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...Commentary... Frank Reynolds...

“I know there is much evidence, from current polls and recent elections to support the view that college students are not necessarily the most beloved creatures in the land these days. Their long hair seems to be getting into everybody else's, and it is easy to get a roar from almost any audience by denouncing them as unwashed punks who want to tear down the establishment.

Almost any audience, but, I want to suggest to you tonight that other audiences this un-silent spring have heard a very different message.

Those who have attended commencement exercises, and others who are now beginning to talk to their returning sons and daughters have heard denunciations not of the students—but of contradictions in American life and problems at home and abroad that have made the students so angry.

And, who are these people—the parents of today's college students? They are card carrying members of the silent majority—that's who.

The other day, I attended a commencement ceremony at a small mid-western college noted for its' strict curriculum and conservatism. The main speech was delivered not by some aging prophet like me, but by a member of the graduating class. There were no obscenities—no personal attacks on any political leader—just a calm and thoughtfully worded rejection of hypocrisy and double talk and an almost plaintive plea for honesty—for understanding and peace.

At the end of the young man's talk—which contained no trace of self-righteousness, the silent majority rose from their folding chairs and gave him and his class mates a standing ovation.

Perhaps there is a temporary political advantage to be won by denouncing the students and no doubt people are tired of hearing the shouts of the wild men who make so much noise, but we are now hearing an equally disturbing message from our sons and daughters, most of them non-violent and that standing ovation the other day suggests we are listening.”

Some Thoughts of Hope In Time of War

Commencement Address
by William C. Placher

Wabash graduates, according to the admissions brochures, go on to prominent graduate schools, to pre-professional training, to important posts in business. This year, instead, a large number go on to be drafted into the army. Of those, many will serve in Vietnam, some will be wounded, perhaps a few will die. There's no way of figuring the exact percentage in advance. But seven Wabash men have already died in the war in Vietnam; and nearly all those who enter the armed services, whether killed, wounded, or eventually discharged unhurt will spend much of the next four years learning, not how to be teachers, lawyers, researchers, or businessmen, not how to begin their families, but how to shoot a gun, to drive a bayonet into a stomach, to kill.

All the traditional phrases about the glorious opportunities that await us as college graduates ring pretty hollow.

I didn't want to talk about the war. You're tired of hearing about it, and I'm tired of thinking about it. But I found I just couldn't be honest with you or with myself and talk about anything else. I am not a political scientist or a military expert; I cannot lecture you on the complexities of the present situation. But I think I can describe my own experience as a college senior graduating in the sixteenth year of American involvement in the Vietnam War, and maybe some of the conclusions I've drawn from that experience will have some meaning for you.

In 1955, when most of us who are graduating today were in the second grade, Secretary of the Army Bricker assured the American people that within a year or two the Communist threat in Vietnam would be ended and that country would no longer need American assistance. In 1963, when we were sophomores in high school Secretary of Defense MacNamara promised that American advisors in Vietnam would be home by Christmas. A year later, Lyndon Johnson was elected President on the promise that American boys would not have to fight a war for Asians. Four years later, Richard Nixon was elected President on a promise to end the war in Vietnam. And a year and a half after that, the first American boys were killed in Cambodia.

Can we be blamed for growing suspicious about what our government tells us about Vietnam? We are promised a rapid American withdrawal, but we have been hearing such promises literally most of our lives. We are told that Americans are fighting for the right of the Vietnamese to choose their own government, but we have read Dwight Eisenhower's admission that if free elections in Vietnam had not

been prevented by the United States in 1955, Ho Chi Minh would have won an overwhelming victory. We are told we fight for the American way of life, but when we see black men oppressed in the ghetto, when we see those who exercise their constitutional right to protest called "bums" or shot down, we find it hard to see the Vietcong as the greatest threat to American freedom. We are told that the Vietcong, who have not been defeated by all of America's military power, are somehow going to be beaten by a South Vietnamese army which has yet to show any eagerness to fight, and we wonder if "Vietnamization" isn't another word for "political expedience", when it becomes easier to let young men go on dying than to publicly admit that one's policy has failed.

I do not ask that all of you share this viewpoint, only that you try to understand the experience behind it. I may be wrong, but surely it is possible to be honestly wrong. Surely it is possible to be patriotic and hate what's happening to the country you love. Possible to hate a war, not out Communism or anarchism, but because it's killing your friends to no good purpose.

