

*Princeton Class of 1954*



*Address by*

ADLAI E. STEVENSON, '22

*at the Senior Class Banquet*

*Monday, March 22, 1954*



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*An address by the Hon. Adlai E. Stevenson '22 to the Princeton Class of 1954, March 22, 1954, upon the occasion of the Senior Class Banquet.*

I have a number of preliminary things I should like to say. In the first place, I am informed that this senior class banquet is being held at the expense of your accumulated reserves. This is a very perilous thing that you are doing by inviting me here because certainly within a few hours the Republicans will ask for equivalent time.

I was delighted to witness a moment ago your emphatic approval of my program for Princeton some thirty-two years ago—unlimited cuts, non-compulsory Chapel, and student firing of the Dean. I have always considered almost from infancy that it was wise in politics to have—shall we say—a popular program. The trouble is that when I went into politics, it appears that I changed my views.

I wonder, President Dodds, if you would like to be excused now. Leave me alone with these young gentlemen. It is really a very inhibiting circumstance to find myself sitting at the wrong side of the President of Princeton, my old and esteemed friend. I have heard him speak many times. I have always found what I have heard both enlightening and profitable. I am afraid there will be no reciprocity tonight. I've been at a loss as to what to say to you, and having just read over what I have prepared rather hastily, I have concluded that I have resolved my uncertainty by saying nothing. This will take me approximately forty minutes.

Some one asked me today when I was walking about the campus why I was here, in view of the fact that I had declined or been unable to come on numerous previous occasions when the University or groups were good enough to invite me. I explained that I had come this time only because I had wanted to come and that I need not have an excuse to come. I think it was perhaps an unwise and intemperate thing to do, and had I continued in my earlier resolve, would be better off. There are too many people hereabouts who know me too well. I was thinking on the way over here about the unwisdom of speaking sometimes and the wisdom of restraining oneself. You will perhaps recall—I am sure President Dodds does—the wonderful remark of Disraeli when a callow, young member of the House of Commons came to him—the leader of his party—and said, "Now, Mr. Prime Minister, I've just come to the House; do you think it would be well if I participated actively in debate?" And the Prime Minister looked at him appraisingly for a moment and said, "No, I think it would be better if you did not. I think it would be better if the House wondered why you didn't speak rather than why you did."

I daresay it will be under those circumstances that I shall leave here this evening. In all events, I am deeply grateful for your invitation, and for the opportunity which you have afforded me not only to come back to this place I love so well but to impose on your time and your patience. There is another one, which you will remember, Harold. President Coolidge



said, "It is sometimes better to keep still and be thought a fool than it is to speak and remove all doubt."

I feel as though I were opening the hunting season on college seniors. From now until mid-June, college seniors are fair game for all of us up-lifters, viewers with alarm, Chautauqua-style orators, even for occasional unemployed politicians. From now until mid-June college seniors are to be repeatedly reminded how fortunate they are and what they should do with their hard-won educational disciplines; they are to be warned repeatedly that the old order is changing, that the sky is overcast, visibility low; and they are to be urged and goaded and implored to accept the challenge to remake the future.

Thirty-two years ago—and I might say quite a number of pounds and a good many inches around the waist ago—when I graduated I believe I listened to these same challenges flung down by orators whose names I have completely forgotten. Now it is my turn to be forgotten. In doing my homework this morning on this evening's oration, I not only let my mind run back to the state of the world 32 years ago when I graduated from Princeton but I also glanced at the Nassau Herald of 1922 in the hope that I could find something about myself that would impress you. Well, I must say, in the long corridor of retrospect, I don't look as important as I thought I was. I discovered that when my senior class voted to bestow the sobriquet of "biggest politician" upon one of its members I received only eight votes—but when it voted on "thinks he is biggest politician" I won second place, and that was due to a conspiracy among my roommates. For the title of "most likely to succeed," I received the impressive total of two votes—(I don't know yet who the other fellow was).

