COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

by

Dr. Henry M. Wriston

President, Brown University

at

Providence College

June 6, 1950
OPENING REMARKS

of The Very Reverend

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President, Providence College

Indeed "this is the day which the Lord hath made. Let us rejoice and be glad." In the year 1919-20, Providence College enrolled seventy-five students in its first academic year as a Liberal Arts College. The year 1949-50 just completed found an enrollment of 1972 students in our day classes and 838 in our evening extension classes, giving a total of 2,810 students attending the College.

Thirty years of academic life have passed and our sights are set on the next thirty years. Our College was established primarily to be of service to this Diocese and community and throughout the years "community service" in the interest of Christian Higher Education has been our goal. This was the mandate of the Most Reverend Matthew Harkins of blessed memory, who invited the Dominican Fathers to establish a college in this Diocese.

Our Sister Institutions of Higher learning in Rhode Island have manifested a continuing genuine interest in our academic work and have given generously of their cordiality and friendship. We envision a continuance of this friendship, so that we will avoid the pitfalls of separatist endeavors, which can become inimical to the common good of the community. We can never lose sight of the educational aims peculiar to each institution, which admit variety and enable each institution to achieve her own special objective in such a way as to contribute to the common welfare of all.

Is not this indeed an occasion for rejoicing? But first we thank God for His Providence over this Institution, whose name "Providence" constantly reminds us of the loving care and guidance of the Almighty. We rejoice that on this platform we have the Presidents of our Sister Institutions, who in honoring today honor us, and who I know rejoice with us because of our dedicated service in the field of education to the Community, the State and the Nation. This bond of unity is further exemplified by the President of the oldest College and University in Rhode Island, who is our Commencement speaker.

While we reflect on our youth, we cannot forget the rock of seven centuries from which Dominican education is hewn. The love of truth which was characteristic of St. Dominic in the thirteenth century marks his sons in the twentieth century.

We look to the future with faith; this faith is a yoke that emancipates minds from the thraldom of ignorance, error and doubt. We are not as children tossed about by every wind. We are rooted and founded in reality, the reality of the Supernatural. This power of the Supernatural must be manifested in our educational processes. We will have failed in the degree that we conform ourselves to secularism. It is our duty to translate our educational achievements into a quality of living worthy of the vocations unto which we have been called. Under Divine Providence, Providence College courageously looks ahead to fulfilling her educational mission in the State and in the Nation.

EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRACY

By Henry M. Wriston

No sensitive person could escape the implications of this moment. "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." Nowhere save in America could the great words of St. Paul have such dramatic illustration in the educational field. A little over a generation ago this College began in the minds of men as an act of faith. It would have been a bold mind, indeed, whose faith was adequate to foresee how quickly substance would be added to the vision, how deeply thought could take root and how swiftly come to maturity.
On this anniversary Providence College has sought to give public emphasis both to the variety and to the fellowship which exist among the institutions of higher education in this commonwealth. Honored today are publicly supported and privately supported institutions; church governed and non-sectarian: some new, some old. On behalf of my colleagues I bring hearty felicitations to Providence College and a sincere wish for its continuing growth and prosperity as it serves mankind by inculcating in youth the love of learning and the more perfect love of God.

The institutions represented here today are indeed different in manifold ways and, if one is to speak on their behalf, there must be some common theme appropriate to them all. Reflection suggests two central ideas they hold in common. All are engaged in the educative process and each is dedicated to carrying forward that responsibility in such a way as to make democracy more real and more potent as an idea, more effective as a way of life.

No one who looks abroad in the world can fail to observe that faith in democracy has ebbed during the last thirty years. From the days of that tyranny-shattering slogan, "a world safe for democracy," there has been not merely a marked recession in confidence in democracy as the best solvent for the world's problems; there is an evident doubt about the likelihood of its survival.

I wish it were possible to evoke from the memories of the older ones among you the triumphant tour of Europe by Woodrow Wilson. There seemed then no doubt in any mind that not only was democracy a valid ideal; it was the most powerful political concept in history—one which had been fully and finally vindicated. No one in the ecstasy of that triumph could have believed that Fascism and Nazism would shortly be born and that Communism would spread like wildfire across half the world—and more than half its population.

