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Commencement Speech 1942

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SPEECH BY W. L. BATT  
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I am doubly glad for the opportunity of being here with you today. I am glad because I consider it a real honor that my good friend, President Lewis Jones, should have asked me to talk to you on this occasion which means so much in your lives. And certainly there is nothing which has more opportunity for good in it than to speak the last words over a graduating class of young people, although by and large I can think of few things, for me at least, more difficult. There is never a time in a young person's life when good council is so needed, just as there is seldom a time when he or she is less susceptible to it. I am inclined to think that that is a healthy condition: for four years you have been absorbing the condensed knowledge of generations from the mouths of professionals. Now that you have reached what might seem to be the saturation point, you are naturally reluctant to receive abuse at the hands of an amateur.

You of the class of 1942 are a unique graduating class, for you are the first crop of this year. Over a period of ten years past there has been one overwhelmingly important question in the minds of young people leaving college--"What shall I do? Where will I find work?" This question does not have the same meaning for you because today there is work crying to be done everywhere and not enough hands to do it.

I used to have stock phrases to reply to that other question of how and where they could get a job. Probably the advice wasn't too specific or helpful, but it was the best I could give. Now, however, through the political and economic upheaval of war, the whole scene has shifted. The questions which are foremost in your minds are probably so many and so varied that they have no common factor but the question mark. And it is hard for me or anyone else to propose answers which will satisfy acute young minds trying to determine their new relation to a psychopathic world.

When you leave Bennington, all of you are, I hope, going to do various kinds of war jobs, too many to name offhand. I suppose most of you will do them competently and enthusiastically. If you do not, it is hardly likely to be the fault of this remarkable institution whose rugged and individual intellectual approach I have long admired.

On the other hand, it won't help the cause any if you put in hours of earnest work during the day and then spend the remaining time undoing in subtle ways, the good you have done. It goes without saying that if you want to beat Hitler, you won't unconsciously work for him. You won't discuss military or production secrets in public, no matter what irresistibly juicy ones you may have been let in on. You won't idly or inadvisedly



criticize the war effort, deprecate our allies or our own minorities, or otherwise indulge yourselves in the peacetime luxury of destructive beefing. We have got to win this war, and the only way for us to win it is to forget our differences and become one unified, indomitable force. Divide and conquer is Hitler's program for us, and it would certainly be tragic if we were unwittingly to carry out his plans for him. He pays people to do that.

Some of you will have a quiet, but nonetheless important job to do, as intelligent consumers. There are already many ways to prove your innate patriotism. Rationing, for instance, can either be a tiresome annoyance or a positive contribution to the good of the whole. It is easy enough to justify some extra consumption of gas in the belief that what you are doing is somehow essential enough to warrant it or that your individual requirements aren't of any particular consequence anyway. But if you face the issue impersonally and consider that gasoline and rubber must go where they are most urgently needed--and if you spread that sort of reaction to those around you--then you will be functioning as one of the small but so important cogs in the great machinery of effectively conducting the war.

This holds true in any situation of shortage. You have all, I am sure, absorbed most of the publicity directed towards consumers, and I don't need to enlarge upon the part you can play in intelligent and unselfish buying. Here again is a chance for you to forget your own isolated wishes and to think of the good of the nation as a whole.

But I did not come all the way up here to Bennington simply to tell you how to do your part to win the war. I want to tell you instead something of how I, as one individual, see this war in its relation to the future, and thereby to your lives and the lives of the rest of your generation all over the world.

You can think of a war such as this, in one of two ways. You can think of it on the one hand as a violent cathartic purging the world of the forces of evil which have arisen to threaten it, and promising to restore the world to a condition of justice and normalcy. If you take this view, as did generally the American public in 1918, you are of course going on the assumption that the winning of a war is an end in itself, and that having won it, there is little more to do until another menace arises and some new hostile power must be crushed.

On the other hand, looking at the situation from a different point of view, you may take the position that the outbreak of war is simply the most violent symptom of a dangerous world malady, and that to achieve military victory is not enough. You do not right a wrong on a battlefield any more than you bring an end to crime through the electric chair. In my own thinking, my first thesis is that military victory is simply our immediate objective. Obviously we shall have to win the war, because to lose it would completely eliminate us, at least for a long while, as a factor in determining the course of civilization. But after we have gained our military objective, another sort of battle front will develop, against other and less obvious enemies, and must be fought with the same energy and singleness of purpose which we are



putting forth today, if a lasting victory is ever to be won.

Most of the battles of tomorrow will be fought by your generation rather than mine, and the obstacles which you face are both challenging and appalling. It is so easy to say what must be done, and so incredibly difficult to do it.

Some way or other, you must develop a way of life which will bring true prosperity at home and which will yet extend to all people throughout the world, the promise of universal freedom from want and equal access to the resources of the earth. That will be the only real preventative cure against the revival of cynical ideologies which have violence as their means and the enrichment of the few as their end.

I should think a good start would be to supplement that abiding reverence for America which I know you have, with an intelligent respect for peoples of other nations; to that might profitably be added a conviction that American security and prosperity are irrevocably bound up with other nation's wellbeing.

One of the first issues you will have to meet when this war is over is the relation of the United States of America to the rest of the world. Whether we are to adopt an isolation policy for ourselves as our pattern of international behavior--to build a high wall around our shores and shut our eyes to what may happen outside; or on the other hand, firmly and fearlessly to assume our share of the responsibility for guaranteeing world peace. Your decision on that vital question may well determine whether your generation is ever to know that burning parental concern for its sons in uniform that mine is feeling now.

You can not too soon or too frequently examine the true meaning of Democracy and decide whether the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for all, is worth realizing. By the same token, you must learn to abhor the kind of hypocrisy which people display when they pay lip service to a great and pregnant ideal without being willing to accept all of its implications.

