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COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS
OF
PRESIDENT ARTHUR CUTTS WILLARD
TO THE
CLASS OF 1937

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UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS
JUNE 14, 1937
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I WISH TO SPEAK to the members of the Class of 1937, who are about to graduate from the University of Illinois. I have an old-fashioned idea that I am, to some extent and to a limited degree, personally responsible for each of you. If you fail I fail, if you succeed I succeed. I am sure the faculty shares with me this feeling of responsibility, possibly in a more intimate way than I can understand. The occasion is an important one to each of you and also to the University. For one thing, it is the last time you will all meet together, after four years of life on this campus during which you have been engaged in a common enterprise popularly known as "getting a college education."

I trust you have all profited by the experience—no doubt some more, some less. Indeed, I hope every one of you has discovered, during your life here at the University, some talent, some unique ability which when more fully developed will add to your professional suc-

cess or to the enrichment and usefulness of your lives. As the Sophomore expressed it in his essay on Genius: "In the breast of every student there smolders a spark of genius which when watered from the spring of knowledge will burst into flame." The metaphor is a little mixed but you know what he meant. I hope you will remember this particular occasion as marking a definite and important mile stone in your lives.

It will not be because of what I am going to say to you that you will remember this occasion. Far from it, as my remarks will soon be forgotten along with much else that has arrested your attention during your college course. But, nevertheless, you will all remember this, your commencement day, simply because it definitely marks the achievement of a major ambition in each of your lives. After four or more years you have arrived at a goal toward which you have been inspired or impelled by a variety of motives.

Regardless of what reason or lack of reason brought you here, or what motives have kept you here, you have at least demonstrated both your initiative and ability to undertake a really serious long term program and complete it. That accomplishment regardless of what you have learned in class or out may be the most valuable product of your University experience. That fact in itself should give you confidence in your ability to undertake another program which is going to occupy your attention from now on throughout most, if not all, of your active life. I refer, of course, to a program of living, about which I shall now speak.

First of all let me ask what did you get out of your educational experience here at the University? Well, for one thing, you have discovered something about

your separate personal capacities and abilities, in comparison with others of your age, to pursue or engage in various mental disciplines. You have a better measure of just how good or how poor you are as a student, and possibly as a scholar in whatever fields of knowledge you may have been engaged.

In addition to this valuable index of your probable professional or vocational aptitude you should have learned a great deal about yourself as an individual. In the give and take of campus life, your personality as well as your mentality, has developed, and your character is much more nearly crystallized than you suspect. The kind of person you are this morning you will probably continue to be; the pattern, at least, of your personality is now pretty well established. How do you like it? Have you thought about it at all critically? You don't have to be an introvert to add up the score, and then decide whether you are satisfied or not. And if you are not, indeed if you know you should not be satisfied with the result, what are you going to do about it?

I believe that personality, meaning both physical and social qualities as well as the moral qualities called character, can be developed along with mental capacity and intellectual ability. You will need to possess the best of all these attributes well integrated if you are to succeed in the program of living which lies just ahead of you. I stress the importance of personality, character, and intellectual ability because any one or even any two of these without the other is not enough for ultimate success.

Society has a right to expect a lot of you as graduates of the University of Illinois. That expectation applies

to all of you, not only as individuals who have had an exceptional opportunity to secure a college education for your own personal advantage, but also as educated members of a democratic society which must depend on men and women of intelligence and responsibility for its future direction and even for its existence. You know all this as well as I do, but unless you recognize these expectations of society and accept these obligations, the fundamental purpose of education at public expense, whether paid for in full or in part by public taxation, will not be accomplished and indeed such education may not be justified. And in speaking of these expectations and obligations to society, I am not unmindful that no one expects more of you, and properly deserves more of you than your mothers and fathers, as well as your relatives and friends. All I am trying to say is, that having accepted and, I trust, profited greatly by an opportunity afforded you by society—to be specific, by the people of the State of Illinois—you should take your proper place in that society and help to direct and promote its best interests.