For those too young to have memories stirred by that great and dramatic episode in the history of democracy, I wish I might have the power, even for a brief moment, to implant in you a sense of the historic faith in the mission and destiny of America. Sometimes it led men in their enthusiasm to such flights of oratory as that of the character who offered this toast at the end of a liquid banquet: "I give you the United States,—bounded on the north by the Aurora Borealis, on the south by the precession of the equinoxes, on the east by the primeval chaos, and on the west by the Day of Judgment." It was bombastic; it should never have been said, for it was tainted with pride. But without condoning its jingoism, we must still recognize the confidence and the conviction it reflected: both the confidence and the conviction have unhappily vanished.

Instead of songs of triumph we hear much more of "democracy on trial." There is much public comment to the effect that we are losing the cold war; we are urged to "defend" democracy. Indeed, so deeply has the lack of confidence penetrated American life that our opponent in the cold war dares taunt us in the world forum. The spirit of success, Molotov asserted, now animates the Communists, while defeatism possesses the United States. He spoke of our "pessimistic lack of confidence in [our] own strength in so far as the prospect of peaceful competition between states and social systems is concerned." No American made a clear, firm, or explicit answer to the sneer. Unless we break this mood of pessimism and recover the confident temper which long animated our history, we will be beaten without a struggle.

My thesis today is that it is impossible to defend democracy unless one adopts the military aphorism that the best defense is offensive action. This is true because democracy is a positive idea; in no sense whatever does it contain any negative
quality. Since it represents, as by its very nature it must, an ideal rather than a status, any description of its current position is disheartening. That is characteristic of any of the primary aspirations of mankind. So the alarm about democracy, now so strident, has always existed in the minds of pessimists and perfectionists. Some men were wringing their hands over the end of democracy as early as the days of Thomas Jefferson; doubters have been wringing their hands ever since.

Any time a survey of democracy is made the result is dismal because the practices of democracy are never in accord with its professions; for as practices improve, the ideal leaps yet further ahead. The eyes of democracy must always be fixed forward toward some distant goal. If they are turned introspectively and self-consciously inward, the result is morbidity. Any negative idea, such as defense, therefore, which implies a fixed position, or a static program, or an immutable boundary, is always and must ever be wholly inapplicable to democracy. If ever democracy is put on the defensive for any considerable period of time it is lost; only when it emphasizes its positive aspect, the primacy of freedom, can it justify itself. That gives the cue for the subject which I wish to discuss today. It is the advance toward democracy through education.

We can educate for democracy; I make no apologies for putting a heavy emphasis upon the word “educate.” For a quarter of a century the public schools have not been talking primarily about “education” for citizenship. A different word has been used—a word with a different meaning, with implications quite different from the word “education.” “Training” for citizenship has been the slogan. The difference between “education” and “training” is not only real, it is extremely significant; for the goals of education on the one hand and of training on the other are far apart. Education looks to wisdom as its product, whereas training looks to skill as its outcome.

The basis of the educational process for many centuries lay in confidence that there were disciplines by which the powers of the mind could be developed and matured. In the twentieth century belief in that idea broke down. The monumental evidence that there were educated and cultured people who had undergone the old disciplines was rejected as proof of their efficacy. By a false inference from science, men fell into the error of thinking that if a thing could not be observed by experimental procedures, it did not exist. Thus there arose a marked skepticism as to whether a liberal education could be a reality.

The new science of psychology was struck with the success of experiments in the conditioned reflex, and many educational psychologists entertained a roseate hope that its techniques would have universal validity. Therefore emphasis was put upon skills readily identifiable and easily measured, rather than upon some nebulous thing called wisdom, which few could define and none could measure.

As the objective of schooling, skill has two inescapable weaknesses. First, its acquisition offers no guarantee whatever that it will ever be used; use depends partly upon demand and even more upon individual attitudes and energies, which are no part of the skill. The second conclusive reason why skill is not an adequate objective is that in itself skill carries no direction. It may be used equally for public service or for public detriment. These two weaknesses are demonstrated by the unsatisfactory outcome of the intensive study of civics, economics, and current events in the public schools and in the colleges over the last twenty years.

