

CONVOCATION - 9/8/77

It is not lost on me that most colleges and universities have, at one time or another, envied the position in which this one finds itself: with a Foundation executive who has spent a few days at the institution but who, instead of having returned to his comfortable pool of money to report in private and make grievous recommendations from a safe distance, is captive in the dock, required to make statements in public for which he may later be held accountable. Given this requirement of putting my mouth where my money was, the temptation to dwell on my past, rather than Carleton, is almost irresistible. And it would not be entirely invalid.

I have some experience of the problems of development and governance in the Third World, in Africa and the Middle East. But in addition, their actions will be increasingly intrusive in our affairs, as individuals and as an institution, in the 20 years ahead. The countries of the black world -- the cultures that, when I graduated 20 years ago were possessions of two or three white, Christian, European nations -- have begun to define themselves, even to "unionize" and to assert their own power, values and sense of need. We will be affected not merely because of what they charge for petroleum, coffee, and bauxite, but because of their redefinition of morality. Much of the less-developed world is asserting what revolutionary societies assert: that the rules of the game of justice, which favor the entrepreneurial individual or nation and validate their accomplishments and law and contract, protect the strong to the detriment of the poor and weak. The sanctity of contract, of comfortable paternalism, are being pressed to yield -- often unilaterally and violently -- to the value of equality, a nationalism of the poor.

As a liberal institution we will confront that world on a number of fronts.

(a) For example, in both southern Africa and Israel there are strong minority cultures asserting a right to exist as collectivities, not as threatened individuals. They are embattled and their historical condition finds deep sympathies and a sense of identity in this society. Ties with those societies, and with their adversaries, will cause anguish for legislators, for those who wish to invest institutional portfolios justly, and for those who wrestle with the meaning of justice. How we understand them as thinking people, how we accommodate their phenomena into our theories of conflict, and how we tolerate how they work out their destinies will, I suspect, be more vital to this society than was the Viet Nam chapter.

(b) But this Third World will also be important because our own Black, Latin and Asian communities, both from ancestral derivation and by social analogy feel an identity with it. They suspect their educational search, I believe, has some of the elements of the earlier Western scholarly search or analysis of Islam or Hinduism which "were explained" as deviants of more familiar cultures. They experience some of the frustration of the Indian Sanskritist who pursues his subject through the exegesis of Germans and Britains^{ons}. Just as our scholars have asked how "truths," the subjectivities, of these cultures are to be understood short of conversion to Islam or Hinduism, so do our minority cultures ask how disciplines can speak to them, their experience of the world.

I bring to Carleton the belief that this external Third World is terribly important, and that only the most imaginative and rigorous education will foster the qualities of mind -- flexibility, tolerance, and analysis -- that this society is going to need to cope with it. It will be the task of all our disciplines in the social sciences and humanities -- not least the classical perceptions of tragedy -- to help improve our understanding. And our faculty and

students with affinities with this world (in addition to their contributions as fellow scholars and students) will bear a heavy part of the burden of helping us comprehend this process through which we shall be living for the remainder of this century. I also bring the recollection of the comment of one of the Ford Foundation's wisest trustees -- an Indonesian who has lived precariously in a precarious society. "The Carletons are among the last bastions of rationality."

But I cannot dwell on my past, even though it represents part of our cultural future. Even in this present state of ignorance -- I can no longer say innocence -- one must speculate and propose hypotheses about this institution and my duties of which this convocation marks the beginning, and what we may expect of one another. It is obviously far too early for a state of the institution statement. But conversations on this campus in these weeks have been too lively, the shades and the presences of my predecessors in Laird Hall have been too immanent, and the nights in Castle Nutting have been too long for there not to have been some brooding. What follows, I think, I would describe as almost a random scanning which, I fear, will tell you more about the scanner than about the permanent features of Carleton or of the future. And perhaps, as we convene here to embark together on this new year, that is only fair.

What, for the next few years, will be our problems and our mission? Through what processes? What can be the contribution of an administrator? And what does he bring to the task?

A major premise is that we are entering into the difficult and rather precarious state for any institution -- an equilibrium. As the economy has flattened and the number of college-age men and women has begun to decline, it is not likely in the decade ahead that we shall see the repeat of the past

decade in which Carleton's student body increased by 25%, its budget by 85% in nominal dollars, its faculty by 10%, and its total student aid budget by 140% in nominal dollars (to the point that 78% of all students now receive some form of student aid). This means, since no institution can remain static without a spiritual shrinkage, that our growth will need to be qualitative. The base of quality already achieved by you and by my predecessor makes this no mean task -- and what I will say may seem far too nebulous, dealing with matters of tone, attitude, and emphasis.

