done by reason."

It is our hope, yours and mine, that America, with an incandescent will, may forge the secret weapon upon the anvil of reason. Our heroic neighbors across the seas have forged it in sweat and blood and tears. We may perchance be spared the blood and tears. But forge the weapon we must if this prophesy of the American dream is to live among us.

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