Statement by Under Secretary of the Interior John A. Carver, Jr., to the National Honor Society of Washington & Lee High School, Arlington, Virginia, April 23, 1966

My assignment tonight would have been easier if this were not Craig's school. I have fretted over what I might usefully tell you, because I have been constantly conscious that my performance would be measured against his, and that pretense would be surely discovered.

You are an elite group, products of an outstanding "lighthouse" school--one which stands as an educational beacon. The seniors among you are college-bound, most of the suspense of waiting now thankfully ended.

Rather more than many of your contemporaries, I suspect, you are conscious of the pitfalls of generalizing about our society from the particular cross-section of it which your school is. To put it another way, I think one of the great advantages of this particular high school is its refusal to be the typical suburban high school. Your school administration and the student body are proud of the school's diversity and heterogeneity, without losing one bit of their pride in its excellence.

This diversity is a fortunate circumstance. The question of uniformity and diversity is a central moral dilemma of our age.

Volumes by two of America's greatest educators, James Bryant Conant, former president of Harvard, and John W. Gardner, now Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, in their books Slums and Suburbs and Excellence: Can We be Equal and Excellent Too?, contemplate this dilemma.
Dr. Conant candidly recognizes that increasingly we are going to be dealing with schools which emphasize the cleavage which arises from basic differences in the status and ambitions of the families being served, not from differences in money available or educational philosophy.

Thus he makes recommendations, which are different for the well-to-do suburbs, and the public high schools in the large city slums.

For the former (Evanston, Ill., Great Neck, N. Y., Newton, Mass., and Scarsdale, N. Y.) he calls among other things for expert guidance early in the process of education for both parent and child in the realities of college admission. And, he says the place to begin to set standards in American education is at the top rung—the graduate level. He asks for the ability to write a competent essay; a good reading, writing, and speaking knowledge of at least one modern foreign language; a knowledge of mathematics through the calculus; a knowledge of physics, chemistry, and biology at the freshman level of our most rigorous colleges; at the same level of competence, knowledge of American history and political institutions and English and American literature.

Such a course will sound familiar to many of you.

As to the schools in the slums of large cities, he warned when he wrote five years ago that social dynamite was building up in the form of unemployed out-of-school youth, especially in the Negro slums; and asked that the schools be given responsibility for educational and vocational guidance of youth after they leave school until age 21;
and he recommended expansion of work-study programs and vocational courses. Mr. Gardner answers his question affirmatively. He articulates a conception of excellence at many levels to accord with the varied potentialities of mankind. "Our society cannot achieve greatness unless individuals at many levels of ability accept the need for high standards of performance and strive to achieve those standards within the limits possible for them." He wants to tone up the whole society.

His conception is based on a pluralistic approach to values, and a universally honored philosophy of individual fulfillment.

These two men are occupied with the modern application of an old conflict. We are the inheritors of a social system which is egalitarian—the tradition of liberal democracy.

But Walter Lippman in his book The Public Philosophy makes a distinction about this tradition, as he discusses the attack upon it in this era.

In asking that we revive the "public philosophy", he points to a distinction between our American revolution, and the revolutions against established authority.

The fathers of our country picked up the language of the Jacobin revolution in France, but we believed in authority and the rule of law. In this context, his discussion of education asks both more of the process, and less of it.

This paradox is explained this way. The explosive increase in population, the broadened franchise, the dissolution of family, church, and community have put demands on school systems which Lippman says cannot be met.
On the other hand, he says, there must be added to the process an ingredient or discipline—akin, perhaps, to Gardner's plea for excellence—because we cannot assume that instinctive rightness and righteousness of the people will lead them naturally to accept their responsibilities.

"If it is the role of reason merely to be an instrument of each man's career, then the mission of the schools is to turn out efficient careerists. They must teach the know-how of success, and this—seasoned with the social amenities and some civic and patriotic exhortation—is the subject matter of education. The student elects those subjects which will presumably equip him for success in his career. The rest are superfluous. There is no such thing as a general order of knowledge and a public philosophy, which he needs to possess."

Mr. Lippmann has a larger view.

Dr. Conant tells us how we must consider the conditions—social, economic, and otherwise—of the people being educated, and tailor our programs to them.

Secretary Gardner calls for a kind of spirit for our educational processes which will bring out the best performance of each according to his ability.

Mr. Lippmann's suggestion about a hard-headedness about the process, one which eschews the comforting thought about education solving all the problems of our society, seems to me to be appropriate at this time in history.

The true criterion of true and false, of right and wrong, is, he says, beyond that which the preponderant mass of voters, consumers, readers and listeners happen at the moment to be supposed to want.
Each of you is here because he has demonstrated a capacity for high academic performance, citizenship and leadership. Some of you may have just a slight lurking suspicion that luck played a part, but I would suggest that such feelings indicate only a fleeting modesty. You have been tested over a rather long pull, and I am confident that none has been invited here except on the basis of real achievement.

Some of you had to work very hard to reach this level; others possess natural gifts that made the task relatively easy. Natural ability coupled with great industry yields the maximum return, but the man who is moved by a desire for excellence and who develops the full potential of his ability is more worthy of praise than is his genius contemporary who wastes his talent.

I consider your first and primary responsibility, now that you have these credentials of intellectual leadership, is not to waste the talent which put you here.

As you leave this school for whatever lies ahead of you, ability has been recognized in you, and you owe it to yourself and the world to see that this ability is properly applied.

We have mentioned that one of the problems which confront all of us is how to recognize and use excellence in a society where equality is the by-word. In a former era, even on our own continent, the existence of an aristocracy took care of the difference between wealth, talent and learning and the common lot of poverty, ignorance and drudgery. Periodically since that era, the temptation has been strong to re-establish class
distinctions on the basis of wealth, or intelligence, or some such indicator. The concept of some such "elite class" is still with us and emerges from time to time, as one or another of the forces in our society takes precedence. In the recent past if not now, the physical scientist has come close to demanding that role. As our society assimilates and becomes comfortable with the strange discoveries of recent science, the diadem of the elite may gravitate back toward those who can control and manage the results of scientific endeavor: the economist, the production manager and the lawyer.

But whatever the pattern of these trends may be, it will remain your task to live up to the challenge of excellence in a democratic society. You must remain a part of that society, for if under some misguided philosophy you withdraw from the family of man in its broadest sense, you cannot hope to exert the leadership force that is your duty. Existentialism is a luxury; luxury is one of our problems.

For three hundred years, America had one dominant, all-consuming goal: to push back the physical frontier and to conquer and subjugate the resources which lay beyond. For the last half century we have exploited those resources, spread ourselves across the land and created a standard of living far beyond our forefathers' imagination.

Almost without warning, we now find ourselves threatened with the isolation of our own affluence. Half of the world is our ideological enemy; even many of our friends are suspicious of our motives and envious of our comfort. How to convince the rest of the world that our way of
peace, industry and equality before the law and the rule of law offers the greatest promise for world peace and prosperity, requires our own understanding of these things.

You, the privileged and the gifted, must assume that task as your intellectual burden.

Since we are gathered here to honor your accomplishment, it is obvious that we tender our congratulations. But in so doing I hope I have stimulated you to think about the special obligations you assume. Your honors are well earned and richly deserved. But carry them with dignity and modesty; regard them as a sacred trust.

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