I. Stewart Hampshire, in a recent article on the future of knowledge, said something which may help us understand this mission. He says "We cannot plan invention, or educate men to be of synthetic imagination, in the sense in which we can make plans for developing critical intellects, and educate men to think clearly and to recognize nonsense when they see it. Insofar as we could plan the work of the imagination, we should not think of it as the imagination; we should have no further use for the concept, for it is a power which we do not expect or even want to understand." I have thought a bit about both halves of that statement.

(a) Carleton is well known for developing critical intellects. As I suggested to the Freshmen a couple of days ago, as one whose most important tasks for the past five years have probably involved the hiring and promotion of individuals, I can testify without reservation that the qualities of mind of analytical precision, intellectual restlessness and impatience with slackness are sought and given responsibility long after grade point averages have receded into the past. Friends have volunteered their experiences of these qualities in colleagues who are graduates of this place. The formation of those habits of mind is probably accomplished variously: the provision of role models, the requiring of standards (even small matters -- punctuality of work as well as

clarity of concept and expression), and the demonstration of caring and magnanimity (qualities, in passing, desperately lacking in the institutions of the Third World, where the rule tends to be carelessness, favoritism, and even competition between seniors and juniors).

But I have wondered, are we nurturing these faculties as strenuously as we might? Carleton is a teaching institution; it is small and intimate, although part of the wider world through its participation in the disciplines and the intellectual community. But its staff are burdened. Relative to 20 years ago, there is much more concern for the whole student, and this increases the hours spent advising; governance -- due process -- can be a consumer of time. With these increased burdens, it would seem to me that the danger might be routinization -- a failure though the sheer pressure of time regularly to reconsider and question the basic processes of a discipline, the core forms of thought it seeks to instill, the purposes of a course, the standards of performance that are required by it. Are students still exposed sufficiently to the rigors of the valid extraction of a principle from general data, the discrimination among the commentaries of various texts, the winnowing of fact from opinion, the capacity to follow the logical progression of thought? The sustenance of enthusiasm for conveying what is known, and doing so repetitively but freshly, must be one of the major tasks of this place, I should think. I have, in these early weeks, sensed that students may need to resist inclinations to demand prepackaging (O Lord, tell me what I need to know); teachers to confuse these demands with requests for lucidity.

The importance of this mission would seem to me to be suddenly important for a second reason. Not only is it a logical and traditional part of a college education, but a fresh attention to the elements of disciplined reasoning and expression is clearly crucial to the intellectual tenor of this country, given

the apparent decline of these faculties of the secondary level, witness the current lamentations, sadly not much more than that at this stage, about the decline in SAT scores. Can Carleton doubt its mission when a commission to investigate that decline suggests it is due to "diminished emphasis on critical reading and careful writing"? One wonders if it will not be an honorable mission for Carleton to look not only upward in the educational system -- to future graduate students and their needs, who should continue to represent a substantial percent of graduates from Carleton -- but to concern itself with the intellectual processes vital to incoming Freshmen, through summer institutes and other devices to strengthen the skills of the best secondary school teachers.

(b) But let us also take the second half of the Hampshire statement. I suspect in the course of the next year I shall be asking myself what we are doing at Carleton to encourage inventiveness -- not only among our students but in the faculty. Is there an imperative -- at least an opportunity -- in the curriculum for students to synthesize? Do we put a value on it? As in all moments of fatigue or discouragement in the course of the past two weeks the reading of a faculty report or a conversation with a faculty member has restored one's soul. As one faculty member put it, can we be more than editors, training editors? One institution with which Carleton justly compares itself, in addition to a departmental major, requires of all upperclassmen an "adjunct program" that consists of four related courses (at least three outside the student's field of concentration) united by a common theme or question of the student's own devising. The objective is to encourage independent speculation and intellectual breadth, to formulate and change assumptions, in the course of a substantial piece of written work that extends across the disciplines. Once one is through the skirmishes about cars, pets and telephones, upperclassmen here seem to question, ask, whether the fourth year is as cumulative, as

much an intellectual culmination, of the undergraduate years as it could be. Is there perhaps a relationship between a sense of meaning and purpose, and enabling a student who has acquired sufficient information to do so to establish hypotheses and test them in writing. In some of our departments, I believe, it is being done. Could -- might -- it be done in others?