Thirty-two years ago my classmates and I graduated into a world that was quite different from the one you enter in 1954. Before settling down to the business of trying to earn a living, I did some more travelling. It was a happier, more hopeful world than the one I saw on a recent journey around the globe. A terrible war to make the world safe for democracy had just ended victoriously. A noble concept, the League of Nations, had emerged from the chaotic aftermath of that elemental struggle. It was the twilight of kings, the dawn of world-wide democracy. Optimism was boundless and people proclaimed that we were on the threshold of the new era of universal and perpetual peace and prosperity.

It didn't turn out that way. It wasn't a threshold after all. A bitter young man, an author, soon wrote, "I was always embarrassed by the words 'sacred,' 'glorious,' and 'sacrifice' and the expression 'in vain.' We heard them, sometimes standing in the rain almost out of earshot, so that only the shouted words came through, and had read them, and proclamations that were slapped up by billposters over other proclamations, and I had seen nothing 'sacred,' and the things that were 'glorious' had no glory and the 'sacrifices' were like the stockyards at Chicago, if nothing was done with the meat except to bury it."

But I don't need to tell you, a generation that was born and nurtured in the depths of depression and came to consciousness in war and to maturity in the confusion of world revolution—I don't need to tell you that your elders have made something of a mess of things. Things didn't turn out as we had thought they would in 1922, and somehow the hope and



the easy confidence we felt dissolved as more and more the articulate and vocal among us doubted their beliefs and believed their doubts.

Nor do I need to enumerate for you in sepulchral tones the problems that you face. You know them only too well. Perhaps you can solve them. I would not presume to tell you how to do it. This University has given you the tools with which to try. Moreover, even if I would guide you, I could not. What a man knows at fifty that he did not know at twenty is, for the most part, incommunicable. The laws, the aphorisms, the generalizations, the universal truths, the parables and the old saws—all of the observations about life which can be communicated handily in ready, verbal packages—are as well known to a man at twenty who has been attentive as to a man at fifty. He has been told them all, he has read them all, and he has probably repeated them all before he graduates from college; but he has not lived them all.

What he knows at fifty that he did not know at twenty boils down to something like this: The knowledge he has acquired with age is not the knowledge of formulas, or forms of words, but of people, places, actions—a knowledge not gained by words but by touch, sight, sound, victories, failures, sleeplessness, devotion, love—the human experiences and emotions of this earth and of oneself and other men; and perhaps, too, a little faith, and a little reverence for things you cannot see.

Nonetheless, I would speak to you not of the past, when my generation held its hopes so high—a time when even I received two votes as the most likely to succeed—but rather I would speak to you of the future, of your future. And if I cannot advise you on how to solve the momentous problems of your future, perhaps I can venture to suggest some duties and, if you please, some rules of conduct that, it seems to me, devolve upon the educated man because that is what you are about to be. I would speak to you briefly, then, about the educated man and his government, and about the educated man and his university.

The political organization that goes by the name of the United States of America consists of no fewer than 155,000 governing units, school boards, conservation districts, municipalities, states, the nation, etc. It is operated by some one million elected officials, ranging from mosquito district trustee to President, and by some six million full-time employees. Our government is so large and so complicated that few understand it well and others barely understand it at all. Yet we must try to understand it and to make it function better.

For the power, for good or evil, of this American political organization is virtually beyond measurement. The decisions which it makes, the uses to which it devotes its immense resources, the leadership which it provides on moral as well as material questions, all appear likely to determine the fate of the modern world.

All this is to say that your power is virtually beyond measurement. For it is to you, to your enlightened attention, that American government must look for the sources of its power. You dare not, if I may say so, withhold your attention. For if you do, if those young Americans who have the advantage of education, perspective, and self-discipline do not participate to the fullest extent of their ability, America will stumble, and if America stumbles the world falls.



