

5-27-1977

1977 Commencement Address: Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Massachusetts)

Edward M. Kennedy

Follow this and additional works at: https://crossworks.holycross.edu/commence_address



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#), and the [Higher Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kennedy, Edward M., "1977 Commencement Address: Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Massachusetts)" (1977). *Commencement Addresses*. 2.

https://crossworks.holycross.edu/commence_address/2

This Speech is brought to you for free and open access by the Commencement Speeches at CrossWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Commencement Addresses by an authorized administrator of CrossWorks.

1977 Commencement Address

Senator Edward M. Kennedy of Massachusetts

May 27, 1977

I am honored to be here this morning with the graduating class of Holy Cross College and their families, and with President Brooks, the faculty and so many other friends of this great academic institution.

Bishop Fenwick would be proud of the college he founded here nearly a century and a half ago, as the first Catholic institution of higher education in New England. He would be proud of the strength of the college today, proud of its strong religious tradition, proud of its strong academic tradition.

Holy Cross has prospered over the years, taking its place in the front rank of American higher education, fostering the fundamental spiritual values that we cherish as a nation created under God, promoting excellence in the study of the liberal arts and sciences — and even producing this year a rebirth of your basketball greatness of the past.

I am also proud to accept your honorary degree. I wear the purple of Holy Cross with pride, and I am honored to be here with the other distinguished recipients of this fine recognition the college has bestowed.

One of Massachusetts' most famous sons, Justice Louis Brandeis had a different view of honorary degrees. Some years ago, the faculty at Yale recommended him for such a degree, but the president would not approve it. The next year, both the faculty and the president recommended him, but the board of trustees would not approve it. The third year, the faculty, president and trustees agreed, but the corporation rejected it. Finally, in the fourth year, Yale got it all together. The faculty, the president, the trustees and corporation all recommend the honorary degree — but Justice Brandeis rejected it.

Returning today to Worcester and to Holy Cross brings back many memories for me and my family. John F. Kennedy came to this campus twenty six years ago, to report to the people of Massachusetts on an important foreign policy visit to the Middle East and Asia. It was December of 1951. He was a young Congressman, about to begin his campaign for the Senate of the United States. He spoke to the students here about his concerns for this country he loved and for its place in the world.

Another occasion also comes to mind. I came to Holy Cross in 1968. It was late in August in the middle of the national election campaign that year.

It was a time of international nightmare. As I spoke, Soviet troops and tanks were rolling into Czechoslovakia, crushing the aspirations of a brave people for freedom and independence.

It was also a time of national nightmare in the United States. America was in turmoil over Vietnam. Violence had shattered the peace of many of our cities. Coming to Holy Cross that day was a profoundly sad occasion for me. Two months earlier in Los Angeles, Robert Kennedy had died. To the audience gathered here, I pledged to pick up the fallen standard of my brothers, to carry forward the commitment to justice and excellence that marked their lives and the leadership they had given to America.

The following years were far more difficult ones for all of us and for our country than we had imagined in that summer of 1968. Incredible as it now seems in retrospect, the crisis over Vietnam consumed the country for five more years. America endured the ordeal and disgrace of the resignation of both a President and a Vice President.

At best, we seemed to be halted in our tracks. At worst, we seemed to be sliding backward in many areas of vital importance to our people. The economy lurched between inflation and recession. The environment gasped for relief from the onrushing tide of pollution. Cities decayed while suburbs sprawled uncontrolled. Rights like health and education and housing drifted beyond the reach of millions of our citizens.

But things are different on this commencement day in 1977. There is a new spirit of optimism in the air, a sense that America has bottomed out, that we are returning to the business of our long neglected agenda at home and overseas.

We know that it will take more than overnight to undo these past years of neglect and lack of effort.

But already, there is a feeling of progress and achievement. We have an active and able President whose first one hundred days in office have been a welcome period of new initiatives and proposals in almost every major area of foreign and domestic policy. We have an active and able Congress, too, ready to join with the President and his Cabinet, in meeting the challenges of foreign and domestic policy.

Together, as a government and a people, we are returning to the deep moral and spiritual values on which our nation was founded. We are engaged in a fresh search for better answers than we have found before on critical issues of foreign policy like human rights, nuclear arms control, and peace in the Middle East, and on basic domestic issues like jobs and prices, health and education, the cities and the environment, energy and crime.

Not all of these problems were made in Washington, and none of them can be solved by Washington alone.

In a sense, there are fallen standards everywhere, waiting for young persons like yourselves to pick them up, to hold them high, to move them forward once again. For you and millions like you around the country graduating this year, perhaps the greatest challenge is to avoid apathy and complacency. I would urge you to become involved yourselves, to find a standard of your own, to try to make a difference on things you care about.

