CHARACTER IN ACTION

Opening Convocation
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by

Henry Merritt Wriston

President of Brown University

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War is terrible; we wish it would end. Such an expression, however, is misleading for we should never speak of war as though it began itself and might end itself. Nor must we think of it as though it had some inevitable course it must run, like a fever. War does not exist as a volitional entity. Man and man alone begins to fight and decides when the war is to end.

Candor compels us to admit that the United States helped produce this war. Having won a victory in 1918, we fled its consequences. Having helped remake the world, we refused responsibility. Having altered the balance of power, we abandoned it wholly to others. Then as the storm clouds gathered, we retreated further and further from responsibility. By attempting to take the most powerful single nation out of the balance of power, we contributed to instability and helped bring on the war.

After the war came, we helped prolong it. If we had been consistent isolationists, if we had remained rigorously faithful to the terms and the assumptions of the Neutrality Act, the war would have been shorter, for Germany would have won. Prolongation of the war, bad as that is, was accepted as a better alternative than a German victory and the kind of peace Nazi victory would involve.

Now, we continue to affect the length of the war. By industrial production, the Lease-Lend Act, and diplomatic pressure we tend to shorten it. Every ounce of effectiveness, every manifestation of steady purpose and courageous action
operates both to shorten the war and to reduce the likelihood of German victory. All open the way for some other structure of peace than Hitler’s tyrannous “New Order”.

On the other hand every inefficiency, every strike, every delay, every yard of red tape, every moment of indecision prolongs the war and also serves to render nugatory the determination not to acquiesce in a German victory. For Germany may win a long war as well as a short war.

Viewed in perspective, it is clear that the United States is in the midst of a fundamental reorientation of policy. There has been a long period of almost exclusive preoccupation with domestic affairs predicated upon an isolationist solution of the international problem. Now we are turning to a profound concern with the international crisis and an activist, if not an interventionist, policy. The transition is not being made smoothly or continuously; sometimes it progresses at a rapid pace, at other times slowly, and occasionally with a strong drift toward reaction.

If we wished to state this proposition in other terms, it could be said that the American people are changing their minds. The world awaits the answer to two questions: Will the change in mind with its collateral alteration of policy be sufficiently complete? Will it come in time?

Some people think the change is not being made fast enough. Several of my friends joined in the call for a declaration of war against Germany a year ago last June. They had made up their minds; they were ready to offer leadership to other people in making up their minds; they were eager to do everything possible to hasten the process. At the other extreme are
those who resent the fact that the people are changing their minds at all. Perhaps the best evidence for that is found in the increasingly strident protest of those who do not want to see the isolationist point of view abandoned. In no other way can one explain the extraordinary ineptitude of Colonel Lindbergh's recent speech and the stupid and self-defeating way in which the race issue has been brought into the foreground, not only by him but by Senator Nye and several others who see the tide of sentiment turning against them.

On one point commentators seem to agree—namely, that changing our minds is a painful process. Intellectual processes are always painful. The business of making up one's mind, even the mind of one individual, does not proceed with machinelike precision on smooth roller-bearing logic or without friction generated by confused motives. Often reasoning supports rather than precipitates the decision; it is rationalization of a position intuitively chosen rather than an advance from a premise to a conclusion.

Most people, as they watch this process in America, are ready to insist that a change of mind and a consequent change of policy in a democracy are slower and more painful, are less consistent than in dictatorships. There is some feeling that a Führer or dictator gives a clear and unequivocal directive to public thought; that the discipline of the totalitarian state is such that it extends into the field of opinion; that on the principle that following is easier than independent thought the dictatorships can move faster than democracies and can pursue both a more consistent and a more effective course.

