

Commencement Address

at

Allegheny College

By

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I want to speak to you -- briefly, you'll be happy to hear -- about credibility and commitment.

To be believed you really should be committed. To be committed you must really believe.

I am worried about the credibility and the commitment of our country as seen through the eyes of foreign countries, friend and foe alike.

You see, I am convinced that many countries are looking at the USA, and they are trying to decide where we're at.

Let's start at the beginning. We need an assumption.

Assumed, we have the best system of government in the world. There are inequities, no argument on that point, but there are comparatively few; and compared to any other system, we enjoy freedom -- much more freedom than most countries have.

We have existed for 200 years. We have stability, and all through our history we have had a commitment to freedom -- freedom of speech, of religion, of enterprise.

Christmas 1974 I was in China. I had only been there a couple of months, but already the enormous differences between our systems had been brought dramatically and very personally home to me.

China has done a great job in bringing minimal health care to hundreds of millions of people, and a great job in

containing crime, and in providing basic clothing and basic food to the masses; but they have paid an enormous price, at least by our standards, and that price is "freedom."

A radical group, visiting China, came to our house for Christmas Eve. They were travelling in China, staying at the hotel, and I thought it would be nice for them to hear some Christmas carols and be on the closest thing in China to U.S. turf.

I was moved by the strolling British carolers who had come by the U.S. Liaison Office, and I made a comment about "Aren't we lucky to be a free country."

One of the visitors spoke up and said, "We have no freedom in our country. We should emulate this system in China..."

I argued a little -- saw the case was hopeless, stopped, but continued to think about the exchange.

On the plus side, to be fair, China has done a remarkable job. Since what the Chinese refer to as "the liberation," they have made unbelievable strides. I was continually impressed by their sense of pride and their sense of commitment -- their dedication to the principles of Chairman Mao and their commitment to the revolution.

On the minus side, they dare not deviate from the approved line. They have no free press. They have initiative, but it must be channeled into the course dictated by the state.

They are not free to worship. They cannot choose their career. They cannot even choose if they want to get a higher

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education. They are inhibited from marrying when they want to. Someone else, somewhere else makes these kinds of decisions.

But China is committed, and it is credible.

Incidentally, the Chinese put great trust in one's word of honor from a foreign relations standpoint.

Okay -- committed and credible; but they look at us today, and I really wonder what they think.

I think they respect our country. I know that individually there is little, if any, hostility to Americans in Peking.

China sees us as a strong country, rich in resources, with a military might unsurpassed in the world. I'm not sure they know enough about our system to give us credit for the diversity that marks our system, or to envy us our freedoms.

I do feel they understand our importance as a world power.

They know our system is different, and they feel that our relationship should be built on our self interest and theirs.

A lot of people speculated at the time of former President Nixon's recent trip to China. Why? Why the trip? Why Nixon? The answer was not related to the domestic political scene in the U.S., or to China's hope that we'd make dramatic policy changes. It was related to the fact

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that Mr. Nixon told the Chinese when he took his historic trip, "I come in the self interest of my country."

To the Chinese this was commitment, and it was very credible.

Yes, China sees our importance as a world power. For their "self interest" they want a good relationship, but let's face it, they are asking themselves -- "Is the USA, after 200 years of democracy, or freedom, or whatever one calls our magnificent system -- is the USA committed? Do the people still believe? Do they believe enough to sacrifice for themselves, to say nothing of sacrificing for others."

They are asking the right questions. Many other countries are asking the same questions. These are questions that all of us should ask.

In my new job, I see lots of information on various countries. From this it is easy to conclude that China is a committed nation and that the USSR is a committed nation. I am not saying there is no dissent, but because of the way in which they establish leadership and stifle dissent, it doesn't matter much.

They are committed to world socialism, if you will. You and I should neither doubt that nor underestimate that.

But they look at us and they wonder about our commitment to democracy, or put it this way -- our commitment to oppose the export of communism or, in the example I want to use, the export of Russian hegemony.

The administration made a commitment to the Roberto and Savimbi factions in Angola just as Cuba and Russia made a commitment to the MPLA in Angola. Our commitment proved to be a commitment without credibility. Theirs was credible.

You might say, "So what, we stayed out; we didn't get involved in another Vietnam." True, but here's the problem: I saw an African leader this week. He used this example: you are walking down the street. You're a little man with a big guy as your friend. Another big guy comes along and says to you, "Come with me; you cannot trust your big friend." Then you have a fight with another person and the big friend does not stand up for you, so you go over to the other big guy for help. And then one other little guy over there, not in the fight -- he says, "Which one can I trust?"

He turned to me and said, "You, sir, know the answer." This man, representing a long-time African ally committed to freedom but too weak to preserve it alone, asked the key question.

Angola hurt us some in Africa, but it hurt elsewhere, too.

Japan, a jillion miles away from Angola, wonders, will we stand firm.

China, concerned about Soviet troops on her northern border, sees a strong NATO confronting the USSR in the west

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as vital to China's interest, and she wonders.

Our Asian allies in Southeast Asia say, "They didn't keep that commitment. Will they keep a commitment to help us stay free?"

Our NATO allies themselves hear talk about isolation and withdrawal. They don't doubt the Soviets' commitment to Eastern Europe's domination -- and they wonder -- will the U.S. stay committed, credibly, to Western Europe's freedom?

It is a worldwide problem. I am not suggesting we be dedicated to intervention. Nor am I suggesting we must export our system to other countries. I am saying that we have obligations to countries that want to be free.

We are a world power, and we properly have worldwide obligations.

And so what does this all have to do with your graduation?

It gets us to the point where you get the free advice.

Our freedom I have been referring to gives you the right to tune it out -- I recognize that, but here it is:

First, as you leave here, don't give up your interest in learning. Study beyond the confines of your job.

Second, expand your interest to include a comparative look at the world. You'll see plenty of stories criticizing our country, our institutions, our leaders; and that is okay but -- just as the guy when asked "How's your wife?"

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responded "Compared to whom?" -- you ask "Okay, we've got problems here. But how are we doing compared to others?"

If you conclude we're doing pretty well, then make a commitment. A commitment to participate in public affairs, a commitment to help in your community, a commitment to do something for someone else. A commitment, if you want, that De Tocqueville understood when he wrote: "The greatness of America lies not in being more enlightened than any other nation, but rather in her ability to repair her faults."

Lastly, save some time for contemplating our role in the world. For studying the realities we face. For understanding that because of our position in world leadership, what we do here shapes the destiny of many peoples all over the world. And then for doing something that will help make our commitment to freedom credible.

In these days of cynicism, there is an obvious question -- how many feel as strongly as Horace Mann did when he said, "Be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity."

Answer -- I think you do; I know you must.

Thank you very much.