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Greetings and Perspective on America (chapel talk)

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GREETINGS 1968-69

I was struggling with the appropriateness of the subject that clamored for expression in my mind all summer as I anticipated seeing you in this setting this morning.

I prayed - and I checked with Prof. Lee - but what tipped the balance was the TODAY show day-before-yesterday morning. Joe Garrijiola reported a poll of opinion on the quality of life in America and other nations: (polls are not infallible) In America compared with 5 years ago -

Is life better or worse in our moals - (sp. emph. on honesty)

78% worse, 8% better

In religion -

2 to 1 worse

and Joe said, "That is shocking."

Now, we could be very ivory-towerish and discuss high-sounding theory, or we could have a year-opening talk on how wonderful and privileged you are, or we could try a sophisticated analysis of our philosophy of education.

But what is more important than looking at the kind of world you are now a part of, and that you will face and soon become responsible for.

So, I am going to begin, stop by the clock, and ask the Spiritual Life Committee to give me the next open date in the chapel calendar to give the other half of my message.
Perspective is very important, so important that it often makes the difference in decisions on great issues that affect the lives of all of us. E.G., the bachelor's point of view was expressed as follows: "It isn't that I don't want to settle down with one woman; it's just that I don't want to insulate myself from all the rest."

What frustrates us in America is the impasse between the unbelievable impotence of the American citizen vs. the incredible naivete of much of our political leadership. Basically, I practice and advocate respect for, and confidence in, and obedience to our elected leaders. However, it is incumbent upon them to conduct themselves, to make decisions and to lead, in such a manner as to command respect and justify confidence.

Just before the close of last spring term, we listened to Dr. Jim Bertsche describe the dramatic moment in the Congo when he and his family were being "pushed hither and yon, with notched arrows pointed in our faces, overhearing conversations about when and how our assassination would be effected." It reminded me of how we fumble and bungle guns, bombs, races, colors, people - until it could also happen here. The horror of man's depraved nature, stripped of moral restraints, is frightening to contemplate.

Still, there are more important considerations than the extension of our physical existence. In Matthew 10:28 Jesus says to his disciples, "Do not fear them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul; rather, fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell."
After all, peace is not the absence of tensions, but the presence of brotherhood and justice. For us it must begin with the rediscovery and preservation of the principles and policies which first made America a great nation. This includes an attitude toward God and faith in Christ that result in obedience to His laws and will. Would that we could still confidently use these as points of reference and orientation in the treatment of our complex contemporary problems - that the commitment of our people to them were still firm and unshakeable. And yet, when one lets his thoughts roam beyond these hopes - to the great troubled America of 1968, as we have known it and seen it in recent weeks and months, the contrast between this early model and the reality of today is tremendous. Those principles presuppose a certain cultural, ethical and religious matrix or heritage, a unique spirit and discipline of the home, school and society. It is this we have allowed to erode and get lost in the affluence and permissiveness of the last twenty years. In this period during which you have grown up we have moved from individual citizen to big government, from rugged individualism to welfare socialism, from economic prudence to extravagant spending, and from a faith-anchored social order to a technology-worshipping society.

The same erosion and deterioration has happened in our growing urban centers. Seemingly without a qualm we have permitted the residential patterns and community structure of our great cities to be disintegrated, the central districts drained of people of education and influence and responsibility - (who took their two-car garages out to the suburbs) - and then, with an equal indifference,
we permitted these blighted central districts to be colonized by huge masses of impoverished and poorly-educated people from remote rural environments (and who didn't even own bicycles) - people without understanding of and appreciation for the institutions of urban self-government by which they were now supposed to be living - and people for whom, in the districts to which they were being permitted to move, there were obviously no adequate prospects of employment and no adequate residential, educational or cultural facilities. Never, but literally never - down to the present day, never - does it seem to have occurred to our leaders that there might have been limits to the absorbent capacity of our great urban communities, and that perhaps it was the business of governmental authority to see that these limits were not over-stepped. You see, my gripe is that the federal government becomes paternalistic about so many things we should be doing for ourselves as individual citizens, but fails to perform the function of government in relation to the organization of society.

I do not mean to disparage or depreciate the progress actually made over the decades in the way of assimilation into our tradition of people to whom it was not native. On the contrary, what has been accomplished in this respect seems to me to have been little short of miraculous. And in many instances, I know, the spirit of the Bill of Rights and the Constitution has been better understood, more highly valued, and more reverently cultivated, by persons who came in from the outside. But one of our national failings, it seems to me, is a tendency to overwork success of any kind; and in this instance, too, to say that we have
accomplished much does not preclude the possibility that we have also gone too far and too fast. This has made possible the recent assassinations of great Americans by some who were not in any sense American.