But the matter also greatly concerns the faculty -- and the administration. In addition to being rigorous, is Carleton intellectual -- in the sense of the definition that intellectuals are people who think in their spare time? For it is the administration, as well as the secretions and initiatives of the faculty themselves, that must feel a responsibility for the creation of an ethic of inquiry and inventiveness -- the exploration and expansion of knowledge, but no less in methods of its exposition and transmission. Partly the matter is money to buy time, but as a foundation executive I confess I grew somewhat skeptical about the extent to which creative work was really stimulated by money. Creative scholars, certainly in the humanities and social sciences with which I was most familiar, were usually doing their work anyway: support enabled it to be done sooner, or before a competing piece of work. So I suspect that the question of incentive is a more subtle one, to be found in the atmosphere of a place. Clearly, in a place like Carleton, with a high rate of tenure, the incentive of tenure is not enough; respect within the discipline is presumably another. But a question that I have asked myself amidst the nocturnal creaks of Nutting House, is whether there is anything an administration can do to encourage that restlessness, to recognize those minds which seek to innovate or even to recast themselves, which provide the leavening, the lightness, to an institution. For it is the presence of these instincts, it would seem to me, that will distinguish such institutions as Carleton from the dreary lockstep of a civil service. The atmosphere, where it exists, is nearly palpable -- presumably as clear to prospective students

as to college presidents. There are places here where it very clearly exists.

These, I suspect, are some of the qualitative matters that will concern us in these next years. Grants, such as those from Mellon for curricular innovation, must be sought, and the obligation will lie heavily upon my mind.

II. Perhaps these speculations about the stimulation of initiative and restlessness lead us logically to the question of leadership -- to the sort of role a college president can play in these vital matters that aggregate into that elusive quality of individual and institutional self-regard, confidence without smugness. Some papers that people have been good enough to write for me to see have suggested the need for a renewed sense of purpose, a reaffirmation of the college's nature, a restatement and articulation of its goals and mission. Whether this is possible, let alone necessary, for an institution as complex as Carleton I'm not sure. As I mentioned to the faculty, a recent self-evaluation of an admirable institution that I read over the summer exhibited much careful thought, represented many man weeks, but succeeded, I think, in trivializing its subject. But there is another reason. In our recent history clarion calls from leaders have not held up very well. I remember how my blood was stirred by the cadences of John Kennedy that this country would bear any burden, pay any price to defend those who seek freedom. The Vietnamese War was the result of that policy -- a noble one in the abstract, but in retrospect, a rather casual one because too general -- and in the event, even irresponsible and immoral. For the law, in its wisdom, properly makes liable to damages a man who makes a pledge, encouraging others to rely and act upon it, that he subsequently cannot sustain -- however admirable his intent. Yet it is, perhaps, the very uncertainty of the times which cry out for unambiguous statements of purpose (and which has led the new Administration in Washington to advocate human rights,

and with such ambiguous results to those whose rights are being denied but whose relief is not within our gift).

We can easily be recalled to another place and another time. Martin Trow reminds us of the passion with which Max Weber spoke of the moral constraints on the teacher, while knowing "how many of the German youth of his day seek in college for some ultimate truth, some transcendent philosophy which will give meaning to life and the times." "The error," said Weber, "is that they seek in the professor a leader and not a teacher." I suspect that these imperatives that lie upon the professor lie also upon the administrator. Leadership in academia is a dicey business. I am not at all sure that it is not described implicitly by Aristotle in the Ethics: "It is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things, just so far as the nature of the subject admits."

I think -- I hope -- that this is not a pusillanimous sentiment. Certainly there are duties one will shoulder with energy, even joy, that are clearly of Carleton's "nature" and of the nature of its presidency. The financial base of this place is one of the great accomplishments of its leadership and its board; one must struggle to sustain it. The game of the next ten years, as one experienced educator told me before I came to Carleton, is not going to be curricular reform but getting and keeping the best students and the best faculty. By interest as well as through an ex officio charge, that will be a major mission. Carleton's natural and physical endowment -- its buildings and its grounds are a major asset, an index of our self-regard for ourselves and for those who come to look at us. Allocations of funds involve painful tradeoffs, but ensuring that this place does not become shabby, remains beautiful as well as comfortable, requires decisions with long lead time. Occasionally, I gather, presidential weight on the balance can be useful -- and a major commitment is to support the

Sayles Hill renovation, which seems to me crucial to the student life of the College. And to see that it is performed in a timely and attractive way. So, perhaps, too can a senior administrator guard the openness and clarity of our administration and academic procedures.

But I think Carleton is also likely to be afflicted with several states of mind that will probably stick with me from my previous incarnation.

(a) One I have already intimated: A Foundation legacy is an awareness that there is always more money than there are good ideas: the recognition that it is the jump in creativity, the new perception of an old truth, a new line of inquiry, a vigorous soul capable of self-recreation to which the administrator must be alert.

To have been grounded in a discipline and worked in foreign areas perhaps gives one some sense of the tension that must exist between the discipline and cross-disciplinary work -- the paradox, as Hampshire says, that by its nature knowledge advances by the division of labor by ever-increasing specialization, every inquiry subdividing into new disciplines requiring separate investigation, yet it is also true that new knowledge depends on ideas from different disciplines being connected within a single mind.

