Schlesinger, Arthur Meier

Convocation address, June, 1926

Wm. A. McSparran

June 1926 Commencement

THE NEW TYRANNY

On July 4, 1776, a band of revolutionists, sitting behind closed doors in Carpenters' Hall in Philadelphia, solemnly resolved that they could no longer endure a political yoke which had become in their eyes an intolerable tyranny, and they declared themselves to the world a free and independent people. One hundred and fifty years later, in this year of our Lord 1926, the american people are being asked to celebrate that fateful decision, for from it has grown a mighty nation, a dynamic civilization, and a system of political principles that has enthroned the common man the world over. It seems fitting, therefore, on an occasion like this, that we should review some of the major elements which have made possible these achievements, and particularly that we should assess some of the results from the standpoint of intellectual progress.

Exactly fifty years after the adoption of the Declaration of Independence, the two men who had contributed most to its drafting lay on their deathbeds. One of them, that sturdy and irascible patriot, John Adams of Massachusetts, had served as second President of the United States, and he had been succeeded in office by the other, the suave and scholarly Jefferson of Virginia. United in supporting the cause of independence, the two men had

later differed as to how that independence could best be used, and had become chieftains of contending political parties. In the glare of partisan conflict their differences had seemed sharply opposed; but, reconciled in their twilight years, they perceived that they had always been striving for the same goal though along different paths. In a correspondence of extraordinary interest they reviewed the formative years of the nation and made clear that they thought well of the results. If Jefferson's letters sometimes betrayed an impatience that the people continued too much under the rule of the upper classes, the criticism was fairly countered by Adams's fear that the masses tended to acquire political power too rapidly for their own good. On the afternoon of July 4, 1826, the Golden Jubilee of independence, Adams breathed his last. His dying words were, "Jefferson still lives!" But it was not so, for the great Virginian had preceded him only a few hours before.

As these men realized, the United States of 1826 was not greatly different, except in territorial extent, from the nation which they helped to found. The freedom of the individual continued to be the chief interest of the state; public leadership belonged to the educated and the well-born; the ordinary man remained very largely a spectator of events. The United States, it might truly have been

said, was a government of the people and for the people, but it had not yet become one by the people. Yet even as these venerable statesmen were breathing their last, they might have heard the distant tread of oncoming armies of plain men who were preparing to make their way into the places of power. The second half-century of independence was marked by the establishment of universal manhood suffrage and the elevation of the masses to political power. Andrew Jackson, who became President in 1829, was the first of a long series to be elected, not because they were superior to the multitude but because they were so much like them. Too naïve in their conception of democracy and unskilled in the arts of administration, this generation made many mistakes. But their errors were not irreparable, whereas the basic principles of popular government which they practised are accepted to this day as the foundations of the American democratic structure.

Perhaps the most significant of these principles was that government must be obedient to public opinion and be constantly responsible to the people. The supreme importance of this conception cannot be challenged. It is the capstone of the democratic system of government. From its acceptance, however, flowed consequences which no well wisher of democracy can view without disquiet. If the voice of the people is the voice of God in the realm of government, why should it not be equally so in other fields of community action and decision? If the majority can override all dissent in matters of legislation, why should it tolerate differences of opinion in regard to social and

moral questions?

The result of this specious reasoning was that the triumph of political democracy was attended by periodic and often prolonged outbreaks of organized lawlessness, undertaken, it was alleged, not in defiance of the constituted authorities but in order to maintain public tranquillity and the will of the community. No holder of unconventional opinions was free from muscular attention from these self-appointed and self-deceived guardians of law and order. The growth of Catholicism in the East was accompanied by mob attacks on the Irish districts of the cities and the storming of convents. The followers of another creed were hounded from Ohio to Missouri and then to Illinois, and finally were forced to flee American soil altogether. When the pioneers of the women's rights movement addressed meetings, they were greeted with jeers and insults and often with physical violence. No community seemed immune to the contagion. Boston, as well as Cincinnati, mobbed her outspoken abolitionists; Alton, Illinois, killed hers. Sometimes minorities replied in kind. In your own state of Ohio, thousands of God-fearing men and women banded together in a secret conspiracy to violate the federal Fugitive Slave Law by aiding slaves to freedom by means of the Underground Railroad.