I am aware that if there has been a serious dilution of the American ideological inspiration, it has been a dilution that has taken place partly within the souls and minds of us who profess to be the salt of the American earth. We have shown little recognition of the need for preserving and cultivating it even in the rules and habits of our own lives; in the observance of religious faith; in the rearing of our children; in the structuring of our communities. If these ideals have been betrayed, the betrayal is partly ours. We have played fast and loose with our national tradition, taking little care to see that its philosophic and ethical foundations were adequately communicated to the millions of strangers admitted to our body politic, taking equally little pains to see that these foundations retained their vitality in our own habits. And the result is that we have today a society that has come a long way indeed - an alarmingly long way from what those forefathers thought they were creating when they drafted their memorable documents - a society in which the endurance and validity of the things they cared for is now very gravely jeopardized.

We have all been repeatedly sickened over these recent months by the spectacle of angry, disorderly people: milling about, chanting, screaming, shouting other people down, brawling with the police or with equally violent opponents, obstructing other people in their normal pursuits; and all this ostensibly in the
effort to achieve one objective or another, not by the devices of persuasion, not through the orderly processes of appointed authority and procedure, but through the devices of intimidation and violence. It will be clear to all of us that this style of political action, far from having anything to do with that "firm adherence to justice, moderation, temperance, frugality and virtue" which the Bill of Rights demanded, is in the most direct and flagrant conflict with the spirit of that document. It has nothing to do with freedom. It reflects a frame of mind which, if the entire previous experience of mankind is to be taken seriously, can lead only to demagoguery and dictatorship.
Now the predilection for this style of political action has been particularly marked, as we all know, in two sectors of our society where we can ill afford to tolerate it: namely, in the urban black communities whose affirmative cooperation is going to be essential if our great cities are to retain their vitality, and among a portion of the student population of our great universities - among people, that is, on whose intellectual and civic capacities our national future is going to depend in the most intimate way. The damage done just in these two sectors of our society alone, and not just the physical damage but even more the social and spiritual disorientation that invariably attends mass disorders of every sort, has already become incalculable.

All this is bad enough in itself. But the gravity of it has been enhanced, as I see it, by the hesitancy, the feebleness, and the ineffectiveness of many of the responses on the part of established authority. One is forced to the conclusion that the confusions of mind which these disorders reflect are ones from which not even those people are immune whose responsibility it is to see that the dignity and good order of our public life are maintained.

Obviously, we are faced today with two great and urgent tasks. The first is to bring this situation under control; the second is to remove its causes.

Only the most unrealistic optimist could believe that we have already brought things under control. Which of our cities is safe from a repetition of the scenes that have disgraced the streets of a number of them over the course of the past two years? Surely, if there has been any excess in the response to these disorders, it has been an excess of tolerance towards such things as arson, looting, sniping and the malicious harrassment of police and firemen endeavoring to perform their duty. Such things cannot be justified by any cause or any grievance. They
are not conducive to the realization of any cause or the alleviation of any grievance. They carry with them a great and real danger of provoking forms of counter-lawlessness even more ugly and menacing than themselves. They are contagious. They undermine confidence in orderly procedure. They lead to a general deterioration of standards of political action across the country.

In no other country in the world would they be treated, I think, with the lenience that we have shown. In the face of the provocation given, I find the charges of police brutality simply irrelevant. (Mob vs. mob) Some object to my oft repetition of the need for law and order. Let me reverse the terms to order and law. Order is a fundamental, philosophic necessity. When we want to accomplish something, we first call ourselves "to order."

The same is true of the resort to violence and obstruction by students on university campuses. Universities are here for purposes of education. They are not supposed to be exercises in political democracy. The term "democracy" refers to the procedures of government. It defines the relationship between the individual citizen and those who hold the ultimate power of disposal over his person and his property. Universities cannot fulfill their true educational function other than in an atmosphere of mutual respect between institution and student. It would be better that they be closed entirely than that they attempt to function under conditions in which that respect is absent.

Higher education is not an absolute right, nor is the enjoyment of it without responsibilities. The American student of this day enjoys the finest educational
facilities ever offered to any students at any time and at any place in world history. Of the actual costs of what is offered to him he does not, on the average, pay even the half. The rest is given him by that very American society — that American "Establishment," if you will — for which the student-activist professes such contempt. It is primarily the student who is under obligation to the university and its sponsors, although the latter have their obligations too. In an age when there are far more applicants for enrollment in our leading universities than these institutions can handle, there is no reason why anyone should be tolerated by them as a student who is not prepared to give the university his respect, and whose presence and activity there are disruptive of the educational progress of other students.
Whether black people, white criminals or radical students, it is plain that the issues are not really those rapidly-changing complaints and demands—some justifiable, some silly— with which they come at us, but some deep emotional discomfort, approaching at times a mass hysteria, the roots of which reach far back into the environment of home and school: into the disintegrated family, the bored over-affluent parents, the timid secularism of parental and school authority, the television set, the over-crowded school room, and the false freedom of the teen-age automobile. To correct these conditions will indeed require a revolution—a revolution in the social and intellectual and spiritual environment of American childhood and early youth—but a thoughtful and orderly and constructive sort of revolution—not the kind that includes violence.