The Regents of the University of the State of New York made an exhaustive inquiry into the effects of education in New York. When the prospective capacity for citizenship of the school children had been reviewed, they published a volume on
training for citizenship. A distressing conclusion was recorded: students readily
gained information about current events and conditions, but as they learned those
facts there was a contemporaneous decline in the impulse to use their knowledge in
the public interest. Investigators found no evidence of high correlation between
the acquisition of data and the attainment of attitudes and ideas appropriate to dem-
ocratic citizenship.

It was an old lesson relearned—skill without wisdom is at best sterile, and at
worst dangerous. One of the great technicians in teaching American Government—
city, state, and national—resigned a famous professorship when he found Tammany
leaders using what he had taught them for evil ends. He learned at last that skill
alone was not education.

Wisdom functions as surely as skill operates haphazardly. For wisdom is no
mere trick, like skill; it is human maturity at its best. The basic technique of train-
ing, the conditioned response, has now been shown by the psychologists themselves to
be applicable only in limited fields; throughout America educators are reawakening
to the need for philosophical coherence among disparate skills. This has led to a
fresh emphasis upon what is called "general education."

If we are to educate for democracy, we must seek out the essentials of wisdom.
The first is perspective. Perspective is attained by broadening and lengthening ex-
perience far beyond the boundaries, either in time or space, of the life span of a
single individual. Experience, therefore, must be gained vicariously. By imagina-
tive processes the experience of people who lived long before our time and of peoples
in far countries must be assimilated into our own lives. Those experiences, though
alien in time and space, must come to possess the vividness, the completeness, and
the reality of our own memories. They must be reflected upon until they are
formed by each individual mind into coherent and significant ideas.

If acquaintanceship with human experience is the method and perspective is
the objective, it follows inescapably that remoteness in time or space has no adverse
effect upon the relevance of knowledge. The thinking of Plato and Aristotle with
regard to democracy is as real, as valid, and as informing as ever it was; the mere
nearness in time or space does not make the views of later and less significant people
more valuable.

The history of tyranny is long; indeed, the history of tyranny is even longer
than the history of democracy. Its transient character and the manner in which it has
always nurtured the seeds of its own destruction make it desirable for us to be familiar
with its record wherever and whenever it has appeared in human history. It will give
us more confidence in facing the Kremlin.

Perspective would reveal the absurd fallacy of the current cliche about "living
in a new world." The most urgent problem before the world at this moment is the
issue of peace or war. Was that not also the most exigent problem at the opening
of the second decade of the twentieth century? Was it not also the central issue as
the third decade drew to its close? Indeed, if one gives thought to the matter, the
problem of peace is as old as man; it is the tragedy of our time that this basic fact
has been forgotten. During the last generation it has been insisted that students had
been required to study too much about war and peace and not enough about social
and economic matters; too much of geography and history, not enough about cur-
rent and local issues.

Neglect to set the central problem of our time in its right historical perspec-
tive bears fruit in a generation that does not use the lessons of the past for the solu-
tion of its imminent and terrifying crisis. Only a generation which had forgotten
the experiences of the world could have been ecstatic about "the outlawry of war"; so transient was that illusion that members of the graduating class have scarcely heard of it, and most of the rest of us have forgotten it. No one with perspective would have expected that prohibition upon war would find an easier path to fulfillment than prohibition upon the use of alcohol.

Only a generation which was obstinately ignorant of the long, informative record of confederations and unions and treaties could have felt so much hope from an organization like the League of Nations or the United Nations. The past would have told them that whatever the forms may be, the substance of success lies in a will to peace, in a steadiness of purpose regarding peace which has been conspicuously lacking.

I would not be misunderstood: I was an ardent supporter of the League of Nations as long as even its shadow remained; I heartily believe in the United Nations and think we should make it one of our principal vehicles of policy. That position is founded upon the belief that through constant use it may grow into an instrument of value—and of power. The difficulty has been that we looked upon the League of Nations as a finished product, when only the scaffolding was up; we concentrated our energy upon the framework of the Charter of the United Nations instead of upon the dreary, unheroic, day-to-day task of breathing life into its bare bones.