You know that our record as citizens in recent years has been something less than perfect. Too often our citizens have ignored their duty to their government. Too often they have not even bothered to vote. But this is not all. Participating in government in a democracy does not mean merely casting a ballot on election day. It means much more than that. It means an attitude, a moral view, and a willingness to assume a day-to-day responsibility for the good conduct of your government. How many times have you heard the good citizen demand for example that the gambling laws be enforced without fear or favor—except, of course, for the slot machines in his own country club? How many good citizens do you know who constantly deplore waste, inefficiency, and corruption in government, and who also go out and ring doorbells for candidates they believe in? Not very many. Far more say, "politics is dirty"—and that is about their only protest about the quality of government, and far more use the word 'politician' as a term of approbrium, disrespect and dishonor—and this in the land of Washington, Jefferson and Lincoln. How many respectable citizens do you know who protest loudly about lawlessness and venality but don't hesitate to fix a traffic ticket? And then there are the unscrupulous for whom anything goes if it is within the letter of the law, or at least not too far outside; the numerous kind for whom legality and morality are synonyms. 'The Fix' has become endemic in our political life.

I would remind you of an axiom of political science: People get the kind of government they deserve. Your public servants serve you right. Our American government may be defined perhaps, as the government that really cares about the people. Just so, our government demands, it depends upon, the care and the devotion of the people.

Now it is sadly true that there are corrupt officials, that don't get caught, if not as many perhaps as the cynical suspect. It is also true that there are at every level of our government able, patient, patriotic, devoted public servants—yes, and Army officers too—but all too often their reward is ingratitude, contumely, and lately even investigation. In years gone by we required only of our career servants, upon whom the successful operation of this huge mechanism of government depends, that they serve at a financial sacrifice and that they serve with little glory or public recognition. Increasingly, it appears, we also require them to run the risk of being branded as 'subversive,' 'undesirable,' as 'security risks.' It becomes increasingly hard to attract good men to government, and no wonder. Thoughtful men do not enjoy living in an atmosphere of constant guerilla warfare and suspicion.

You who have spent four years on this campus know better than most people that your greatest satisfactions, your greatest rewards, resulted from the free interplay of ideas. You know that your most penetrating insights resulted from the exchange and the interchange and clash of ideas. And I would remind you that just as a great university cannot operate in any but an atmosphere of intellectual freedom, neither can a great government. It is the function of the democratic form of government to nurture freedom. No less does the democratic form of government require freedom as the condition in which it can function at all.

I would suggest to you, then, that it is the duty of an educated man in America today to work actively to put good men into public office—





and to defend them there against abuse and the ugly inclination we as human beings have to believe the worst. I would suggest that it is not enough merely to vote but that we, all of us, have the further obligation to think, and to maintain steadfastly the rights of all men to think freely.

It is always true that when the citizens of a democracy become apathetic, a power vacuum is created, and corrupt men, or incompetents or worse rush in to fill it. But today our situation is even more dangerous than that. In ordinary times the corrupt or the incompetent can be suffered for a while and then ejected. But these are no ordinary times. The world's fate now hangs upon how well or how ill we in America conduct our affairs. And if a bad man is elected trustee of a sanitary district, or if an able man in Washington is left to shift for himself in the face of unjustified attack, then our government is diminished by that much—and even more because others will lose heart from his example. So you as educated, privileged people have a broad responsibility to protect and improve what you have inherited and what you would die to preserve—the concept of government by consent of the governed as the only tolerable way of life.

We in our country have, indeed, placed all of our faith, we have placed all of our hope, upon the education, the intelligence and the understanding of our people. We have said that ours is a government conducted by its citizens, and from this it follows that the government will be better conducted if its citizens are educated. It's as simple as that. We believe that the people will find their way to the right solutions, given sufficient information. We believe with Lincoln, "Why should there not be a patient confidence in the ultimate justice of the people?" (although I must confess to having entertained certain private fleeting doubts upon occasion). We have bet all our chips, if you please, on the intellectual improvement of our people. This is a magnificent gamble—but it is a gamble, for it raises the question whether we have reached the awesome pinnacle of world power we now occupy too soon, before we have sufficiently elevated our national mind to lead the world wisely. Only the educated man entertains doubts, and doubt is the beginning of wisdom; but doubt is not wisdom's fulfillment, and in a time of crisis the man who doubts may fall prey to the strong dumb brute—to the man on horseback.

