



Address by
Elmer B. Staats
Comptroller General of the United States
at the
Commencement Exercises
College of Social Sciences
Brigham Young University
Provo, Utah
August 15, 1975

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Recipes for Living in a Complicated World

President Tanner, Dean Riddle, ladies and gentlemen. Two honors are extended to me today: the privilege of talking to you all, especially you of America's future who are about to graduate; and the selection of me to receive, this year, the Abraham O. Smoot Public Service Award for service to the community and the Nation. I am grateful for both these honors.

In Washington, where I have lived and worked most of my life, they tell many stories--some cruel, some charitable, some witty, and some windy. A popular word in this Washington dialogue today is "future." There is a World Future Society in the capital which publishes a magazine called The Futurist. Everybody talks about the future and to some extent, we are learning how to plot our future, but this is still a new science. Well, here I stand as I said--looking at America's future: you in this audience. I am not trying to be prophetic. This is what you are.

At the same time, I feel a little like a certain U.S. Senator they tell about in one of those stories. It seems the senator had as his administrative assistant a former newspaper reporter who had worked for him for many years, ever since he had been governor of his State. This man was a better speech writer than his boss and the senator had developed

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great confidence in him. He had so much faith in this aide that he sometimes made the mistake of stepping to the podium without ever having glanced at the text he was to read. In the course of time, a serious disagreement developed between the two men and in the midst of this problem the senator had to give another speech. The aide prepared this, but not as usual. The text had a stirring beginning which, if the senator delivered it today, would sound something like this:

"We are faced in our future with the worst shortage of energy in America's history. I am here today to tell you how to solve this crisis.

"We have the highest crime rate today that this country has ever known. I am here to tell you how crime can be greatly reduced.

"We have a staggering inflation which requires superhuman efforts to control and conquer. I am here today to tell you how it can be done."

At this point the senator came to the bottom of the first sheet, turned the page, and read:

"Okay boss, I quit. From now on, you are on your own."

Standing here, facing America's future, I feel this morning, ladies and gentlemen, like that senator must have felt as he looked at the blank piece of paper in front of him. I, too, feel like I am on my own. If there is one thing I do know, it is that I don't have the answers to the problems of our intricate and perplexing world, and there are few persons in Washington, or anywhere else, who do. A commencement address is, unfortunately, usually a stereotyped occasion, for speaker and for audience alike. The speaker is supposed to inspire his audience with visions of

great things that they can do for the world--almost immediately upon graduation. And the audience is supposed to regard every word they hear as priceless and act accordingly. So let this be as unsteriotyped a commencement talk as I can make. Let it be a simple and sincere exchange of ideas. I won't promise you the stars but in exchange for this I hope you will always reach for them.

These are not the best of times, they are not the worst of times. They are certainly not worse than they were for my graduating class in the Depression Years. Then, as now, the availability of jobs was the paramount concern of both graduate and government. Now, as then, the resourceful graduate will uncover opportunity and exploit it, while the less persistent, less successful graduate will have no difficulty becoming one more unemployment statistic. The late 18th and early 19th Century German philosopher, Hegel, believed that it was an uncommon ability to perceive, understand, and harness the flow of history that enabled some men to achieve great ends. Opportunity, for them, was created, not solicited. And even with all that America holds out to this year's graduate in the fields of government, science, business, and industry, it is important that you appreciate the value of self-help, self-determination, and self-reliance. Unrecognized opportunity is no opportunity. Even in the best of times, nearsightedness by some, and farsightedness by others, will blind them to the promise of incipient opportunity.

Thinking back to the time of my graduation, it became something of the ethos of the Depression Years--as it has whenever times were difficult--that the struggling young parent would hope and pray to give his children

those things that he or she never had. And America presented opportunities for the fulfillment of that goal.

So it was that the merging of the skills of a culturally diverse population with a wealth of natural resources produced in our country technological change and material gain on an unprecedented scale. We harnessed steam, electricity and the combustion engine to make work easier and free time more plentiful. And the harnessing of the atom on a larger scale for peaceful purposes is not far away. We of today are living longer and doing more. But, we must always ask ourselves, living longer and doing more for what purpose? Merely to sit in one's car in traffic slow-downs every day? To watch television's meaningless quiz shows or soap operas? Or to while away the hours in fruitless gossiping?

For although post-Depression America realized its dream to provide for its children much in the way of *things* that it never had, I fear that many parents forgot to pass along to those same children the important qualities which they *did* have. I am referring here to those spiritual attributes which sustained a materially deficient society through a difficult period. Have we lost those attributes? Let us take a look, for a moment, at some aspects of American life today.

The tremendous breakthroughs which have brought us to partake of nonstop information and entertainment via the electronic media have cost us dearly in terms of our senses, culture, community, and family life. It is obvious that the heads of many American households are more familiar with the latest news from outer space or overseas than from across the dinner table. We traded inter-family communication for international news. The price of citizenship in the world has been individual and small group identity.

