

To: The Class of '85
From: Douglas Edwards

We Wish You Much Glory

Commencement speakers usually are men and women of great accomplishment who have filled their lives with a wide range of fascinating people and interesting experiences. Unfortunately, commencement speeches usually are eminently forgettable — usually, but not always.

Once in a while a gifted speaker approaches his assignment in the true spirit of the occasion, not as a preachment from on high, nor as media happening in which the words are intended to overshadow the event, but rather as a charge to the future, full of wit as well as wisdom — hopeful, candid, sincere, drawing on knowledge from a life well spent. CBS news anchor and fellow Oklahoman Douglas Edwards made such a commencement address to the University of Oklahoma's Class of 1985.

The distinguished-looking, silver-haired man at the podium in Lloyd Noble Center bore a distinct resemblance to the young television broadcast pioneer who brought post-World War II Europe into the nation's living rooms nearly 40 years ago — and the voice was exactly the same.

In the capacity audience were representatives of the generations of Americans who have grown up with Douglas Edwards and the news. Sooner Magazine presents his address for those readers who were unable to attend.



It gives me great pleasure to be with you at the University of Oklahoma on this very special day, special not only for you graduates, but also for those of you who encouraged and supported these graduates when they needed encouragement and support, you relatives and friends.

"The roots of education are bitter," Aristotle said, "but the fruit is sweet." I don't know how bitter your educational roots were, but surely this has to be an occasion of great sweetness for all of you, and I salute you on it.

When he was our United Nations ambassador, the late Adlai Stevenson once made a speech to a woman's group. Afterward a little lady came up to him and said, "Mr. Stevenson, I have to tell you that that was simply superfluous." Stevenson thought a minute and came back with the line, "Well, perhaps I should consider having it published posthumously." And she

said, "You know, that's a great idea, and I think the sooner the better."

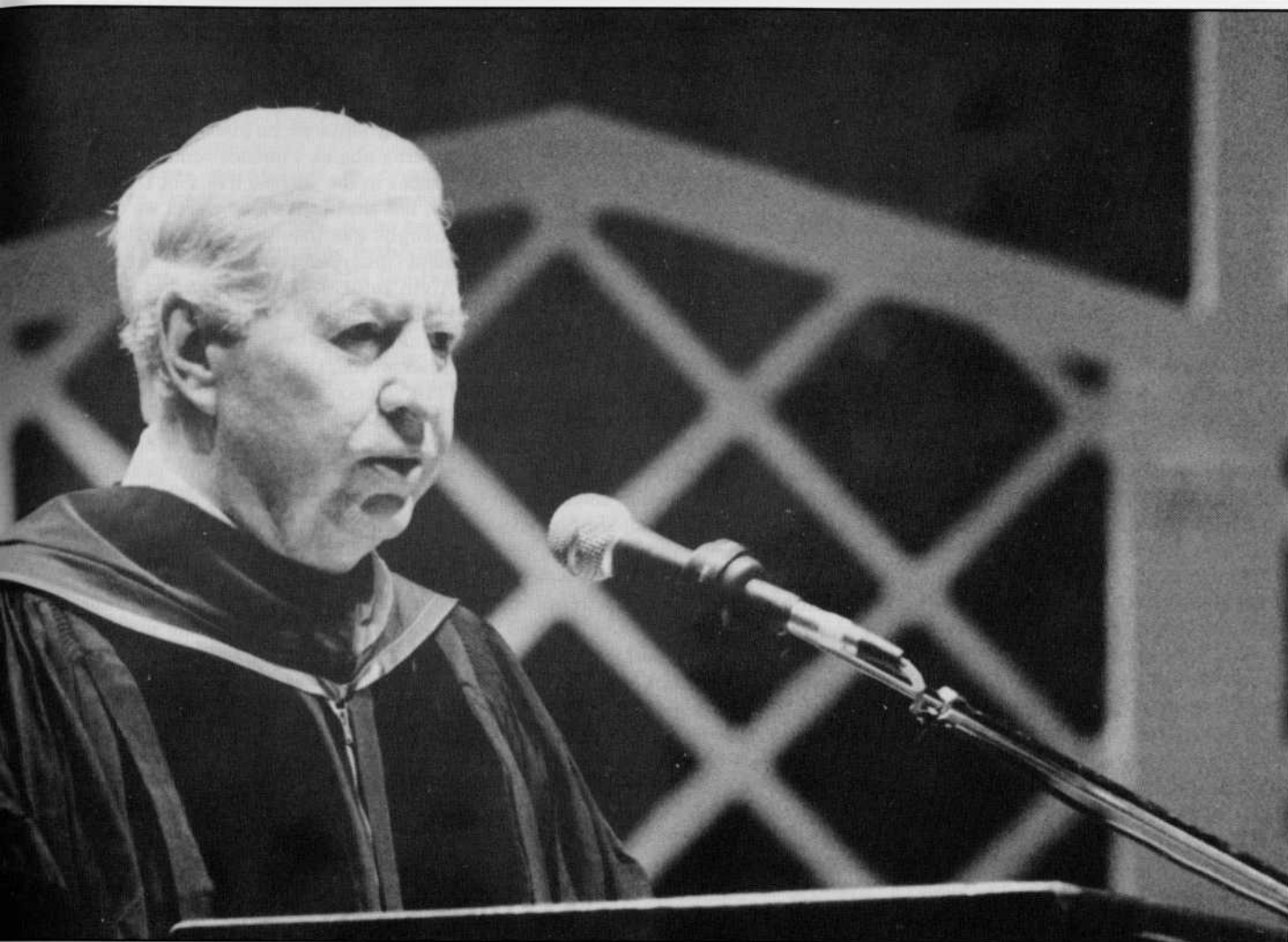
I have no illusions that my remarks to you will be published posthumously or otherwise, or that they will even be remembered. Commencement speeches have a habit of getting lost in the high fever of the day. But by the same token, I hope they won't be considered superfluous either. I hope they will add at least to the impressions you carry away of your college life, and of this auspicious day, and that they will perhaps define for you something of the world into which you, as college graduates, are stepping. I would like to talk to you briefly about that world — some observations on its present and its future. These observations stem from a career in broadcasting that goes back a good long time.