Today we press for a Union of Europe. We forget that pressure, which is essentially transient, cannot blot out the history of hundreds of years which shaped the modern patterns of Europe. That pattern will change. I hope progress toward union will accelerate: but it is naive not to realize that time is an element in politics; and time is something man did not create, cannot control—but must understand.

Perspective, I say, is the cure for many things—the antidote for over-excitement about small issues, the check upon grandiose hopes of global solutions. If one's perspective is right, then the perennial crop of panaceas, every new group of Utopians, and many "catastrophic" events fall each into its proper niche among passing phenomena, and not infrequently among the trivial. There is profound wisdom in the early scriptural remark, "This also shall pass away."

It is not necessary to take too literally the old saying, "The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be, and that which is done, is that which shall be done, and there is no new thing under the sun." Nor need we believe that the pattern of history is "sealed" or that history reveals "laws" of universal validity. Without going so far, it is nonetheless evident that the shock and terror of incidents decline if we recall that the same sort of thing has happened before, and that the world had survived. On the morrow of the 1938 hurricane, we were told that the glory of New England was gone. But today, eleven and a half years later, when so much of the damage has been repaired, and in the springtime with its smiles, we can realize that wind and flood came before—in 1815 and in 1869; yet the splendor and the glory of New England survive.

What is true of our physical world is true of the world of affairs. As the war drew near in 1939 one of our self-conscious "policy makers" recorded in his diary his "feeling of seeing civilization breaking, of seeing it dying before its actual death." Musing upon the arrogance of this banality—the fruit of knowledge foreshortened and without perspective—ought to be helpful in these days of doubt regarding democracy.

Democracy is not some fresh and untried invention: it is a sturdy growth maturing through the centuries. In Britain and America, at least, its roots have
struck deep into the soil. In countries where it was set out as an exotic plant, the intense heat of the World War and its aftermath has blighted it or destroyed it. Where democracy was grafted onto an alien stock, the graft, in some cases, has parted and the bough has withered. But those events, unhappy and unfortunate as they are, do not affect its ultimate validity.

It is perfectly clear, however, that perspective has not been a primary objective in the public schools or in many colleges during the last three decades. Emphasis has shifted to knowledge of today, and to skills immediately useful. The social studies have been crowded with data of the current scene; successive editions of textbooks have tumbled from presses to keep up to date.

The material is out of focus. The simple fact is that the distant past is no more dead to youth than the recent past. If an event happened before he was born, it is just as dead as one which occurred a hundred or a thousand years ago. We may remind ourselves that the students in college today know nothing of the first World War except what they are told; to them Caesar is no more dead, either physically or spiritually, than Woodrow Wilson. Good teaching can make one life as real as the other.

There is, however, one vital difference: the competent teacher can indicate the ultimate effect of the policies of Caesar, but no man can yet fully evaluate the outcome of the policies of Woodrow Wilson. From the teaching standpoint, in the effort to develop perspective as one of the constituent elements of wisdom, events which are long past (the ultimate results of which can be adequately assessed and fairly evaluated) are often much more useful than those more recent happenings, the meanings of which belong in the realm of volatile opinion rather than of established knowledge.

In recent educational emphasis, distance in space has been treated much like distance in time. The "artificial ties" with Europe, against which Washington warned in the Farewell Address, have been replaced by real ties—with steam and motor vessels, airplanes, telephone, and radio. At the very time when those things have linked us more closely with the old world than ever before, it is held that the teaching of foreign languages is unnecessary. There have been two world wars in one generation, in the course of which nearly four million Americans, who still live, have been abroad. Even in peacetime Americans are the most inveterate travelers in history, so that today one of the principal hopes of plugging the "dollar gap" comes from tourism. Yet when there is more contact than ever before with the peoples who speak other tongues the teaching of their languages is held to be irrelevant.

The time is coming and is not far distant when we will watch events in Europe firsthand through the eyes of the camera, and television will draw those peoples across the sea into our own living rooms. Even now many millions of Americans are in direct contact with foreign languages by radio, on the regular broadcast band or by direct short-wave reception. Indeed, Americans are the only people who turn on the radio with the bath and turn it out with the cat. Yet the languages of the world, with all their contributions to perspective, have been caricatured as only "traditional" studies and as having no "magic"; they have been treated with ridicule. The capacity to enter directly into the thought of other people is a fundamental element in perspective.