This point was eloquently made recently in a newspaper article by the commentator Rod MacLeish when he wrote:

If we assume--as we should--that our artifacts symbolize our social conventions and habits, then the disappearance of the American porch may tell us things more ominous about ourselves than Watergate ever could.

...I suppose we began to abandon the porch when radio came into our lives. We went indoors to listen to it. Then air conditioning made indoors tolerable. Then television came and gripped us. The front door was closed on the porch and the ways of being that it represented. We exchanged the useful pleasures of dialogue for the rapt fixation of the listener to electronic monologue.

That point was also made last year in a magazine article written by Colman McCarthy, whose family had given up television for a year. In an article called, "Ousting The Stranger From The House," he said:

Now, a year later--a family living as cultural cave men, says an anthropologist friend--the decision we made was one of the wisest of our married life. The ratings--our private Niensens--during this year of setlessness have been high, suggesting that such common acts as talking with one's children, sharing ideas with one's wife, walking to the neighborhood library on a Saturday morning, quiet evenings of reading books and magazines aloud to each other, or eating supper as a family offer more intellectual and emotional stimulation than anything on television.

It would be wrong to interpret either of these articles as not supporting the ends of technological progress. No reasonable person would ignore the changes which science has brought to our lives. But social engineering requires only that we respect the potential of science, not that we worship its every manifestation. We are rapidly learning that bigger and faster is not necessarily better as was demonstrated, for example, in our rejection of the SST. So, there is nothing inherently virtuous in size, speed, or quantity. The recent boom in camping is evidence that young Americans, weaned on the current from their television sets, are discovering the beauty of things natural.

This is perhaps the basic challenge that society presents--graduates of the College of Social Sciences--how to merge the power and brilliance of advanced technology with the traditions and opportunity of a free society. Having journeyed to the moon, it is now time to come back to earth. The merging of what C. P. Snow calls the scientific and humanistic cultures presents new and difficult questions.

Let me ask some of these questions now but not attempt to answer them. (If I did, we would be here all day.)

How do we reintroduce pride into the professional lives of people involved in heavily mechanized careers?

How can we preserve tried and true social institutions and values amidst a plethora of superficially appealing, but empty, alternatives?

As the electronic media bombards us with common information, how do we preserve our individual independence, and the strengths inherent in cultural diversity?

What is the role of Government in all of this?

What is the role of the individual? As a representative of Government, I welcome the creative among you to join us in attacking these problems with people-oriented solutions.

Perhaps Kingman Brewster, Jr., the President of Yale, gives us some guidance in these areas in his remarks last fall to the new freshman class.

Welcome to the burdens which this largely permissive university imposes on you. ... Yours is the burden of having to find out for yourself what matters most, what you are most about, what you believe, what you most want to do with your life. ...

Of course, some would find release from freedom's burdens by submission to the State. This is one of the great appeals of Stalinism and Maoism, no less than it was the appeal of Hitler and Mussolini. But the democratic state will not give you that release. It can only provide the circumstances for choice. It may even compound the problem in a sense, for, if public policy is successful, it will multiply your capacities and opportunities.

As I have read these wise observations, perhaps you who are graduating find them as thought-provoking as Yale undergraduates who are just beginning. It is not surprising. What Dr. Brewster calls the challenges of affirmative choice--what to be for, what to drive for--are basic matters. It is easy and simple enough to say "no." But there are a thousand different ways of saying "yes" to a new idea and how to achieve it.

One doesn't need to be young to learn from experience. After nearly 40 years of government service I am still learning, at least I hope I am. How is one best equipped to make his way? Of course, one must never lose his or her ideals. I don't know if any of you have seen 19th Century steam engines in operation. Some of them were used in the early threshing machines out here in the west. They are hard to find nowadays. Some of them used to have a gadget attached known as a "regulator." It acted, in its effect, as a balance to keep an engine running steadily. Well, we all need a regulator to keep our ideals from running out of control. I call that regulator a sense of balance or proportion, a quality vital to success in any worthwhile endeavor.

This is a part of the learning process--to adopt and adapt to new ideas, to innovate, to adjust--in the ever changing conditions and needs of society.

For you as graduates--especially for you as graduates in the College of Social Sciences--this is a day of celebration, congratulations, and a sense of achievement. But it also needs to be a day of resolution and dedication. You will now be more of a participant in society than in the past. You will have no choice--even if you wanted one--for you will be involved on the job and through the various organizations with which you will be associated. Participation becomes synonymous with leadership in dealing with problems in local communities the State, and even the Nation. Not to participate and not to take this kind of leadership means that your future--and mine--will be controlled in ways not necessarily in keeping with our wishes or with the ideals upon which Brigham Young University was founded and is so widely known and respected.

Participate!

Dedicate yourself!

Become involved!

Take leadership!

Clichés? Yes, but valid and healthy for individuals and the community and the Nation.

Our Nation has great problems and great concerns but it also has great strengths and great resiliency. These strengths lie chiefly in the ideals and determination of our people. The Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights, will all be a part of our observance of the Bicentennial next year. The ideals set forth in these great documents have been rearticulated by many American leaders

in the nearly 200 years of our history, by Washington, Jackson, Lincoln, Roosevelt, Kennedy, and others. We would do well to recall them more frequently and you should remind yourselves of what they mean to those of you graduating today.