There is in the moiling masses of Asia a tremendous power, potentially the greatest power on earth, and today our enemies conspire to gain the mastery of this power. They have at their disposal, as we all know, a powerful weapon, for communism is a perversion of the dream of justice. And while we see its leading attribute as the perversion, the illiterate, the toiling masses still have their eyes fixed on the dream.

We too have a powerful weapon, truth, and we gain our strength from our thoughtful citizenry, which seeks and holds the truth with both its heart and its mind. The question is, however, whether we have come to decisive responsibility too early, before we were ready, before we had matured sufficiently. No man can say with certainty. Personally I am optimistic and confident, but this question will not be answered tomorrow; it will be answered in your lifetime, and it will be answered in large part by you, the privileged American.

If I have made your tasks and your responsibilities sound formidable, which indeed they are, may I also remind you that this is what makes the



prospect of your careers so exciting. There is a wonderful passage in Emerson,—and happily I couldn't lay my hands on it—I'll spare you from it. I hope sometime you will read that essay. It says the time to live is not when everything is serene, but when all is tumult—when the old admits being compared with the new. This is the time of early morning, when it is fresh and exciting. I think this is your generation, I cannot be sure. Change is the order of life and difficulties its meat. You live in a time of historic change and of infinite difficulty. But do not let the difficulties distract you. Face the problems of your time you must, deal with them you must. But do not allow the alarms and excursions and partisanship of our political scene to distract you, do not let even the awful problems of the atomic age claim all your attention. Dare, rather, to live your lives fully, boldly; dare to study and to learn, to cultivate the mind and the spirit, even though it isn't fashionable in your community. For though our people become prosperous as never before and though our foreign policy triumphs, these things are but instruments of the proper purpose, the higher purpose, of Western man—the cultivation of the mind and of the spirit.

It would be presumptuous, and out of character for me to lecture you about your spirit. That I must leave to the wiser, and to better men. But perhaps you'll forgive me if I draw on my own haphazard, desultory experience—(I have not always been an unemployed politician, you know)—to say a word about intelligence and experience as attributes of the good judgment you will need—the good sense, if you please.

Don't be afraid to learn; to read, to study, to work, to try to know, because at the very best you can know very little. And don't above all things—and I am sure President Dodds will agree with me—be afraid to think for yourself. Nothing has been, in my judgment, more disheartening about the contemporary scene the last several years in America than the growth of the popularity of unreason—of anti-intellectualism. One thinks of those chanting, screaming crowds that walked over precipices in Germany—and not so long ago. The conformists—unreason and anti-intellectualism—abominate thought. Thinking implies disagreement and disagreement implies non-conformity and non-conformity implies heresy and heresy implies disloyalty. So obviously thinking must be stopped. This is the routine. But I say to you that bawling is not a substitute for thinking and that reason is not subversion but the salvation of freedom. And don't be afraid of unpopular positions, of driving upstream. All progress has resulted from people who took unpopular positions. All change is the result of a change in the contemporary state of mind. Do you remember—and here again I shall tap a resourceless memory—some words of Materlinck, who was writing about the Spanish Inquisition and said that in those times to the conservative they should not kill so many and to the radical they should not kill any. Don't be afraid of being out of tune with your environment, and above all pray God that you are not afraid to live, to live hard and fast. To my way of thinking it is not the years in your life but the life in your years that count in the long run. You'll have more fun, you'll do more and you'll get more, you'll give more satisfaction the more you know, the more you have worked and the more you have lived. For yours is a great adventure at a stirring time in the annals of men.