When De Tocqueville came to America in the 1830's, nothing so sharply challenged his attention as the spirit of intolerance which he found rampant in all fields of

political and social endeavor. The visible censorship exercised by the mob seemed to him, on the whole, a less serious matter than the invisible pressure which every community exerted to make the individual conform to its approved pattern. "Public opinion," he wrote, "presses with enormous weight upon the mind of each individual; it surrounds, directs, and oppresses him." Coming from a monarchical country of Europe and counting himself a friend of democracy, he could nevertheless declare, "I know no country in which there is so little true independence of mind and freedom of discussion as in America."

Thus, out of the very womb of triumphant democracy, in the second half-century of American independence, there was born an evil principle that robbed the individual of much of the freedom which the law intended to give him and which, along with other influences, was destined in time to erect a real tyranny of the intellect amidst the freest political institutions the world has ever known. What was more important, it threatened to deprive the community as a whole of those sources of fresh inspiration, and of those new alternatives to old ways of doing things, which form the very breath of life to a progressive society. It is a truism that the minority opinion of one generation becomes the majority opinion of the next; yet the dominant forces in society, blind to the lessons of history, were willing to sacrifice the larger interests of society to a fancied present good. That they did not wholly succeed was a testimonial to the inherent and virile individualism of the people.

As the second half-century of independence drew to a close, the thoughts of the people turned instinctively to some suitable celebration of the one hundredth anniversary of the nation's birth. Nothing seemed more appropriate than a great national exposition which should reveal the state of intellectual and material development ~~which~~ that the nation had attained; and, of course, no place was so fitting as the city where independence had first been proclaimed. The result was the Centennial Exposition of 1876 at Philadelphia, attended by countless thousands of Americans from all parts of the country.. There the visitor, doubting the evidence of his own senses, could use a contrivance, exhibited by its inventor, a young man named Bell, for carrying on a conversation over a wire. Walking about the grounds at night, his way was lighted, brilliantly as it seemed to him, by arc lamps, invented shortly before by Brush of Cleveland. In Machinery Hall he found a bewildering display of all kinds of new and strange mechanisms which were designed to revolutionize the work of factory, farm and mine.

The Philadelphia Centennial was both an evidence and a promise that the nation was entering a new era, -- an age of machinery, of steam, steel and electricity, of scientific discovery and large-scale production. The story of this third half-century, continuing to the present year, is like a page from the Arabian Nights. No slave of the lamp performed greater miracles at the command of an Aladdin than have the Edisons, the Mergenthalers and the Wrights during these years. Human society was transformed between the

the infancy and old age of an average man. The urban dweller born in an era of coal-oil lamps, horse cars and four-story buildings died amidst the roar and rumble of a city of incandescent lighting, automobiles and skyscrapers. The farmer toiling in his lonely fields found the good things of the city drawing nearer to him with the extension of good roads, mail-order marketing, interurban trolleys and the telephone. In this general well-being the women of the household partook, as the drudgery of housework crumbled before the introduction of new mechanical appliances and the labor of food preparation was simplified by the efforts of butcher, the canner and the baker. It is not too much to say that, as a result of this unexampled advance in the physical facilities of living, the average workingman enjoys more comforts than did a medieval baron. Certain it is that if the owner of the poorest tenement house in a modern city should install the kind of plumbing that George Washington possessed, he would promptly be locked up as a menace to the health of the community.

The motive force behind these changes was machinery, -- machinery in its thousands of applications and countless ramifications. A new power had arisen in American life, impersonal, all-pervasive, irresistible. Originally the offspring of the brain of man, the Machine speedily turned to the task of reshaping society according to its own needs and caprice. As if to offset its acts of beneficence, it established a dominion over man which no one had intended or foreseen. It asked for a home; and huge mills and

factories were built on every hand. It demanded retainers and servitors; and millions of men, women and children were drafted into its service. It disdained the open countryside; and great, smoky, disease-breeding cities, where men were crowded like cattle, were created for its pleasure.

Samuel Butler in his novel called Erewhon tells of a race of men who, alarmed at the growing power of these iron monsters and fearful lest they take on a life and consciousness of their own, abolished all machinery from their land. There is, I dare say, no danger that these mighty machines of ours are likely to become men; but there can be no doubt that they are causing men to become like machines. Indeed, in an age like the present when industrialism is held up as the great goal of human effort, what could be more fitting than that men should adopt machine ways of living and life itself become mechanized? The peoples of entire cities are ruled by the shrill blasts of a few factory whistles, and rise, eat, go to work, rest, toil and sleep again at their bidding. Cities themselves have become so standardized that in traveling on a railway it is scarcely possible to distinguish one from another.