And similarly, in the case of the Negro: I cannot see that the stock proposals for correcting his misery and his sense of degradation come anywhere near to the heart of the problem. What good will it do to raise living standards among those Negroes already present in our great cities if millions more are waiting to crowd in behind them and to take advantage of any marginal opportunities, however miserable, that may be opened up in this way?

And finally, I would question the usefulness of any public discussion of this problem that departs, as has so much of what we have heard in the recent past, from the wholesale imputation of guilt or innocence to great masses of people. This is a problem with deep historical roots. It was not created by the generation of Americans now alive; it was only inherited by them. There have been many people
of good will on both sides, even in our lifetime, who have never failed to make
the effort to improve things within the limits of their own modest possibilities.
Perhaps I speak for some of these when I say that I am a little tired of being told
how endlessly guilty I am in relation to this situation. It seems to me that the
first requirement of a useful discussion would be the recognition of the truly
tragic nature of the problem - a situation from which both Negroes and non-
Negroes suffer alike.

Is it not fantastic that a country facing such domestic problems as we now
face, and one that stands virtually on the brink of a major international financial
humiliation, should be continuing to pour its substance, to the tune of a full
fourth of its budget and more than a half a million of its young men, into a military
adventure on the other side of the world. I believe that the early liquidation of
this involvement is a prerequisite to any successful national policy in the foreseeable
future.

When this liquidation is finally effected, and when we are able to examine
what has been happening to our world position during the period of our preoccupation
with Southeast Asia, we will be dismayed, I think, to discover how much Vietnam
has cost us in terms of the confidence and respect of world opinion. We didn't gain
any respect and confidence either by our action, or our lack of action, in the case
of the Pueblo incident. Let us not argue over the degree in which this loss of
esteem and prestige is deserved. The fact is that we are going to find a distress-
ingly large part of the world public either inclined to the belief that we are some
species of blood-thirsty militarists and imperialists or at least shaken in a prior impression that we were not. We may intend our actions to be altruistic, but the question is not how we interpret actions, but how they interpret them. There are certain forms of hostility and suspicion and skepticism about our motives in international life, to which there is only one dignified and effective response: withdrawal, abstention and silence. Only by a long period of restraint will it be possible for us to correct the misinterpretations concerning the spirit and purposes of our nation to which the Vietnam involvement has given rise.

And this restraint will have to be supported by the quality of our efforts here at home. Whoever has looked closely at international affairs knows that the way in which nations really commend themselves to the respect and confidence of others is not primarily through their words or even primarily through their external actions, but rather through the tone and quality of their domestic life. It is not only between individuals that the power of example is greater than the power of precept. This is also true among nations. And until we in this country have restored the quality of our domestic life to a state where we can exhibit it to the rest of the world without shame or apology, we will not get very far in advancing our prestige either by talking at people in other countries, or by dispensing aid and technical advice to them, or by force of arms. There is a great contrast between the elaborateness of our recent efforts to influence other peoples by our physical presence and our activities of one sort or another in their midst, and the abundant evidences of our failures here at home. A prerequisite of our coming to
terms successfully with our international environment is that we should first come
to terms with ourselves, and this calls for moral and spiritual renewal. And here
is where Christian higher education makes its contribution.

Hopefully, within the span of your college years, you can look toward a
post-Vietnam world. Even in a post-Vietnam world, there will be a number of
problems and responsibilities to which we shall have to give most serious attention.

There will be Germany, the Middle East, the Union of South Africa,
Mainland China, and the fact that five or six major powers now have nuclear weapons.
Add to these the potential problems of Laos, Cambodia, Burma, Thailand, Malaya-
and there will be more and more of the same as long as Christians do not provide
the leadership and the direction. At many points, in Europe and elsewhere, where
we have become accustomed to regarding our own presence and attention as essential
to stability, others can now do without us. Not all of them are going to find it
as pleasant as they thought they would when Yankee really goes home; but Yankee,
as I see it, has no choice; and many of them may gain from the denial of America's
favors and attentions a respect for what America has to offer which the extravagant
extension of those favors was never able to produce.

If we can cure ourselves of exaggerated notions of what we can do for others
at this stage in our history; if we can stop squandering our resources on external
undertakings that may feed our national vanity but do little to justify it; if we can
apply to the ordering of our own affairs those resources of energy and courage and
idealism and physical substance which we have been pouring into our external
involvements; and if, above all, we can place once more at the foundation of
our personal lives and the education of our children that discipline of Christian
conduct and that understanding for first principles which were once assumed to
be the essential basis of any successful self-government, - if we can do these
things, there is hope. In order to do these things, Taylor University will have to
be at its best this year, and you will have to do your individual best under God.