In 1907 Ezra Pound came to Wabash College to teach English, lived in a house over there on Grant Street. A few years later, after World War I, he wrote some lines peculiarly appropriate for the class of 1970:

These fought in any case,
and some believing,
pro domo, in any case . . .
Some quick to arm,
some for adventure,
some from fear of weakness,
some from fear of censure,
some for love of slaughter, in imagination,
learning later . . .



some in fear, learning love of slaughter;
Died some, pro patria
non "dulce", non "et decor" . . .
walked eye-deep in hell
believing in old men's lies, then unbelieving
came home, home to lie,
home to many deceits,
home to old lies and new infamy;
usury age-old and age-thick
and liars in public places.

To all this there are no easy answers, and I do not propose to insult you by offering any. Yet I do not want to dwell only on a note of despair. Had this speech been given ten years ago, I could have been very fashionable and tried to depress all of you. That was a time when some college students loved to attack the apparent self-satisfaction of their society and speak at great length of "alienation" and "existential anguish." Time has proven true their suspicion that all was not well. But today, in the midst of war, with cities and campuses alike erupting into violence and mankind apparently fated in the end to sink under the mass of its own garbage, it surely takes no particular insight to be depressed. And so it may prove worthwhile to look for reasons for hope. Let me offer you, then, three fragments to shore up the ruins of the times.

The first is from Albert Camus' novel *The Plague*, in which a doctor recounts the grim struggles of his city when swept with an epidemic of the bubonic plague and at the end explains that he has written this "To state quite simply what we learn in a time of pestilence: that there are more things to admire in men than to despise."

It's hard not to think of this as a time of pestilence for our country. But perhaps we can begin to learn the same lesson. We began, I think, to learn it at Wabash the week after Kent State, when we found that our college president was more courageous, our faculty more receptive, our students more concerned than we had expected. The years ahead will be difficult, and it may be beyond the capacity of any of the people around us to solve any of the real problems. But wherever we go, some people will try to help us, some people will care about what happens to the world, some people will show their love in the way they live, and we may learn, in a time of pestilence, that there are more things to admire in men than to despise.

The second lines come from a poem W. H. Auden wrote when Sigmund Freud died. Of those, like Freud, who battle the demons that beset men, he wrote:

... For every day they die
Among us, those who were doing us some good
And knew it was never enough but
Hoped to improve a little by living.

This is a time when it is hard to be both honest with yourself and proud of yourself. A few brave soldiers hate to kill but are willing to die; a few go to jail for their principles; most of us sell out somewhere in between. And if my birthday makes me safe from the draft, so I don't want to take any risks by causing trouble, who am I to judge anybody else?

Well, most of us aren't heroes; we already knew that. But these are challenging times, and even ordinary men sometimes respond to challenges. In the years ahead, in the

army, on the campus, in the corporation, many of us may, for reasons we will never quite understand, act more bravely or speak out more honestly, than we had quite intended. We may do some good, and know it will never be enough, but hope to improve a little by living.

My third beacon of hope is a movie called "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid." Two very appealing outlaws are constantly threatened by pursuers and shot to death in the last scene. Yet though everyone sympathizes with them, the film is hilariously funny, and no one leaves the theater depressed. I suspect this is because, while the heroes or antiheroes or whatever are surely among life's losers and end up shot, they have a hell of a lot of fun along the way.

There's a feeling around that if one can't actually do anything about Vietnam or racism or pollution, one can at least have the decency to be miserably unhappy. I think that's stupid. A real concern for these problems makes us want to seize the joy that remains in the world. Whether it's the joy of a summer hike in Turkey Run, the joy of being with someone we love, the joy of creative accomplishment—all these are good; all the evil in the world can't change that, and it's a strange attitude indeed that makes us try to do in the name of good what evil could never accomplish.

I said I would offer no easy answers, and I trust I've kept that promise. The class of 1970 does not enter a world full of nothing but glorious opportunities. But perhaps we'll learn that there are more things to admire in men than to despise; perhaps, knowing it will never be enough to change the world, we will act more honorably than we expected we would; perhaps we'll have a lot of fun along the way. It wouldn't be a bad life.