We are a Nation founded on religious ideals and religious freedom. It was this struggle for religious freedom which was the basis for our Nation's founding and the basis for the great declarations made two centuries ago. They have been the source of our regard for the individual, the family, and a society based on justice, ethics and concern for the welfare of the less fortunate. These ideals have also been a source of hope and determination as we face the problems of today--energy, unemployment, poverty, and peace.

As Eric Sevareid said this summer on one of his broadcasts: "Hope puts down despair and courage makes a fool of fear." Winston Churchill, the great British Prime Minister in World War II, inspired the western world in those critical years more than any other man. His speeches were a mixture of ideals, realistic assessments, and determination. One quotation will suffice us today. In talking to a boy's school in England, he said simply "Never, never, never give in." If I leave one thought with you today, it is summarized in that quotation. I hope you will remember it and take it away with you as you complete your educational year and undertake a new role and new responsibilities.

That is what commencement is all about.

September 2, 1975

President Dallin H. Oaks
Brigham Young University
Provo, Utah 84602

Dear President Oaks:

This is a belated thank-you note for the courtesies extended to me in connection with the commencement exercises at Brigham Young University and for the copies of the newspaper clippings which appeared in connection with the commencement award.

Again, I would like to express to you my appreciation for the great honor which the University bestowed upon me in receiving the Abraham O. Smoot Public Service Award. This was the first opportunity I have had to visit the campus at Brigham Young although we feel here that we know the University well through the many graduates and faculty members with whom we have been associated. Your program is indeed an impressive one as is the campus and its setting.

Best wishes.

Sincerely,

(Signed) ELMER B. STAATS

Elmer B. Staats

cc Mr. Sawyer

Aug 15

June 3, 1975

Mr. Dallin H. Oaks
President
Brigham Young University
Provo, Utah 84602

Dear President Oaks:

I was indeed pleased to have your letter of May 27, advising me that Brigham Young University plans to present me with the Abraham O. Smoot Public Service Award in connection with its commencement exercises on Friday, August 15. I am delighted to accept and will plan to be on hand for the occasion.

I enclose biographical information which may be helpful to you, as suggested in your letter, along with a photograph. The academic cap should be in size 7-1/4. I am 6 feet tall and weigh 190 pounds.

I appreciate your inviting members of my family to be present on the occasion, but I believe that this will not be feasible since it will be necessary for me to return to Washington.

Again, I appreciate your letter and the honor.

Sincerely,

(Signed) ELMER B. STAATS

Elmer B. Staats

Enclosures

August 20, 1975

Dean Martin B. Hickman
College of Social Sciences
Brigham Young University
Provo, Utah 84602

Dear Martin:

It was a pleasure being with you this past week, and I feel especially honored to be among the recipients of awards at the August Commencement Exercises.

Under separate cover, I am sending you and Carl Snow a copy of our recent publication of lectures entitled "Evaluating Governmental Performance: Changes and Challenges for GAO."

It was a great pleasure being on the campus and having the opportunity to meet you and so many of your colleagues.

Sincerely,

(Signed) Elmer

Elmer B. Staats

August 20, 1975

Mr. David S. Monson
State Auditor
State of Utah
Office of the State Auditor
Salt Lake City, Utah 84114

Dear Mr. Monson:

Thanks ever so much for your letter of August 12. I enjoyed ever so much my trip to Brigham Young University and was especially honored to be the recipient of the Abraham O. Smoot Public Service Award.

I was glad to have your comments about the "Golden" book. We are extremely pleased that the standards have had such an excellent reception. This reception is an indication of the increasing interest and support of effective audits of publicly supported programs.

Sincerely,

(Signed) ELMER B. STAATS

Elmer B. Staats

August 20, 1975

Mr. Mark W. Cannon
Administrative Assistant
to the Chief Justice
Supreme Court of the United States
Washington, D.C. 20543

Dear Mark:

Thanks ever so much for your note in connection with the Abraham G. Smoot Public Service Award which I received at Brigham Young University. It's an impressive University under the leadership of some very impressive people.

I was pleased to learn from your letter that the Chief Justice will be dedicating the new law school which I saw under construction while I was there. I'm honored to be in such good company.

Sincerely,

(Signed) Elmer

Elmer B. Staats

August 20, 1975

Mr. Glen A. Wilkinson
Wilkinson, Cragun & Barker
The Octagon Building
1735 New York Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20006

Dear Glen:

Thanks ever so much for your note in connection with my receiving the Public Service Award from Brigham Young University. Your letter came just as I was leaving.

This was my first visit to the BYU campus and I was especially pleased to have a good visit with your brother and to sit next to him during the Commencement Exercises. It is a most impressive campus and was a most impressive ceremony. I was honored to be a part of it.

Sincerely,
(Signed) Elmer

Elmer B. Staats