Often, all it takes to turn the tide is one individual, acting alone and against the odds. A single voice of courage and understanding can change the flow of events and improve the community in which we live. Sometimes it can alter the course of history. As Robert Kennedy told the students at Capetown in South Africa on his visit there in 1966:

“Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, these ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.”

That has always been the genius of our nation — the willingness of ordinary men and women to get involved themselves, to work for change. We are never comfortable in the role of spectators, watching only from the sidelines. We are always at our best when we go down onto the playing field, committing our own energy to whatever challenge is before us.

More than ever, at times like this, the country needs the energy and inspiration of its youth. Often in recent years, it is the youth of America who have held up a mirror to the nation. More than a decade ago, it was your older brothers and sisters who raised the first objections against the Vietnam War, who took their protests to the country and finally convinced the nation that the war was wrong.

Young men and women have helped to lead the way on many other issues. They marched for civil rights in the 1960s and brought new hope for millions of black Americans. They marched with the Peace Corps and brought new hope for millions of impoverished peoples in other lands. They are marching now to save the environment here at home and to preserve the magnificent natural beauty and resources of our land.

Through achievements like these, young citizens have made vast contributions to our country in the past, and they are doing so today. Young doctors are bringing health care to communities that never had a doctor. Young lawyers are bringing the Constitution to citizens who never knew the Bill of Rights. Young teachers are bringing education to children who never had a school.

And today, in all of these endeavors, there are unparalleled opportunities for women as well as men. The age old barriers of sex discrimination are crumbling. For the women of Holy Cross who are receiving their degrees today, the opportunities are especially great. There has never been a better or more hopeful time for young women to graduate in the history of our country.

America, said Lincoln, is the last best hope for mankind. At some moments in our history, the hope of America has shone more brightly than in others, lighting the dark corners of our own land and the far corners of the world, a beacon of hope and opportunity for all those less free and less privileged than ourselves.

To me, the current time is another such special moment for leadership by our land. After years of silence, error and neglect, the voice of America is being clearly heard on the central issues of our time. We are developing new approaches to foreign and domestic policy that bring America home to the great democratic and humanitarian ideals that have guided us at our proudest moments in the past.

No community, no nation, can isolate itself from the currents of change and the stirrings of hope that are being felt in nations throughout the world.

Progress here is not at the expense of our traditional concerns. We are moving forward wisely on our paramount effort to protect America's national security. We are beginning to build again on the historic initiative of President Kennedy in 1963 at American University. Once again, we are searching in earnest for international agreements on arms control, to prevent the devastation that nuclear war would bring.

We understand the need for a strong defense, strong enough to defend ourselves from any possible adversary from abroad.

But we are also beginning to understand that our security has a larger meaning. National defense begins at home. We need a strong defense against military attack. But we also need a strong defense against inflation and unemployment, against poverty and disease, against prejudice and ignorance and discrimination, against crime and slums. These goals are also basic to the real security of America — because in the last analysis, the only security worth having is the people's faith that the nation is worth securing.

The same new attitudes and new approaches that are beginning to guide our domestic policy are also changing our policy toward other nations.

We are learning that challenges to peace and to world security can come from directions other than arms races and military confrontations. We know that poverty and hunger and disease can be threats to peace and stability. We know that refugee movements can unbalance the peace, and that natural disasters can create upheavals worse than war.

President Kennedy spoke in 1963 of people in huts and villages across the globe, struggling to break the bonds of mass misery. His concern was a part of a timeless spiritual and humanitarian tradition that knows no international borders, a tradition nourished by leaders of our Church who have spoken eloquently in the past for peoples of every land and faith.

Nearly a century ago, in his encyclical “On the Condition of the Working Class,” Pope Leo XIII said that, “Nothing is more useful than to look upon the world as it really is.” He went on to speak of social justice, of man's “right to provide for the sustenance of his body.”

In 1937, Pius XI spoke of these concerns. As he stated,

“Social justice cannot be said to have been satisfied as long as working men are denied a salary that will enable them to secure proper sustenance for themselves and for their families, as long as they are denied the opportunity of forestalling the plague of universal pauperism; as long as they cannot make suitable provision through public or private insurance for old age, for periods of illness and unemployment.”

And one of the 20th century's best love leaders, John XXIII, stated in *Mater et Magistra*: The solidarity which binds all men and makes them members of the same family imposes upon political communities enjoying abundance of material goods the obligation not to remain indifferent to those communities whose citizens suffer from poverty, misery and hunger, and who lack even the elementary rights of the human person. Given the growing interdependence among the peoples of the earth, it is not possible to preserve lasting peace if glaring economic and social inequality among them persists.”