It is incontestable that policy in a dictatorship can shift
more suddenly, but it is far from clear that decisions are more logical, that they accord more closely with the real interests of the nation, or that they are coherent. As time passes the attribution of an inner consistency to Hitler's policy becomes more and more difficult in the face of his palpable tergiversation—first striking hands then drawing the sword, "eternal" decisions altered in the next breath, "perpetual" friendships that last a year. Speed of action, yes, but equal speed of reaction; consistency—scarcely a trace. And as to perceptive ness, one has only to look at Paris, the center of a collaboration which Hitler can neither achieve, nor when it seems within his grasp, exploit. Or consider Norway, easy to take by surprise and treachery, but hard to hold in the face of the moral tenacity of his opponents.

Naturally I welcome the change of mind and alteration of policy upon the part of the American public. Having through all my adult life opposed the isolationist point of view, I am happy to be transferred from a hopeless minority into the effective majority. But though I realize that the sands are running fast and that decisive events may shape the course of history before the mind of America is fully made up, I am nonetheless patient with the slowness of decision. Having waited twenty years without any encouragement, I feel that the pace of the change in the last two years is not so slow.

A swift reversal might be followed by an equally rapid reaction—as happened after the last war. Facility in reversing ourselves might mean that we were moving upon tides of passion rather than with the force of conviction. We must win not only a war but a peace. If unity and energy are
necessary to win victory, patience and steadfastness, conviction and moral power are necessary to win the peace. A decision which is mature and a conclusion reached in the face of the unhappy reality that the arguments are not all on one side are more likely to stand the strain of time than easy and facile gestures, even though they may have the appearance of romantic courage.

The current decision is peculiarly hard to make because the menace to American security, though very real, is still distant in space. It is in the middle distance with regard to time. Furthermore the nature of the menace cannot be accurately described. On the other hand the things which we have gained and which must now be sacrificed are tangible and on the whole pleasant—automobiles turned out even faster than in 1929; more electric refrigerators, more radios, more washing machines, more vacuum cleaners; automatic toasters that will throw the toast higher than ever; television just around the corner.

A new public decision comes with particular difficulty because disillusionment after the last war drove many to materialism. Even in high quarters, democracy came to be interpreted as nourishment, clothing, and housing for the underprivileged third, with very little accent upon the intangibles, such as freedom. Indeed it was boldly said in official circles that freedom could have no meaning to a hungry man, thus making unconscious mockery of Valley Forge, thus denying the soul force of Gandhi, thus blinding itself to the heroism of the Chinese, who had rather be hungry and free in western China than fed and submissive to Japan in the east.
Nevertheless the decision is inexorably being made, however slowly, however haltingly. Its achievement is much more than a mark of intelligence; it is a triumph of character. It means that sacrifice is to take the place of plenty; hardship is chosen over comfort; the things of the spirit are preferred over the pleasures of the moment. It demonstrates that not the short run alone, but the long run have meaning for the American people. They have not lost their sensitiveness to concepts of right and justice and human dignity. I had rather wait for the assertion of those great qualities of character than see some impulsive and facile but deceptive unity sweep us into action from which we would later retreat.

I have spoken of these things, not to comment upon the international scene so much as to apply what is going on about us to your educational problem. The purpose of college is to provide an opportunity for you to make up your minds, to withdraw to some extent from day to day necessities in order to gain perspective, to allow reflection to develop maturity of mind in place of unstable impulse.

You can spend four years here, indeed you can graduate, without getting an education. Many in the past have achieved that doubtful distinction. They have gone away with pleasant memories and a sheepskin, never knowing that they left behind what was most precious. Others there are, and many, who never saw the inside of a college hall, and yet achieved the education privileged men have spurned.

Brown offers the opportunity for an education—but we give no warranty, express or implied, that the seeds we plant will bear fruit. Some doubtless will continue to fall by the way-
side, some upon stony places, and some among thorns. But we shall supply all the favorable elements we can.

There are four things here which can help you achieve an education. The first is environment, the second is perspective through study of the experience of the race. the third is perspective through theory, and last, but most important of all, is an accent upon values.