But mechanization is more than a matter of externals: it has invaded the mental and spiritual life of man as well. The newspaper reader, wherever he may be, in town or country, in East or West, sits down to the same daily diet of identically worded news items, the same political cartoons and feature stories, the same advertisements, comic strips and advice to the lovelorn. Andy Gump, and Mutt and Jeff, are

the idols, not of a single community but of the entire nation. In their hours of ease, men perforce turn for companionship to machines, -- to the motor car, the movie, the radio. Nor are these mechanisms mere means to an end. Take away from the automobile owner his car, and what resources of the inner life are there for him to fall back upon? The streetcar conductor in the familiar story, finding himself with an unexpected vacation, spent the day riding around in a streetcar.

The principle of standardization, so vital for industrial efficiency, has become one of the animating principles of modern society. In imitation of the machine, an unthinking public has come to place a premium upon uniformity, homogeneity, conformity, and to abhor, except within narrow limits, diversity, differences, innovation. The incessant bombardment of standardized newspapers, magazines, books, movies, plays are causing the people not only to use the same slang, sing the same melodies and wear the same clothes but even to feel the same emotions and think the same thoughts. The whole force of mechanization on American culture has been toward the suppression of ~~uniqueness~~ uniqueness, individuality and independence in thought and conduct. The pressures exerted by society tend to make everyone cherish the aspiration of being like everyone else; and we are in danger of becoming a nation of parrots.

Thus, the Machine has taken its place along side of Public Opinion as a contender for the mastery of the American mind. Both have found a potent ally in a distinctive attribute of the national character, which may be called the

American genius for organization. This was a capacity of which the people had only recently become conscious. In colonial times individualistic enterprise was the dynamic principle of society, and it was only in matters of religion that the people resorted to association and co-operation. With the winning of independence, however, men devoted their organizing abilities to problems of government and politics, -- to the making of constitutions, the holding of conventions and the direction of political parties. This they accomplished with such unparalleled success that the second half-century of independence saw an extension of these activities to humanitarian causes and reform movements. Thus, great national bodies were formed to agitate and promote such reforms as public education, women's rights, temperance and anti-slavery.

Feeding on its own success, the spirit of organization has, during the past half-century, penetrated virtually every field of American thought and endeavor. Capital has created its great trusts and combinations; labor, its labor unions. Scholars, deserting their traditional solitude, have banded together in local and national associations. Business men, teachers, physicians, preachers, engineers and undertakers, all have become involved in an intricate network of organizations with the customary elaborate paraphernalia of officers, conventions and official publications. As the American people have acquired a greater margin of leisure from gainful labor, here too the virus of organization has done its work. It was in these years that the

Americans became a nation of "joiners." Lodges and clubs sprang up on every hand, with fantastic names and secret rituals, gripe and pass-words. Nor were the women neglected. Their clubs became so numerous and widespread that more than a quarter of a century ago they, too, were able to form a national federation. Even in the realm of physical recreation, which would seem to offer a peculiar scope for individual initiative, that sport was indeed a poor one which could not show one or more national leagues and associations.

This headlong rush of persons possessing like tastes and interests to do things together is without parallel in the history of the world, and was, of course, based on the sound maxim that "in union there is strength." But what was at the outset a healthy instinct has become vitiated by overzealous practice. There is scarcely a community in the entire land that is not overorganized and in which the energy consumed in committees, clubs and organizations is not altogether out of proportion to any good that could result. The great benefit to the individual, which should have accrued from the enjoyment of a larger measure of leisure than any people has ever before known, has been neutralized by the perpetual motion imposed by group activities. The older idea of congenial spirits shyly seeking each other for occasional communion, of individuals giving themselves of choice to periods of serious reading or reflective thinking, of husband and wife quietly sharing each other's thoughts of an evening before the fireside, has almost entirely vanished. Moreover, the notions of the club, of

one's social set, of one's political party, have supplanted those standards of personal rectitude and intellectual integrity so important for the welfare both of the individual and the community. In the vital matters of self-cultivation we have abandoned the self-reliant ways of our forefathers, have forgotten the importance of privacy and repose, and have learned to hide from ourselves by seeking refuge in a crowd.