We have seen, by extension, this tension in the evolution of law and the behavior of courts in the past decade in American society. The legal frame of logic is rigorous and demanding; it requires much of its scholars and practitioners, in the service, to the end, of certainty and predictability. But we have passed through a time when its forms of logic -- concern for precedent upon which predictability is based -- bumped up against reality. Other factors, most notably in the past 20 years equity among the races, came into play and the courts overruled a long range of judicial precedent. This increasing judicial activism led it into definitions, even quantum definitions, of economic equality, eventually even to the point of deciding in what month a fetus becomes

a human being -- to the result that the legitimacy, the certainty, of the law was brought into question, as well as the competence of the courts. This is not a commentary on the Supreme Court of recent years; nor a denial that these are important subjects. It is an example, perhaps valid beyond the field of the law, of how a system of logic and professional values matures, perhaps calcifies, and then breaks its shell upon reality, the unruliness of human affairs, becomes vulnerable as it overreaches itself and then grows again. It is, I suspect, a process of this sort which enables disciplines to retain what is referred to as "relevance." Clearly, it is the extension of the discipline within its own terms, as well as the extension of its frontiers into other systems of logic, that concern an academic institution.

(b) The second cast of mind, which I fear my fellow administrators are already encountering, is the compulsion to see how an entrancing idea can be reified as a program, a course, or a line of inquiry. This requires you to listen first to people who are the touchstones of quality and salience who insure that your own hearing is adequate; and then to wrestle for the followup and the check on standards of performance.

(c) Finally, I think from my work and living in Pakistan and in Africa, one has an abiding awareness of the fragility of societies, and this takes us back to Carleton.

III. I do not know the history of Carleton well, but I think I am beginning to catch its drift. There is a skepticism here, but a mature, optimistic and even warm-hearted skepticism, it seems to me. There is no great impulse in the place to seek justification in abstract theory, to redefine our aims and objectives. Thus, to carry out the charge of the Trustees to articulate the purposes of the College, I doubt that I will find much encouragement for recapitulation or for synopsis. I think that is because there may be here a

liberalism -- or perhaps a conservatism -- of the Burkean sort: resistance to any pretension to declare a universal or absolute truth. Such I gather has been Carleton's genius which got it through the 60's -- whether the absolute truth be free speech or peace in Viet Nam. The place has resisted any efforts to establish "prior rights" in ways that would destroy the capacity of the place to function.

This is not to say that there are not convictions and passion. Alexander Bickel, the legal scholar, suggests that systems navigate between two extremes: between the "tyrannical tendency of ideas," of revealed truths, of lexically prior rights; and the "suicidal emptiness of politics without ideas." In effect, intolerance on the one hand; indifference on the other. Bickel is a Burkean, and I suspect I am too.

We will have painful, even anguished decisions in the months and years ahead: the allocation of limited financial resources; perhaps most painful of all, decisions on the personal futures of faculty through tenure decisions and the decisions of faculty that will affect the futures of students. At a recent faculty meeting I mentioned that I regarded civility as an important value. That, I believe, is not a term which is synonymous with gentility or geniality; it is self-restraint -- what Bickel calls "the morality of consent" -- a belief that the preservation of what he calls the manifest constitution of the country (and what we might call the manifest or open and unwritten constitution of Carleton) -- the structure and process of the place -- is more important than any single right or interest. Still less does it permit intellectual sloppiness, for if the quality of the whole is to be maintained, it will depend upon the most careful and conscientious treatment of individual issues.

I have had no direct experience of the governance system, but all that I have heard suggests that in the institutions, and in the individuals and groups which sustain them, these attitudes will not be unfamiliar or unattractive.

Well, you may say with some justice after this ramble, let us hope that fellow begins to get some sleep there amidst the bats of Nutting House. As you can see, we have been talking about matters which turn upon one another: morale and enthusiasm, which are a consequence of professionalism and standards; carefulness and some nervousness about the validity of those standards. But these qualities are also the consequence of personal well-being and the absence of meanness -- which are reflected in faculty salaries, and also in budgets which do not mortgage the future; in student life, in meeting places for students and faculty; the consequence of a campus which is beautiful and well-maintained. They embody the confidence which enables a system to articulate its purposes as it goes along.

I have seen enough of the world to know how unique this place is -- it is one of that uncommon breed of free-thinking, hard-working, critical institutions. We have some stormy weather ahead, but there is much strength here. I pledge you heart and soul to preserving that strength and to helping bring forth the best that is here, strongly believing that the world will value those qualities in those who go out from us. What I do, I suspect, will principally be a channeling, an encouragement of the best energies of the faculty, the administrators, and the students. But I have also read my Microcosmographia Academica, whose principal precept, as you all know, is that even the most liberal, progressive initiatives in academia tend to be variations on the theme that "nothing should ever be done for the first time." I am grateful and happy to be here. May the year be a good one.