

Commencement Address, Schoellkopf Field, May 30, 1977

Dale R. Corson

Members of the graduating classes, family and friends of graduates, members of the faculty, trustees:

For you graduates and for me, today is a finale. This is the last movement in the composition, the concluding part of the performance. You proceed from this place to a career, a profession. I proceed to a modified form of unemployment. I'm marking what Harvard's John King Fairbanks has termed "the passage from distinction to extinction."

For me it's the end of a Commencement-to-Commencement cycle. At the 1970 Commencement I was invested--much like stocks and bonds--as Cornell's eighth president. Today is the last Cornell Commencement over which I will preside as Cornell's president. You made it in four years, it took me eight.

When you who are receiving degrees today first came to the University, your main aspiration was to arrive at this day, to become Cornell degree holders.

When I first came to Cornell in 1946 I had no aspiration to be president of the University. Fate, of course, plays a large part in the way anyone is propelled into a role such as the one I've played the last eight years, and fate has been my constant companion.

When you were accepted for admission to Cornell, there were 5.4 others clamoring for your spot. When I was elected president, there was no other candidate. In fact, there was no candidate at all. You were and are a select group. I was dragooned.

You've determined your path to this time and this place more than I've determined mine, but here we both are. So let's savor it together.

You've prospered and grown. I've survived and grown older. I'm standing here, in the need of prayer, looking forward to hearing the Glee Club sing a Latin anthem beseeching the Lord to "make safe our president."

I stand here proud to be among you and to share in your day of attainment. I feel much like the mule who was entered against Seattle Slew in the Kentucky Derby and again in the Preakness. An incredulous race track rail bird asked the farmer who owned the mule why in the world he ever entered it. "I know he can't win," replied the farmer, "but I thought the association would do him good". I'm proud to be associated with you, but I have a tip. This particular mule won't be entered in the Belmont.

Clark Kerr, at one time president of the University of California, has been one of the most perceptive commentators on university presidencies. Kerr said he left the California presidency the same way he assumed it, fired with enthusiasm.

Kerr has said the university president in the United States is expected, among other things, to be a friend, colleague, good fellow, sound administrator, good public speaker, astute bargainer, politician, press spokesman, "devotee of opera and football equally," a decent human being, good husband and father, an active member of the church.

Let me tell you based on eight years of experience, no one can be all these things. Some succeed at being none. I've tried to be as many as possible.

I've tried to be a stabilizer and a facilitator in restoring Cornell to equilibrium, an equilibrium it needed "In those days," as John Masefield wrote, "Of broken frontiers and collapsing values...When dams (were) down and the floods (were) making misery...When every future (looked) somewhat grim...And every ancient foothold...(Had) become something of a quagmire."

My goal, however, was more than stabilization. It was to do as C. L. Sulzberger once urged, "accelerate the pace but escape the convulsion."

The pace was accelerated, the convulsion escaped. We at Cornell achieved stability, but we also kept the University and, most importantly, its academic program strong. We've been able to achieve significant academic developments in spite of the difficulties of the late 1960s and the early 1970s. Academic programs have been strengthened, others revitalized, yet others begun.

Through the years of student unrest and months of financial crisis, Cornell stood and today it "stands and shines". This standing is a credit, not to any single individual, but to all Cornellians. You, Cornellians all, are responsible for restoring Cornell to its proper place. I'm indebted to you and I thank you.

You must be alert to the future. Cornell must go into the future strengthened by the conviction of its quality. It needs and will benefit from the vigorous leadership of its ninth president, Frank H. T. Rhodes. I call upon all Cornellians to stand with President-elect Rhodes and to help him as he confronts the problems which face Cornell and which face all of higher education.

The pool of students available to higher educational institutions will decrease in size and the question becomes which university will get the best students. There will continue to be the inevitable struggle for resources between the private and the public institutions. Cornell must continue to attract faculty of the highest quality. Consumerism among students will grow. Students will not pay the charges if the teaching is not the best. There must be a continuing and increasing emphasis on undergraduate education. Public accountability will grow also and governmental intrusion will increase. Faculty must increasingly explain to the public what they do and why they do it. It will be necessary to prove that research has brought great public benefit in the past. Allied to this, science can no longer be amoral. Witness recombinant DNA research. Witness attitudes about nuclear power.