The modern tyranny, then, which confronts the American people is not that of a political despot or a military dictator. In Byron's phrase,

> Think'st thou there is no tyranny but that
> Of blood and chains?

Nor is it so much an oppression of the body as it is of the inner life of man. Would that it were a despotism of the usual kind, for it would then be easier for society to combat it! If my analysis is correct, it is the monstrous product of three factors in American development that in themselves should have yielded only good: Public Opinion, the Machine and the National Genius for Organization. Grown to bloated dimensions, they have collectively imposed on the mind of man a servitude that is all the more fearful because it is impalpable and unseen, all the more powerful because it is seldom challenged.

Without a violent stretch of the imagination the typical American today may be pictured as a man wearing a Knox hat, an Arrow collar, a Manhatton shirt, a Hart, Schaffner and Marx suit and a pair of Walkover shoes, seated in a Ford car with a Saturday Evening Post under his arm on his way to the monthly meeting of the National Association for the Ban-

ishment of Privacy from the American Home. He is standardized both inside and out. Like the drapings of his body, so have the furnishings of his mind been supplied by the various agencies which operate for that purpose in modern America. The necessity for reflection and thought has been eliminated from his life. In matters of religion, the church says, "Let me do your thinking for you." In matters of personal conduct, the community declares, "We will do your thinking for you." In matters of politics, the party leaders announce, "We have done your thinking for you!"

In the last decade the forces making for social uniformity and the suppression of dissent have attained an unprecedented momentum. The intolerance engendered by the war helped to this end, but, after all, it did little more than intensify tendencies already well developed. One of the most flagrant manifestations of this spirit has been the rise and spread of the Ku Klux Klan. In a country bred to the Anglo-Saxon tradition of progress through law, a secret hooded order, borrowing the name of an unlawful organization of Reconstruction times, has intimidated and ruled entire communities, has waged war against racial and religious minorities, and has sought to rubberstamp its peculiar pattern of "americanism" upon the nation.

The contagion of intolerance has even infected legislators, who have joined in the hue and cry of those who wish to substitute a medieval obscurantism for the knowledge discovered by trained scientists and scholars. The whole nation laughed, a quarter of a century ago, when the Indiana legis-

lature came within one reading of passing a bill providing for that the circumference of a circle should thereafter be four times the diameter instead of the vexatious 3.1416. Yet this tilt with truth was no more ridiculous than the solemn efforts that have been made in the last few years by various lawmaking bodies to settle, by legislative decree, what constitutes verity in such subjects as biology and history. As Lowell wrote many years ago,

> Think you Truth a farthing rushlight
> to be pinched out when you will
> With your deft official fingers and
> your politicians' skill?

Yet today, in Tennessee, Florida and North Carolina, no public school teacher can legally teach that man has descended -- or even ascended -- from a lower order of animal life, but must uphold (according to the Tennessee statute) "the story of the divine creation of man as taught in the Bible." Other states, like Wisconsin and Oregon, have invaded the domain of the historical specialist, and with equal assurance have declared what manner of information regarding American history shall be imparted to public school pupils. They profess, of course, to act from motives of patriotism, but it is a frail kind of patriotism that fears lest the truth about the great men of America be unfit for young ears to hear. Moreover, in their efforts to cramp the human intellect, legislatures have had the zealous support of large organized groups of the public, -- a curious assortment, to be sure, but nevertheless numerous and powerful, -- including some of the larger Protestant denominations, the Sons and Daughters of the American Revolution, the Irish-Americans and the German-Americans. In

one cause at least, descendants of the Revolution and hyphenated Americans may labor lovingly together. It may well be asked, what has become of our vaunted belief in tolerance, of our faith in the power of truth as a force for personal and civic righteousness, of our proud boast that error is dangerous only when truth is not left free to combat it?

Thus, in this sesquicentennial year of independence, we find ourselves confronted by a strange paradox: America has achieved the greatest measure of political freedom known to history, but Americans individually have never before possessed so little intellectual and spiritual freedom. My message were indeed a counsel of despair if there were no escape from this creeping social and intellectual paralysis. One agency of society, however, has the power, the intelligence and, I believe, the courage to break through the shackles which modern life would place upon freedom of thought and investigation. That agency is education, particularly as vitalized by the leadership of the college and the university.