I was anchoring a daily television network newscast on CBS before most of you graduates were born. I was there

before CBS even opened its eye. Broadcasting has changed a lot over the years, reflecting the changes in our country. It is bigger, bolder, more influential, but still prone to make mistakes.

A classic along that line happened to my friend and colleague Harry Reasoner a number of years ago, during his first tour of duty at CBS. One night he was pinch-hitting for Walter Cronkite on the evening news when, unbeknownst to Harry Reasoner, there came a very worried, frightened, beseeching telephone call from somebody in the commercial scheduling department. The fellow on the other end of the line said to the producer of the Reasoner news, "Whatever you do, don't let Harry lead into that next commercial. Get him some more news; wave him off. I am down on my knees in an attitude of prayer."

Well, they got Harry some more



news. He didn't stop for the commercial, and in a way, it is kind of a pity. Had he done so, had he stopped, there would have appeared on the screen a picture of a very worried, frightened, beseeching lady, tsk-tsking and shaking her head, and she would have said, "Harry needs a laxative."

We now use so-called bumper shots to save ourselves from near-misses like that. Relief has arrived at last.

Yes, indeed, broadcasting has changed — right along with the world and our country. The world which most of you graduates entered about two decades ago seems, in retrospect, more innocent, more tranquil than the world today. Of course, if you were a victim of McCarthyism, of virulent anti-Communism, it was anything but tranquil then. If you were black and trying to integrate the public schools, it was anything but tranquil. If you were a woman who protested in-

equities in business or education, it was a more innocent time, yes, but hardly tranquil.

Since then, we have been through two major social and political experiences — Vietnam and Watergate — both of which shattered our innocence and sharpened our cynicism. Now, in the decade of the 1980s, we face new problems, new challenges: great tension in our relations with Latin America, particularly Nicaragua; an agricultural crisis that threatens the existence of the family farm; rampant crime and drug use; a steady increase in the number of the chronically poor, unemployed and homeless. And each day, there are more of us Americans, our population growing at a rate of perhaps two million a year — more people to feed, house, clothe and find jobs for.

I could go on and on. The problems of this country are plentiful, and our

tendency to catalogue them is quick. The United States is probably the most self-critical nation in this world. But this is not the time to dwell on what is wrong with us; instead this is the time for confidence and hope.

In his memoirs, Judge John Sirica, who presided over the Watergate trials, said that often during the trials he wondered if the final verdict would, in his words, "toll the passing of our nation as the showcase of democracy." He said he often wondered if it would be worth it to this country to bring down an administration, however misguided it might be, in the midst of a war and the sharpest decline in American influence this century has seen. But he concluded, "Subsequent events have shown that our system of justice and our insistence on the truth, no matter how painful, led to the best result in the long run.