Among these four, environment is the most obvious. Here is a place set apart, equipped and endowed, giving visible and tangible evidence of an interest in the life of the mind. The libraries, the laboratories, the classrooms, and the dormitories—each of them contribute to that total environment. More important than those physical properties is the company of scholars joined together in a common pursuit of truth, in the great search for understanding and wisdom. There are also your fellow students, chosen with care, coming from near and far, from environments of great diversity into a company of great catholicity. In addition, there are memories of the men who have been here and have gone out equipped, in mind and heart, for great events in which they have played significant roles. You profit by the Brown University environment, and if you really gain an education, you also enrich that environment.

The perspective that comes from study of human experience is to be found in history and philosophy, in economics and sociology, in the languages and the literatures, and in the sciences which are themselves but cumulations of one phase of human experience. The interpretations of these subjects by different minds are far from uniform. There is no authentic doctrine of experience valid for all men and all times.
What will seem deeply significant and profoundly influential to one mind brings no challenge whatever to another. Yet all would agree that the more catholic your responses, and the more critical your evaluations, the more the experience of others will contribute to perspective in viewing the problems which will beset you through life.

Theory belongs beside experience as a contribution to perspective. For theory is nothing other than an attempt to give a coherent and relatively compact expression to accumulations of evidence. It seeks to bring order out of the chaos of data with which the mind can readily be overwhelmed. Every effort toward synthesis is consciously or unconsciously an attempt to arrive at a working theory and to give it adequate expression. You must guard against the strange, though common, assumption that theory represents unreality. Quite the reverse, it is an attempt to express reality within a formula that can be seized upon and used by the human mind.

But the greatest gift of this University is not to be found in environment, in experience, or in theory, but in its accent upon values. Standards of value can range from the lowest to the highest. At the bottom is that complete negation of significance epitomized in the well-known phrases, “Let us eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die”; “By mere chance were we born, and hereafter we shall be as though we had never been; because the breath in our nostrils is smoke, and while our heart beateth reason is a spark, which being extinguished, the body shall be turned into ashes, and the spirit shall be dispersed as thin air.”

The postulate upon which this University stands is at the
opposite extreme. The college would never have been founded, it would never have survived, it would never have grown and prospered without the sense of value epitomized in the motto upon our seal: "In Deo Speramus." It is a measure of value which puts all the intangibles at the head of the list—human dignity, embodied in the phrase of the Psalmist: "Ye are gods, and all of you are children of the Most High." From that central postulate flows the demand for freedom, for justice, for truth.

If that scale of values is valid, then other things may have to be sacrificed to maintain them. The physical standard of living, the ease and comfort, the pleasures may have to be sacrificed for a time in order that things of more exalted value may be preserved.

Your predecessors of 165 years ago had no wish to leave this environment and give up their studies, their comforts, such fortunes as they had, and even life itself in the War for Independence. But their studies would have been useless if they had not led them to express their mature characters in action which vindicated the values educated men have always held most precious.

Eighty years ago the issues of the Civil War seemed as confused to many as the issues of this war. Horace Greeley would have let the erring brothers go and the Union be destroyed, just as Herbert Hoover would now let Europe burn itself out. Then students of Brown turned from books to guns with the same reluctance as you do today, and only when it seemed necessary to vindicate in action the fundamental values for which the University itself stood.
The weighing of values forms the great significance of the reorientation of national policy now going forward. It is not an intellectual game. It is not even a cold calculation of national self-interest upon a material plane. What we now witness is the essential character of the American people manifesting itself in a determination to vindicate those values which are most precious.

Some of you will not be called to military service; others will take training and never fight, and be tempted to feel that you indulged in a futile gesture. For still others the moment of conflict may come. But though the nature of the service required of you may vary, the tradition of Brown demands that you vindicate its accent upon values.

You can do so here and now. Many of you come to your studies under a cloud of uncertainty. You should not let that disconcert you. Those are not idle words of advice; they are designed to remind you that throughout life you will be faced by uncertainties. Those you now face are only more dramatic than others. It is a manifestation of maturity of character to face with steadfastness and with courage the hazards which are part of life itself. That is your reasonable service.

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