You have a better chance than many people to give a lot and therefore to take a lot of life. If we can't look to people like you for this leadership, for good judgment, for wise directions for ourselves and for the convictions of our society, then where can we look? For here at Princeton, which for more than two centuries has transmitted from one generation to the next the riches of Western civilization, you have gotten some grasp of the basic principles on which our culture is founded—the concept of the supremacy of the individual, the worth of a human being, and the necessity for a climate of freedom in which these values may find means of expression.

And before you depart from this campus that you and I have known and loved, stay a moment, my young friends, and think a bit, inquire—these halls, this campus, our university, what do they mean? "university" is a proud, a noble and ancient word. Around it cluster all of the values and the traditions which civilized people have for centuries prized most highly. The idea which underlies this University—any university—is greater than any of its physical manifestations; its classrooms, its laboratories, its clubs, its athletic plant, even the particular groups of faculty and students who make up its human element as of any given time. What is this idea? It is that the highest condition of man in this mysterious universe is the freedom of the spirit. And it is only truth that can set the spirit free.

The function of a university is, then, the search for truth and its communication to succeeding generations. Only as that function is performed steadfastly, conscientiously, and without interference, does the university realize its underlying purpose. Only so does the university keep faith with the great humanist tradition of which it is a part. Only so does it merit the honorable name that it bears.

When you depart, think occasionally upon your university's inherent ideas and purposes, as its outward trappings recede. Don't forget that Princeton is a university, as well as *your* University; and that it has obligations to the whole of mankind not just to you—obligations which it can neither ignore nor shirk, and which cannot, consistently with its honorable name and its place in the community of scholarship, be sacrificed to passing passions and prejudices. As members of the alumni family I trust you will be alert to its needs; they are imperative, and you can meet them if you will as many of your predecessors are today, but keep, I beg you, always in the forefront of your mind the realization that the single greatest need of any university, as of any seeker after the truth, is not just the money, not expensive libraries and laboratories, but this freedom, this thing that seems so inchoate to you now, freedom to do its work, to pursue its inquiries, to conduct its discussion, to extend the limits of learning.

The right to the serene pursuit of truth did not descend like manna from heaven; it was won by hard fighting, and the fight goes on and on to the end of time—even as the struggle between good and evil. See to it then, that no one, for whatever reason or in the service of whatever interest, diverts this University from its classic objective. As its graduates, as individuals who have made in it an investment of the golden, ir retrievable years of your lives, you cannot, I suggest, do less. And carry away with you some of the wise serenity of the timeless courage, the unhurried objectivity which is the atmosphere of Princeton and which represents the





collective imprint of its founders, students and teachers who have gone before you.

The university in America is the archive of the Western mind, it is the keeper of Western culture, and the foundation of Western culture is freedom. Princeton, or any other university, great or small, has the obligation of transmitting from one generation to the next that heritage. The faculty and administrators of a university can do that only if they are free. I think we believe with Gladstone that it is liberty alone that fits men for liberty.

I came here last night in darkness, after not having been here for some four or five years. I came with an old friend and an old classmate. We drove a little through the campus, after dusk. It was soft, the air fresh, the beginning of spring. I thought of some words that I read here long ago, written by an English poet, Alfred Noyes, who stayed on the Princeton campus for a few years. They went something like this if I am not mistaken:

Now lamp-lit gardens in the blue dusk shine  
Through dog-wood red and white,  
And round the gray quadrangles, line by line,  
The windows fill with light,  
Where Princeton calls to Magdalen, tower to tower,  
Twin lanthorns of the law,  
And those cream-white magnolia boughs embower  
The halls of old Nassau.

Sentimental? Yes. Nostalgic, childish? Perhaps. Yet lovely, beautiful, true. Your days are short here; this is the last of your springs. And now in the serenity and quiet of this lovely place, touch the depths of truth, feel the hem. You will go away with old, good friends. Don't forget when you leave why you came.