"Our institutions have survived,"

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Judge Sirica said, “because they were sound at their core, and because we believed in them, and that is our greatest strength of all — that we believe in ourselves.”

Much of our hope for the future depends on you young people. You are the ones who will shape this nation's tomorrow. If I am to trust what I read and hear, you are different from the college graduates of a decade or so ago. You are said to be more career-minded, more pragmatic and practical than the preceding generation of college graduates. You are also yet to be heard from, and yet I can say from experience, while waiting in the hall, you are a lively group.

You are not, perhaps, the vocal generation that graduated in the late sixties and early seventies when the Vietnam war was dividing us so painfully. Well, perhaps that's all to the good. Perhaps you will be heard from in ways we do not expect. Perhaps your political and social creativity is ahead of you instead of behind you, as it seems to be with so many of the activists of a decade or so ago. I hope so.

One thing that I wish you would turn your attention to is that most basic element of our government, our election system. It is in need of repair. If it were not, we would have a much better turnout at the polls. Scarcely half the nation's eligible voters turned out for the 1984 presidential election. Our voting record, unfortunately, is the worst among the nations of the world.

I also hope you will see to it that more candidates run for the highest offices in the land. In the past 40 years or so, only about 150 men and women have been serious candidates for the presidency, and this is a nation of more than 200 million people. Over four decades, I think we can do better than that. I think we can provide a wider choice — that you of this generation

can provide a wider choice. As that great philosopher Mae West once said, in an entirely different context, “Too much of a good thing is wonderful.”

Let me tell you a little political story. Back in the 1950s, before television coverage was widespread, there was a fiercely contested election down in the state of Florida. Its campaign has become legendary, and so have the stories that grew up around it — some of them in dispute, but worth telling, nevertheless.

The story I want to tell you concerns a particular campaign appearance by one of the two contestants, George Smathers. He was running against Claude Pepper for the U.S. Senate, and the two of them were carrying on like cat and dog. At one place, where the audience was really behind the times — and remember, there was no TV coverage — Smathers let out all the stops.

Among other things, he said that Claude Pepper was known around Washington as a “shameless extrovert”; that he practiced “nepotism” with his sister-in-law; that his own sister was once a “thespian” in wicked New York City; and worst of all, my friends, Claude Pepper, before his marriage practiced “celibacy.” Not too surprisingly, Claude Pepper lost that election — history's first victim of “guilt by assonance,” as somebody said.

But you know, I figure he would lose it again today. You simply cannot practice celibacy and be a winner — not in 1985. The point, however, is that Claude Pepper came back. He is now the oldest member of the United States House of Representatives, where he has served continuously since his comeback in 1962, and a champion of the elderly. Pepper is proof, if proof is needed, that age is not a matter of numbers and that assonance may be a bit harmful, but it is not fatal.

With Claude Pepper in mind, it is easy to look ahead, to be sanguine about America's future. Like you young graduates, he gives me hope. In looking ahead, I foresee some real advances in the way we live. Not Utopia, no, not that brave new world we once thought was inevitable. Rather, some solid progress toward what author Alvin Toffler — he of the *Future Shock* book — calls a “full and radiantly human civilization.” Some dreams, in other words, that seem realizable.

In science researchers believe that the whole “Star Wars” technology, regardless of its usefulness for defense purposes, will yield many peaceful benefits — to improving detection of cancer in its early stages, to screening people for genetic defects, to the healthy processing of fresh fruits and vegetables on our supermarket shelves, to safeguarding the nation's forests from acid rain, to astonishing new discoveries in astronomy.

There is the widespread belief that we simply will live more wisely in the future, that the improvement in our health will come not from dramatic breakthroughs in medicine — though they too will come — but from better care of our bodies — preventive medicine.

There is even hope for the American family — that battered and abused unit of society, fractured by divorce, bewildered by sexual freedom and confused by women's liberation. Experts say that by the year 2000, the nuclear family will not only be around but will be a better institution than most people think it has been. As one expert put it, “The family of the future will be smaller, less permanent and more vulnerable to change, but it will survive and thrive.”

Then there are the wilder flights of fantasy — the prediction that by the year 2000, we will have drugs that can permanently raise the level of intelligence and control the aging process; that there will be artificial eyesight for the blind; that there will be edible nutritional plastics (I think I've already tasted some of them); that mail service will be faster and more efficient, handled by electronics; and that there will be a reliable 30-day weather forecasting system. Now that is what I call *real* fantasy.