Given the necessary response to the public, life in a university can continue to be the great intellectual experience it has always been for the best students and for the best faculty, but it will no longer be possible to pursue that life without interference from the outside.

The opportunity to be at Cornell has been a great privilege for me and for Mrs. Corson. The opportunity to associate with, and be part of, a faculty of the quality we have here; the opportunity to teach students of the ability we have at Cornell, the opportunity to count as friends the hundreds, the thousands of supportive alumni we've come to know; the opportunity to work with a Board of Trustees with the ability and the dedication of the Cornell Board, the opportunity to work with an administrative staff and a University work force of such dedication, and in many cases, of such uncommon ability; the opportunity to live in a physical setting of such natural beauty--these have all been privileges of the highest order. For these we are grateful.

In our years at Cornell, we have experienced the exhilaration of extraordinary achievement by faculty colleagues, by students, by athletic teams. We've experienced the exhilaration of Commencement on a glorious spring day. We've also known the sorrow, the terrible empty sorrow, of brilliant lives ended too soon, of young lives lost before their promise ever bloomed, of tragedy thrust on us from every direction. Perhaps we, more than most, have felt the sorrow because our lives, more than most, have been interwoven with the life of the whole University.

Today is a day of joy, the joy of commencement, of beginning. It is a day of joy for the entire University. Today is a day of attainment and of hope. The attainment of a Cornell degree is an accomplishment achieved with much effort and sacrifice. It's an accomplishment of which you can all be proud. You parents should feel particular pride. Having children in college is an extensive and an expensive experience filled with sacrifices and anxieties. Let me assure you parents that your graduates are worthy of the support and confidence you have given them.

You who graduate today have benefitted from a sense of obligation to the Cornell future on the part of past generations. I ask that you reciprocate, that you be mindful as Cornellians of Cornell's heritage and the need continually to strengthen the University to make it more than eminent, to make it preeminent.

You have benefitted from the many opportunities available to you. Cornell has come a long way from the days in which the first general announcement of the University boasted of "two laboratories well equipped..." and when financial aid was summed up in the statement, "there is much labor to be done on the farm attached to the Agricultural department, and a large number of students can be employed from one to three hours a day, at fair prices."

You have over the past four years proven the third law of academic motion. That law asserts that to every administrative action there is an equal and opposite reaction. You have reacted. Sometimes you not only have reacted, but you have come to my office to help me make decisions. Sometimes as many as 200 of you came to my office at the same time to help me. Sometimes you didn't want to leave.

But today you're leaving. You enter a society more optimistic and less cynical than in recent years. You enter a society so devoid of heroes that the adulation given the memory of Charles Lindbergh these past few weeks indicates our need to take heroes of the past as our own. You enter a world of freedom where you will need values, morality, civility and honesty. These are qualities not taught directly in the University's curriculum, but they are the most important qualities of all.

It was T.S. Eliot who said "The world turns and the world changes, But one thing does not change". That one thing is the "perpetual struggle" between good and evil. I hope that your Cornell experience and the example set by

those of us who were your teachers, your administrators and your friends have helped you clarify the values which you will carry with you forever. "Tis nobler to be good," said Mark Twain. "Tis nobler still to teach others to be good--and much less trouble."

I hope Cornell has given you the necessary values and I hope Cornell has nurtured in you appropriate perceptions and clear perspectives, has shown you the forest as well as the trees. "Where is the Life we have lost in living?", T.S. Eliot wrote. "Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?" "Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?"

Lindbergh took his quest to the sky. He once said there was in each person "a spark able to kindle new fires of human progress, new light for the human spirit."

Tennyson wrote of the magician Merlin's pursuit of a vision of hope and idealism he called the Gleam. The aging Merlin urges a young sailor to take up the quest.

"O young Mariner,
Down to the haven,
Call your companions,
Launch your vessel,
And crowd your canvas,
And, ere it vanishes
Over the margin,
After it, follow it,
Follow the Gleam."

So, kindle new fires and kindle a new light. Follow the Gleam. The quest now is yours.

Goodbye and good luck.