The civilization we now enjoy is neither static nor necessarily permanent. It has come about through education. If education ceases our civilization will most certainly disintegrate and eventually disappear. Society is where it is and what it is today because in every generation which has preceded you there have been a few individuals who were so fired with intellectual curiosity that they have carried on the unending search for knowledge, and then, assisted by other scholars, they have promoted the dissemination of knowledge, which is the basis of our civilization and of modern society as we know it. Perhaps there is much about our

civilization and modern society which is not as it should be, perhaps it is badly in need of revision and readjustment. Perhaps we have acquired more knowledge than wisdom in the use of knowledge. Men have not always been wise in their use of discoveries whether scientific or geographical. The social and political implications are not easy to predict when a new science or a new continent is being developed. In many situations even the historian cannot help us very much in our attempts to judge the future by the past. Possibly we have discovered more knowledge than is good for us, but if that is the case we need more and better educated men and women who will have both the intellectual curiosity to find out what is wrong with society and the ability to make it right. But, mark my words, it will be men and women with true intellectual curiosity and ability, actuated by high ideals of public service and not by purely selfish ambitions of private gain, who will serve society in solving these problems.

It hardly seems necessary to point out that these problems are from today your problems. They are in fact the problems of the graduates of every college and university in this and all other countries. If the colleges and universities are not successful in inspiring more and more of their graduates with these ideals they will have failed in one of their major obligations to society which supports them and makes their existence possible.

Believe it or not you are each and every one of you idealists. You have faith in education, you believe a trained mind is better than an untrained mind; you have confidence in knowledge as a basis for a program of living as your presence here today testifies. I place great reliance in that confidence of yours; without it

you will accomplish little, and I trust you will never lose it. You may lack experience—who doesn't at the beginning of his career? But with confidence and knowledge—call it the confidence of youth if you like—you are capable of meeting that handicap as it has been met and overcome by every successful man and woman. And so I hope your University experience has added to your confidence in your ability to meet those problems of the individual and of society which lie ahead of you.

You are about to change your status from students to graduates. This change must not interfere with your attitude of mind toward learning and acquiring new knowledge. That attitude must never change, or your college course will become little more than a hazy memory. But I have in mind another aspect of this transition or change of status which is most significant to you and the University. The reputation of an individual and an institution is involved. For better or for worse you chose to become identified with this University. As I said earlier in this talk, the motives which caused you to make that choice varied widely and those original motives may not be very clear to you today. Some of you came just to get a college degree, some to get a liberal education at the college level, some to prepare technically for a profession. But whatever it was that made you come, the degree you are about to receive will be valued through the years as the reputation of the University of Illinois rises or falls. And, obviously, the future of that reputation, the standing of the University itself, will depend in part, at least, upon you as individuals and as citizens. What you do from now on as alumni will reflect directly on the reputation of this institution.

By and large, of course, the reputation of a department, a college, or a university rests upon the quality, the calibre, and the renown of its faculty, that is, its teaching and scientific staff. But the graduates who have been trained, educated, or inspired under that faculty are the visible evidence to society of its competence. You and the men and women who have preceded you, the rest of the alumni, both graduates and former students, are in a very real sense the interpreters of this University. Your careers, professional or otherwise, good or bad, are a measure of how well our University ideals and objectives can be translated into real life as a basis for a program of living. What the University of Illinois is going to be in the future depends in no small degree on the regard and esteem in which its alumni are held by the citizens of this great commonwealth. If the University of Illinois is to succeed and continue to justify its existence and serve the purposes for which it was founded, then you, the graduates of the Class of 1937, must succeed. There is no other alternative; your future and the future of this University are more closely related than you may realize. I am as much interested in the one as in the other. They will be, very largely, whatever we choose to make them.

Perhaps all that I have said to you can be summarized in these last few words. The reputation and even the existence of any institution, educational or political, depends on the composite reputations and the interest of many individuals. In a very real sense each one of you will continue to be a part of this great institution, which has been and will continue to be your University—your Alma Mater. May success and happiness attend each one of you.