But we must not scoff at dreams or stop them. As Thoreau said, "If one advances in the direction of his dreams and endeavors to live the life which one has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours. Dreams are the touchstones of our characters." For you, at the beginning of your careers, this is the time to dream, to try to live the life that you have imagined.

At the same time, you must not live in the expectation that the future automatically will take care of tomorrow's problems, that the future somehow will spell their disappearance. Remember, many of our problems simply are not capable of solution, and even when they are — or it looks as if they are — new problems arise out of them. The automobile: there stands an outstanding example of a solution that created a few new problems — congestion, pollution, energy demands. We must learn to think of life in this country not so much as a condition of being but as a process. We are always living in an age of conquest and transition in America, in an age of quest, and our problems are part of that quest.

One of our problems, paradoxically, is in my field, the field of communications. I realize this may sound seditious of me to say, but we all talk too much and communicate too little. Well, perhaps not all of us. I know the story of a youngster eight years old named Stevie, who "no how, no way" wanted to be sent away to summer camp. But he was anyway, and believe me, he was pretty bitter about it. It took him about three weeks to mellow down long enough to sit down and communicate with the folks back home.

On the back of a postcard, Stevie wrote, "Dear Mom and Pop: I knew all along something awful was going to happen here. Well, last night, it did. Love, Stevie." How is that for a communication gap?

The historian and librarian of Congress Daniel Boorstin, whom it was my great pleasure to interview not long ago, tells us that the word communicate can be traced back to Starkie's *History of England* in 1538. There the word is connected to the definition of God. Starkie says that God "is he who communicated his goodness to all others. This, in turn, is related to the

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word "communicant," a person who shares in the Eucharist or Holy Communion. So in origin, communicate suggests common or community, and it means somehow to make common, to share.

If we think of it that way, then we naturally will be more selective in what we say. We will share with one another what is significant, what is from the heart, what is honest and what is, ultimately, loving. We will not share what is profane, dishonest or uncaring. We will, in truth, communicate.

Much of the violence that is currently so popular in the movies — and on television too, though less so than it once was — is an effort to communicate, misguided though it often is. The reasoning is that unless we are screamed at, unless the image is lurid, we will not respond; and it works for a time. For a time, we are attracted to the grotesque, the bizarre, the brutal, even the disastrous. We do respond. But after a while, such aberrations lose their impact. After a while, even violence cannot interest us, cannot turn us on — except, perhaps, to more violence. What is truly unfortunate is the final result. For violence never unites us. Violence only serves to separate us from each other, to emphasize the separateness of each individual, the very opposite of our spirit of our oneness as men and women which ennobles us.

Now if I understand communications correctly, if I understand our democracy correctly, the aim is not to divide us, but to bring us together, closer together, in some semblance of peace and harmony. The aim is to minimize our differences, not to enlarge them. The world into which you will step as college graduates often will be violent, uncaring, uncommunicative, in the true sense of those words. But it also is a world of beauty,

of concern and of love. You must reconcile yourselves to those opposing forces and not be discouraged by their opposition.

You must dream your dreams; you must have faith in the future. To do otherwise, warns the philosopher Desjardins, "is to destroy both the love of living and the momentum of mankind."

In closing, let me draw on Daniel Boorstin again. He tells about how he once met the explorer Thor Heyerdahl. Heyerdahl, as I am sure you know, has made several successful ocean crossings by primitive means to certify certain theories of his, and one of those voyages took him across the Atlantic in a frail boat built only of reeds. In talking to him, Boorstin said he expressed the fear that Heyerdahl and the crew must have felt when they suddenly left the sight of land and got out into the open Atlantic.

But Heyerdahl said, on the contrary, the great dangers — the dangers of shoals and rocks — existed along the shore. There was, in fact, a wonderful sense of relief when they got out into the ocean where there was openness all around.

From that, may you, as young explorers, perceive the importance of living — not among the shoals and rocks of this world — but instead, of living in its openness. Not among its dangers and problems exclusively, but among its dreams and great possibilities, its enormous challenges and its very precious rewards.

Remember, you live in a world that in its way is new each day. It is there for you to explore, to enjoy, to contribute to. So go forth, my young friends. Explore it; enjoy it; contribute to it; and we wish you much glory.

DOUGLAS EDWARDS
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