After perspective, the second important constituent of wisdom as a basis for education for democracy is disciplined emotion. Disciplined emotion is a sound response to values. Such an ideal is as far as possible from the ideal of the conditioned reflex.
If we want to develop a warm but controlled emotional response, we should deal with events and issues where prejudices do not intrude, because prejudice makes for uncurbed emotions. If the matter in hand is wholly detached from current interests and daily irritations, then the discipline of emotion is facilitated. If for example, a student reads Euripides' "Trojan Women," he can feel the depth of emotion as Hecuba looked upon the burning city she loved.

"Ah, me! and is it come, the end of all,
The very crest and summit of my days?
I go forth from my land, and all its ways
Are filled with fire! Bear me, O aged feet,
A little nearer: I must gaze, and greet
My poor town ere she fall.
Farewell, farewell!
O thou whose breath was mighty on the swell
Of orient winds, my Troy! Even thy name
Shall soon be taken from thee. Lo, the flame
Hath thee, and we, thy children pass away
To slavery . . . God! O God of mercy! . . . Nay
Why call I on the Gods? They know, they know
My prayers, and would not hear them long ago.
Quick, to the flames! O, in thine agony,
My Troy, mine own, take me to die with thee!"

You will not find human passion more poignant, you will not find human loyalty more intense than that. It could have been said by some mother watching the City of London in the blitz, by a victim of Stalingrad, by any woman of Hiroshima; but it is not distorted by the other influences that make those recent tragedies so difficult fairly to evaluate.

Things of the past, in other words, are as "discoverable," they are as new to students, as guessing what Stalin is going to do next. The student can approach them upon an intellectual plane: he can make his emotional response, and then test, in the event, the validity of his judgment of the values. Thus in the classics, now so heartily scorned as "remote" and "dead," students may find, in high relief, the whole gamut of human passions, the whole range of human feelings. They show men grappling with the same moral problems the world faces today. There students may find ideas as clear and thoughts as noble as those for which we hunger at the present moment.

It is infinitely significant that we impress upon every coin, down to the last penny, "In God we trust." But you will look in vain for it carved over the door of any public school in the United States. Attention is no longer given to the eternal verities. Indeed, in this "new" world, in this "modern" flux, anything as stable as an eternal verity is regarded as statistically impossible! Why anyone should expect a healthy emotional response to democracy to develop in such an atmosphere is difficult for me to imagine.

Contrast, if you will, the educational reform of Denmark after it had been stripped of its glories and its possessions. Those who sought to reawaken Denmark and set it upon a new course did not attempt it by showing all the weaknesses and shortcomings which had led to defeat; they did not dwell upon the rape of Schleswig-Holstein, they did not linger over the loss of two-fifths of the land, they did not harp upon economic doctrine, and they did not prate of social amelioration. They said nothing about how the people were clothed or fed or whether a third of them had too much or a third of them had too little.
Instead, they carried the peasants back to the folk songs, the old legends, the stories of ancient days—to the wisdom of the ages. They sought to inspire those beaten youth, they sought to reawaken courage and the spirit of piety. Christian Kold exclaimed on one occasion, "When I am inspired I can speak so that my hearers will remember what I say even beyond this world!" Their aim, in other words, was not to bring the facts of everyday life to the youth of beaten Denmark; it was disciplined emotion which they had as their goal. They believed that, if you awaken courage and inculcate a sound judgment of values, then knowledge will take care of itself. If minds are stimulated and hearts are warmed, then the formulation of policy also will take care of itself. The event has proved they were abundantly right.

The process in America has been the precise reverse. Determinedly, the story of the race, on the social and the political side, has been robbed of the sense of victory and achievement; it is all too often interpreted as a record of exploitation and frustration. In fact, the only "success story" currently popular in the public schools is in the field of science, which is ethically neutral, and serves with even hand the will bent upon constructive effort or destructive purpose.

The emphasis has been shifted from the triumphs in American life to its shortcomings and its failures. We hear little now of the rise from the cabin to the presidency; we hear less and less of the gifts of the industrial revolution, which has brought the slaves of the lamp and many other slaves to do our bidding, and more and more of technological unemployment, until fear rather than courage is the emotion which we inspire.