You must decide whether this country can ever again afford a condition wherein there is work to be done, men to do it, and materials to do it with, but where the work, men, and materials cannot seem to get together. If you decide that you cannot afford that condition, you must establish it as a sound principle worth being conserved, that there shall never again be forced unemployment in America. I devoutly hope your generation does a better job than mine in realizing that ideal.

You must decide whether a government of the people, by the people, and for the people is inevitably a good government; and if you reach the conclusion that that government is no better than the judgment which creates it, you must do everything in your power to spread in others the realization that their vote is not only a privilege, but a sacred obligation as well.

You must remember and keep alive in others the great lesson of today; that a nation which is psychologically unprepared to defend its very existence when



called upon to do so, encourages the worst instincts of aggression in its neighbors. It may still be a defensible statement that nobody wins a war, but it is certainly a tragic fact in this modern age, that somebody stands to lose it.

These are some of the fronts on which you will all have to take your stand in the coming battles of peace. There are many, many more, all worthy of the most penetrating thought which can be brought to bear and the most determined action. There can be no relaxing, no slackening in the effort to build a better world, for as soon as you decide that the good things are not worth fighting for with peaceful methods, you may be sure that you will, sooner or later, be forced to defend your right to them with guns.

I do not know whether the prospect of endless striving which I have presented for you, is attractive to you, or whether it is not. But I can surely tell you that if any one of you depends for her happiness on finding a ready-made, ideal world in which to live her life, then she is destined for a very unhappy existence. And while I do not wish to lose myself in the unfamiliar realm of metaphysics, I would like to suggest to you that there is far more real satisfaction in constantly striving for something better, than in realizing what may seem to be an ultimate goal. That is not just a Puritan philosophy; it is an axiom arising from the fundamental nature of the species of animal called Man.

To say that is not to deny that progress in itself is a desirable thing. It is simply to say that there is no real end to progress, and that if we ever decide that we have reached our ultimate goals--that things are about as good as they can be expected to be--on that day we will have started the human race down the road to extinction.

And we have very nearly done that at times in the past. Our failure to assume the obligations of our rightful place in the Community of Nations after the last war--our complacency and fatness in the false prosperity of the 20's--these were indications of a general unwillingness to face the obstacles of peacetime life, with the full vigor and resourcefulness which we had just previously thrown into the war effort. That attitude did much, you may be sure, to precipitate the present war, and if we had been only a little tardier in realizing the gravity of our position, Heaven knows what might have become of us by now.

Today there is new sense of unity--a feeling of common purpose which goes far to overcome the normal isolation of the individual from his kind. There is a quickened appreciation of one's national heritage, of a way of life, of just living--as these commonplace things are suddenly and with amazement found to be in need of defending.

And that is not all. In arming for war we have forced the barometer of national income up and up, to the point where all employables are employed and there is an urgent demand for more help. We are producing a flow of goods, most of them without economic value, which exceeds by far the peak



production levels of peacetime. And all of this in a civilian economy of scarcity, where the purchasing power far exceeds the volume of civilian goods available for purchase. Yet only a few years ago we were in the doldrums of chronic depression!

This paradox of spiritual regeneration in the face of great danger, of plenty in the midst of wanton destruction, has got to be understood if war is ever to be conquered. It has, I think, a great lesson in its apparent contradictions.

Is it not natural and desirable that people should want to feel themselves as part of a social entity which is not an aimless thing, but an integrated group striving for tangible, realizable ends? Why cannot the slogans and objectives of war be replaced by the slogans and objectives of peace? Certainly the aims of one are as valid, as worth striving for as the aims of the other.

And what is to hinder us from realizing the production levels of today after we have gone from the building of tanks to automobiles, barracks to low-cost houses? Why should there not be work for everybody? Work producing in volume, the things which those same people will at last have a chance to buy in volume?

Until somebody proposes a satisfactory answer to these questions, I for one am unwilling to accept the thesis that my sons' sons, and their sons in turn, must go forth at regular intervals in history to destroy their fellow men or be destroyed.

I have asked you a great many questions today, and I shall feel amply repaid for my visit if you will consider these questions carefully in odd moments and decide whether or not you feel as I do with relation to them. Some of you are destined for business, perhaps others for public life, and most of you for the job of being wives and mothers. But whatever you do, you will come in contact with other people, and as intelligent members of society you will exchange ideas. The extent to which you are able to discern the right course and the desirable end, and convey to others the inevitable logic of your views, will probably determine the extent of your contribution to the attainment of those ends.

You have had a chance to learn many lessons from my generation. If we have not always set you an example of farsighted vision and wise action, at least we have foundered on enough shoals to give some indication of where there is a safe passage ahead. I do not say that apologetically, because you must remember that we are rather recent emigrants from a horse-and-buggy era into a strange new world whose rate of change approximates a continuous revolution. You, on the other hand, were born in the full tide of that revolution, and should be far better equipped by background and education to cope with it and guide it toward constructive ends. Within the short space of



your lives may well be condensed a span of world development, material and spiritual, which will exceed the progress of the past two thousand years. That is what you may look forward to if you believe in progress and if you believe that progress is worth fighting for every day and on every front.

Today every man, woman, and child in the world who is a victim of injustice in any of its loathsome forms, stands as a living challenge to you against which you dare not turn your backs. They summon you to a wholesome war - to a war of construction instead of annihilation - a continuing and determined war against insecurity and indecent living wherever those conditions exist, in our country and out of it. The weapons you use you will have to forge for yourselves, but the casualties they inflict, you may be sure, will have few mourners.

I pray that I may live long enough to see how you face this challenge.