



ADDRESS TO THE GRADUATES

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I am most indebted to the President and Trustees of this distinguished University and, indeed, to all of you gathered here today on this festive occasion — both for the distinction of the degree and for the privilege of forever after being considered your fellow alumnus. The introduction was most warm and generous.

Sir John Wilson, a distinguished British barrister, was always pleased by American introductions. In England, as he pointed out to me, one was customarily introduced with cool civility. In France, the introductions could last twenty minutes or more and the chairman, who had insisted on seeing the speaker's notes beforehand, often left the speaker desperately improvising new material. Or, in South Asia, as I discovered, I was frequently called to the podium an hour or more after I was supposed to conclude, but with the hope expressed that I would realize that the program was running late.

After my return from Switzerland and our final conquest of smallpox, I was regularly asked to distill from that experience the single most important lesson I had learned. That seemed like a quite impossible task but I did give the matter a great deal of thought. I concluded finally that the ultimate lesson was to choose carefully one's area of specialization. Over the course of a decade, I had achieved international status as an expert in smallpox. Like any recognized specialist, I had come to know more and more about less and less. And, suddenly, there was no smallpox — and certainly no market for those skills. What else was I suited to be but a Dean?

Fourteen years as a Dean trains one well in dealing with parking problems which are never solved; tuition fees which are always too high; faculty salaries which are always too low; and student services which never seem to match what the students seem to want. Good training to become science advisor to the President.

And certainly, that role provided a unique view of the world, although not so glamorous as some might believe. As I came to learn, status and perquisites preoccupied many. I was amused by the three most greatly envied perks of the White House senior advisors. The first was one's telephone number. A "456" exchange, I was told, was given only to the most senior advisors and that everyone in Washington recognized this. However, I never discovered anyone outside of the White House who was aware of this. The second perk was admission to the White House Mess — a pleasant enough room in the West Wing seating perhaps 30 people and served by Navy Mess stewards. The menu was imprinted with a great Presidential seal and carried no prices. One's guests were duly impressed that one could eat so well every day at taxpayers' expense. What they didn't know was that at the end of the month one received a personal bill for some of the most expensive lunches in Washington. The third perk was the chauffeured limousines but after John Sununu's too generous use of such transportation, the motor pool shrank in size so dramatically that most of us used the common taxi or walked. As with so many other positions, the perks proved illusory and of little relevance compared to the substance of what was accomplished. And, to me, accomplishment is what distinguishes an interesting job from dull routine.

For a new graduate one of the most vexing questions, and the one most often posed to me is, quite simply — I want to do something meaningful, something substantive, with my life, something challenging, something which offers the satisfaction of achievement. Where do I begin?

But where you begin is the wrong question. If you focus on tomorrow, next week, next month, even next year, you remain chained to the present. There is a need to look beyond the beginning — to dream and to dream even what others may regard as unrealistic or impossible.

I recall well when we first talked seriously about the global eradication of smallpox, we received from our mentors no end of sage advice — best summarized in terms of "can't be done," "social utopia," "never been done before," "impossible to mobilize all countries to do anything." Fortunately — and I do mean fortunately — we were young then and all too inexperienced in the vagaries of world politics and all too ignorant of the litany of failures in social programs. We had a dream and, technically, we saw no reason why that dream could not be realized.

Our first steps were tentative ones with any number of false starts and mistakes but we continued to focus on the ultimate goal of eradication. We were soon to discover that our principal obstacles were often as not the most experienced and knowledgeable politicians and scientists who offered all manner of reasons why particular initiatives and

strategies would fail. As they saw it, there was, in fact, no need to experiment with new approaches which were predictably doomed to failure. Never mind that many of these had never been tried. Increasingly, in our recruiting, we enlisted staff whose primary attributes were motivation, intelligence and willingness to make a commitment — past experience became less and less relevant and the average age of our staff became ever younger. Eventually, our international staff comprised nearly half of all staff in the World Health Organization under the age of 40.

It was a dedicated staff from many parts of the world who were far better at digging a Landrover out of the mud than attending a diplomatic reception. Much to everyone's surprise, young women, even in profoundly orthodox Muslim countries such as Afghanistan, performed in an extremely capable manner; Russians worked well with Americans even during the coldest of the Cold War. We were united in a common goal.

A program strategy of outbreak control and vaccination worked well but long before eradication was achieved, we began looking beyond this immediate goal to ask why all children should not be vaccinated against other serious diseases like polio, measles, diphtheria, whooping cough, tetanus and tuberculosis. Vaccines against these diseases were in widespread use in the wealthy industrialized countries but no more than two in 100 children in the developing world — 2% — were being vaccinated. Hospital wards were full of children paralyzed by polio or dying of whooping cough and tetanus. More than one billion doses of vaccine each year would be needed.

We met with health officials, we held meetings, we asked for help from various assistance Agencies and we described our vision to the Press. It was patiently explained to us again and again that smallpox eradication was a special case and that there was little interest in supporting such an ambitious scheme. However, we began with what we had and steadily, step by step, we recruited increasing support. By 1980 — some 20% of the world's children were being vaccinated. UNICEF and Rotary International joined the effort and ten years later — in 1990 — an international summit including 73 heads of state met in New York to celebrate the goal we had set of vaccinating 80% of the world's children against 6 major diseases.

In 1985, another goal was set — to eradicate poliomyelitis from the Western Hemisphere and this August we will celebrate the third year without a single case of polio in any country of the Americas. Now we are engaged in a global polio eradication campaign and yet another initiative to develop new and more effective vaccines for universal use — hopefully a vaccine against AIDS will be one of those vaccines.

Many public health staff, from many nations, have participated and are participating as architects and builders in this grand venture — a venture which in less than 30 years has reached the point where more than 5 million fewer deaths are occurring each year. And, in every country, as more children survive, the birth rates are falling. The outcome — fewer, but healthier children.

What has been the secret of success? The reasons are two and they are today no different than they were 25 years ago. In every meeting I attend — there are a remarkably large number of young people — motivated and enthusiastic — who have yet to learn all the reasons why the seemingly impossible cannot be achieved. The strength of their convictions, and their creativity derives from being in the field, seeing for themselves, listening to workers and clients at all levels, constantly asking the questions — can't we do better, can't we do more? By and large, they are not very good at routine office work and they are highly allergic to diplomatic receptions and cocktail parties.

Are there other international challenges out there besides that of immunization? Countless. What we require is vision, imagination and youth. To me, the view is brighter than ever if we now seize the challenge.

We have emerged into a post Cold-War period with an opportunity for the first time in 50 years to reduce significantly the hemorrhage of resources and personnel into military armament. Forty years ago, President Eisenhower, a soldier by profession I remind you, said in a speech: "Every gun that is fired, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the formal sense, a theft from those who are hungry and not fed, those who are fed and not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone, it is spending the sweat of labors, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children." Resources are not, in fact, the limiting factor. We can now foresee both the prospect and the mechanisms which could realize Toynbee's prophecy that the latter part of the 20th century could be the age

when the welfare of the whole of the human race becomes a legitimate concept and a practical possibility. Many of the abstract terms of human rights embodied in the United Nation's declaration of 40 years ago can now be restated in terms of realistic possibilities.

But I feel an urgency in what we do and this is well captured in the words of the Chilean poet, Gabriela Mistral:

"Many of the things we need can wait
The Child cannot
Right now is the time his bones are being formed, his blood
being made and his senses are being developed.
To him, we cannot answer "Tomorrow"
His name is "Today."

I wish you all meaningful, productive and challenging careers. You are needed.