But higher education itself, as we know it, is a product of the complex forces of modern life, and its character and procedure have been deeply influenced by the conditions that prevail in the outside world. Thus, there is scarcely a university in the land in which the facilities have not been sadly overtaxed by great throngs of students intent primarily on getting a technical or professional education. The emphasis of higher education has definitely shifted from the attainment of a broad liberal culture as a preparation

for life to the acquisition of vocational proficiency for earning a livelihood.

Moreover, the physical difficulty of dealing with vast numbers of students has greatly complicated the problem of instruction. One hundred years ago the total college enrollment for the entire United States was 6,419; today there are almost twice that number in the Ohio State University alone. Leaders of opinion, reflecting the current subservience to industrial ideals, have been heard to speak approvingly of "educational factories" and of "mass production in education." The fact is, however, that the process of educating the human mind is not comparable to that of assembling and uniting the parts of an automobile. No principle is better established than that true education must be, in final analysis, the product of the student's own mental exertions. Yet, in our overcrowded college courses, class work, instead of allowing the freest possible scope to the development of the individual, tends to become a fixed routine. Unconsciously the main purpose of the instructor becomes to train the memory of his students rather than to stimulate their minds, to satisfy intellectual curiosity rather than to excite it, and to reward those who can best reproduce in an examination what the professor has said in class. It is not surprising that a foreign observer, after visiting some of the courses in one of our older universities, should remark, with a strong seasoning of truth, that the students acted as if they believed everything worth thinking had been thought and they were there only to gather souvenirs.

Another characteristic of the modern college is the extraordinary patchwork of courses which forms the curriculum. This curriculum was the conception of no single man nor of any single group of men. It was blown together, so to speak, by the winds of chance. As the interests of modern society have increased, one field of study after another has pushed its way into the curriculum, and the older subjects, enriched in content and point of view, have become divided into sub-fields with substantial bodies of knowledge of their own. Departments of instruction have multiplied, each of them zealous to secure proper representation in the general list of offerings. As President Frank recently observed, "specialization has converted our universities into intellectual department stores or, more accurately, into a series of intellectual specialty shops housed under a common roof."

The fact is that the whole system of higher education has been organized for the convenience and benefit of the teacher or specialist in a subject rather than from the point of view of the needs of the individual student. The undergraduate moves along, as in a great cafeteria, selecting dishes here and there, with no assurance that at the end he will have a balanced or digestible meal. It is little wonder that the average student thinks of education in terms of course credits, or that at the end of his fourth year he asks, "Have I sufficient credits for graduation?" rather than, "Have I mastered any considerable portion of the domain of human knowledge?" This is not the student's fault, but the faculty's; and the situation will

continue until the course of study is completely reorganized with the learner's mind, rather than the teacher's, as the starting point of the educational process.

The nationwide controversy that is raging over the question of military training in the colleges illustrates again how confused our thinking has become in regard to education. The whole system of soldier training rests upon the complete subjection of one man's will to that of another. If we accept the premise that the primary reason for students going to college is to learn how to use their minds, anything which actually defeats this purpose, however desirable in itself, is to be condemned. It would seem clear, therefore, that military training, whether compulsory or voluntary, has no place in a university that is consecrated to the ideal of cultivating individual initiative, independent thinking and intellectual leadership.

As for the modern college faculty, that institution is a rare and fortunate one in which the members of the instructional staff are not underpaid and overworked. ~~In no part of the business world is trained ability so meagerly recompensed, and no business or professional man regularly works as long hours as the average college professor spends in his library or laboratory.~~ The widely accepted myth of scholarly leisure is a snare and a delusion. It has completely broken down under the increasing weight of endless academic tasks; and the college instructor vainly envies the eight-hour day of organized labor as he strives conscientiously to execute his

manifold duties as teacher, investigator, writer, director of research, committee man, student adviser and public speaker. Once the holder of a university chair was regarded by society as a torchbearer of civilization, as an intellectual pioneer advancing the outposts of truth; now he is watched jealously for fear he may give utterance to views that run counter to the inherited opinions of the community. The professor's mind, it seems, must be standardized according to the same model as that of the public; and the unfortunate who forgets this is likely to find himself haled before some august tribunal on vague charges of "radicalism" and "bolshevism." It is a paradoxical fact that, at the same time that we are spending millions on education, we have come to fear the effects of education upon the human intellect. By some perversion of thinking we have come to regard a college as an academic hothouse where delicate minds must be shielded from the storms and controversies that rage in the world outside. Big universities can be built on this plan, but great ones never.