We ignore this leadership and these teachings at our peril. Too many of us today, in our careers of comfort and complacency, are unaware, or do not care, that in many corners of the earth, the most urgent issue is the daily struggle for bare survival.

I have seen the need first hand. As Chairman of the Senate Subcommittees on Refugees and Health, I have tried to study the issues of world hunger, disease and poverty. The more I learn, the more concerned I get. I am appalled by the great need, and I am even more appalled by the even greater failure of nations that could respond.

I have walked through the refugee camps in Bangladesh and the Middle East. I have seen lifetimes of hunger packed into lives of children too young to understand their condition. I have seen small figures, warped and deformed from malnutrition. I have seen parents, aged before their time, hollowed eyes peering out of bodies wracked with disease.

As the Bengali poet Tagore wrote, "Every child comes with the message that God is not yet discouraged of man." But the children are those who suffer the most, whose suffering is the least excusable.

Their misery cannot be understood by dry statistics. You have to see the young boy with his face forever scarred by smallpox. You have to see his sister squinting in the sunlight, not because of childhood curiosity, not because the sun is bright but because her young eyes are failing from vitamin insufficiency. You have to see them suffering from kwashiorkor and schistosomiasis and other diseases with names unknown to most Americans. You have to see the victims to understand the tragedy of their plight, and to realize the enormous — and enormously preventable — waste in human life that is taking place today in other lands.

Conditions of poverty and disease, malnutrition and illiteracy can easily be found in the midst of the prevailing affluence in the United States. But these problems, distressing and unacceptable as they are in our own Commonwealth and nation, grow pale by comparison to the crisis that confronts us on an enormous worldwide scale.

In the past, our country has freely used its influence and power in many ways and for many ends. But we have relied too heavily on the sword and too lightly on the plowshare. This year alone, over \$5 billion in military and security assistance will flow overseas from the Treasury of the United States — more than three times what we spend for other forms of aid.

We have been reluctant to use our power to rescue and rehabilitate the victims of conflict and disaster, poverty and disease. We have great power in this area too, but we have not wielded it in ways commensurate with the other uses of our power.

Now, however, I am hopeful that the era of neglect and unconcern is ending. President Carter has provided a historic new emphasis on human rights in America's foreign policy. We are no longer prisoners' of the policies of the past. Our preoccupation with the East-West power balance is yielding to a new concern for the North-South issues. Our emphasis on military aid is giving way to an overdue concern for human aid to the less privileged nations of the world.

With new leadership and cooperation in Washington, and with the support and encouragement of the people of America, there will be opportunities for more of us to contribute and to play a role.

The Administration has pledged to expand and revitalize the Peace Corps, so that more young Americans — and their parents and their grandparents — may involve themselves directly in helping others around the globe.

In recent years, the Peace Corps has acquired a new maturity and practicality that match the idealism of its birth. It is creating what the Director of Action, Sam Brown, has called a "quiet revolution in international development." The accumulated experience of thousands of volunteers has become a major international resource. The Peace Corps has given new meaning to the emerging concept of "appropriate technology," by which types of aid are keyed to particular stages of national development. They have found, for example, that in many areas it is cheaper and more effective to fight hunger by controlling the rats and mildew that destroy the grain in storage, rather than build new fertilizer plants to produce more grain.

There is no better opportunity than the Peace Corps for young Americans to do something tangible about human rights. There is no better way to broaden your horizons, no better way to enrich your lives, no better way to begin to carry out your stewardship on this earth, than to devote yourselves for a period of time to service in behalf of fellow men and women in other lands.

We must also give more active support to the pioneering work by America's voluntary agencies like Catholic Relief Services, and by the agencies of the United Nations. Unseen and unsung, these organizations are carrying out extraordinary humanitarian work. No American dollar is better spent than when it is spent for work like this. Often these agencies are the first to reach the scene when an epidemic or natural disaster strikes. They point the way for governments to follow. They educate us to the need. They demand action by their example. Increasingly in the future, there will be opportunities for service here as well.

The outside world touches Americans too deeply to be ignored. It calls us to greater involvement and participation. The growing interdependence among the nations of the globe is a phenomenon as striking today as the interdependence of the tiny colonies that came together on our shores two hundred years ago.

There is a common good, a common thread of humanity that draws us together, that reaches from Holy Cross and other communities in America to the most distant corners of the world. We cannot ignore our opportunities nor hide from our responsibilities. What diminishes our fellow human beings in far off lands diminishes ourselves as well.

And so, as you go on from this graduation, be thankful for your teachers and the knowledge you have gained. Be grateful for the efforts of your parents and your families, and for the sacrifices they have made to bring you safely to this threshold of the future.

Above all, because so much has been given to you, be worthy of your stewardship and the promise of this land. Give something back to America, in return for all it has given you.