Democracy, itself, has been criticised as not giving "security." If one seeks to discipline emotional response for life in a democracy, I say to you that security is the worst possible ideal. When Woodrow Wilson asked for a world safe for democracy, Gilbert Chesterton retorted, "Impossible; democracy is a dangerous trade." So indeed it is, for if democracy does not live dangerously, then democracy does not live at all.

If you set up a political slogan of "Safety first," it is corrosive of the very central ideal of democracy. Democracy requires the pursuit of many ideals and their pursuit is always inherently hazardous; to set safety above them ends our pursuit before it is fairly started. It is therefore, no accident that an age which has made a fetish of "security," an age which seeks to escape the hazards of life, has not been effective educationally in forwarding the democratic ideal. Democracy is a great human adventure, and only the adventurous spirit makes it possible. The sense of adventure is an emotional matter, and education must deal constructively with the emotions as well as with the intellect.

There is a third aspect of wisdom of which I would speak this morning. Wisdom is not easily acquired. "For at the first she will walk with him in crooked ways, and will bring fear and dread upon him, and torment him with her discipline. . . . If he go astray, she will forsake him, and give him over to his fall." Patience is necessary, but industry is even more so. Industry is the third important constituent of wisdom, yet the virtue of hard work is selling at a serious discount in the public schools of America.

So meanly do we regard our children that one of the commonest assertions is that the disciplines which have so long charmed the minds of men are "too hard." Schools doubtful of their own programs, schools crowded with students kept there against their wills by the law of the land, schools under political pressure to "pass" their students, schools suddenly supersensitive to the psychological dangers involved
in the concept of failure have tended consistently to substitute less and less arduous and infinitely less significant materials of instruction. It is a self-defeating program, if wisdom is our goal.

It has been preached for twenty-five years now that the failure of the student is the failure of the teacher, as though failure were not one of the common, one of the inescapable experiences of life. "Passing the buck" for failure from the student to the instructor establishes an escape mechanism that will exact a dreadful toll in years to come. Learning by industry and by foresight to escape failure is one of life's greatest lessons, and to short-circuit that lesson by abolishing failure by edict is to give a false definition of success and to lend an illusion of achievement where none exists. Such a course of action, whatever the motive, must put industry at a discount, just as blaming things on "society" relieves the individual of his sense of personal responsibility.

No one wants to abuse the youth of today, but we are in far more danger of killing them by mistaken kindness than by overwork. Much of course can be done by modern devices to facilitate instruction. But when the last movie reel is put back in its tin box and all the sugar coating has been sucked from the pill, the process of learning will still be difficult. Whoever pretends that it is easy is cheating our youth. Any procedure which miscalls failure by the name of success does not advance, but prevents education. Any refusal to make a boy face ideas, because ideas are more difficult to grasp than facts, results in simply stuffing him instead of educating him. Any pretense that the material can really be "correlated" outside his own mind misleads him.

Learning, the use of the mind, is hard work. It requires industry of a courageous kind. I have seen many a boy who would sweat all summer building roads quail before a book. But books must be faced; and even worse awaits. What is there must be remembered and reflected upon until it is no longer a piece of a book stuck into the mind, but until the ideas are digested and become an integral part of the mind, just as food well digested becomes part of the body.

Democracy is the most difficult, it is the most dangerous form of government. It achieves progress in the hardest possible way, in the belief that the process is as important as the result. That process is the realization of the fullest potentiality of each individual citizen—not merely his most convenient use by the state, but his richest self-realization. To that end the state, in normal times, waits upon his voluntary activity for the solution of its hardest problems. Democracy seeks to fulfill that ancient ideal: "The multitude of the wise is the welfare of the world." That ideal can never be attained by training for skills alone; it may be attained by education for wisdom—through perspective, response to values, and industry.

These are the tasks all the institutions here represented share in common. These are the goals which all must seek. In this sense, whatever the form of organization, or the habiliments of our faculties, or the source of our revenue, we are all public institutions: all are dedicated to the realization of the democratic ideal through education.