It is evident, therefore, that if higher education is to take a militant leadership in the struggle to save the individual, it must begin by reforming itself. If the signs of the times are to be trusted, this the authorities of our colleges are prepared to do. Fortunately man has inherited from his simian ancestors not only the capacity to ape others but also the ability to monkey for himself. There is every reason to believe that the more progressive coll-

ges are convinced they have gone far enough in aping one another and are now resolved to do some monkeying for themselves. Probably never before has the academic world been in so great a ferment; never before have so many significant experiments been undertaken in the effort to humanize and individualize education.

One evidence of the new trend is the development of countless junior colleges, offering only the first two years of the college course and thus tending to relieve the great universities of congestion in their lower branches of instruction. Another is seen in the practice of endowed institutions in limiting enrollment, a policy which has usually been attended by a more careful selection of the type of students admitted. The state universities have thus far hesitated to restrict the size of their student bodies; nevertheless they, along with the private institutions, have carried on a series of novel and fruitful experiments which have as their purpose the development of the unusually gifted student as over against that of the average one. They are no longer content with the ideal of an educated mediocrity. The new doctrine is that democracy in education consists, not in giving every student the same instruction but in giving to each individual mind, according to its capacity, the greatest possible incentive to growth.

There are signs too, here and there, of a willingness of college faculties to forget their departmental boundaries, and collaborate on courses which give students, in their early years, large and understanding views of great fields of

knowledge. Some institutions have even gone so far as to require all students, before graduation, to take a series of general examinations covering their four years' work and involving a thorough knowledge of some one large field of study irrespective of the specific courses taken in it.

Perhaps most significant of all has been the self-assertion of the students themselves in matters relating to educational policy. They are asking, and asserting, the right to be heard on questions which, though we have often forgotten it, are more vitally related to their interests than to those of the faculty. And in an increasing number of colleges the authorities are welcoming such collaboration and finding in it a useful corrective to the present-day tendency toward the mechanization of the educational process. Though this new spirit is in evidence in many places, two examples will suffice for purposes of illustration. At one institution last fall, when the students were engaged in selecting their work for the year, the undergraduate daily published a guidebook to the college courses, with candid descriptive comments which often differed radically from the accounts that appeared in the official catalogue. More recently, the Student Council of the same institution drew up a long printed report, proposing changes in the curriculum which are now under the serious consideration of the governing board. At another college last year a student committee, after visiting a number of colleges and studying their aims and methods, formulated a new curriculum which the faculty adopted.

These and numerous other signs indicate that the educational pendulum is swinging away from uniformity to diversity, from standardization to differentiation. The new purpose is to arm the student to do battle with those countless tyrannies of modern life which seek to destroy the individual in the mass. The new aspiration is not so much to teach young men and women how to make a living, but to help them to learn how to live a life. It was none other than Thomas Jefferson, the Father of the state university system, who more than a century ago set the goal which we have yet to attain, when he declared, "I have sworn upon the altar of God eternal hostility to every form of tyranny over the human mind."

Yet the college cannot proceed far without the support of an intelligent public opinion. You who are going forth into the world will have much to do in shaping the thinking of the next generation. In the memorable words of President Coolidge uttered before the recent convention of the American Legion, "Progress depends very largely upon the encouragement of variety. Whatever tends to standardize the community, to establish fixed and rigid modes of thought, tends to fossilize society. ... It is the ferment of ideas, the clash of disagreeing judgments, the privilege of the individual to develop his own thoughts and shape his own character, that makes progress possible."

Where will you stand, my friends, on this greatest of all issues? Alma Mater asks you, as educated men and women, not to exhaust your loyalty in rejoicing over her victories on the athletic field. She summons you to a greater loyalty, a higher consecration: nothing less than your undying devotion to the freedom of learning, the fearless dissemination of truth, and the emancipation of the human mind.