

Remarks by Willard Wirtz  
At the Commencement Exercises  
The Ohio State University  
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The recently published Letters of E. B. White include the telegram this remarkable master of words and ideas sent off once, collect, in response to an invitation to speak at another distinguished university. The telegram was very short: "Sorry cannot speak don't know how many thanks."

Well, I don't know how either, especially on an occasion such as this, for my impression is that commencement speakers almost invariably come off bearing a striking resemblance to grandfather clocks. Standing about six feet high, typically ponderous in construction, obviously traditional rather than functional, they make more noise than progress in the monotonous communication of nothing more memorable or noteworthy than the time of day.

Though I'm not quite sure why this is, I like to think it's partly because of the perennial dilemma in which these imported victims of pomp and circumstance find themselves. We would like very much on the one hand to justify by the erudition of our remarks the compliment of our invitation. Yet we know at the same time that the fullest repayment of that compliment would not be in counterfeit profundity, but in the sterling coin of brevity.

These remarks will be brief.

They pick up where the commencement speaker here at Ohio State left off at the exercises in August of 1974. The speaker that day had just two weeks before become president of this country under circumstances which we will remember as chaotic. But when he came here to Ohio State that morning, it was to look beyond the wreckage in Washington to this problem of why it is that so many college graduates are finding difficulty in getting the employment which they are fully prepared for and which they have been led to expect is there. Gerald Ford called it another Catch 22. At the end of his obviously heartfelt, constructive, thoughtful remarks, the President said that he was requesting the Secretaries of Commerce, Labor, and Health, Education and Welfare to recommend, as he put it, "new ways to bring the world of work and institutions of education closer together."

That was two and a half years ago. Yet in the time that has passed this situation has not improved. Many of you are probably witnesses to the fact that it has worsened. It is worth our discussing for these few minutes.

Those recommendations President Ford said he was requesting from the three Secretaries were never filed, at least formally. It would be the unfairest criticism, though, to suggest that that was because of any default or failure to follow up. That's not true. His request here at Columbus that morning was followed by a literal frenzy of activity in the agencies and bureaus, with some extraordinarily competent and committed people doing their best to work out the answers to the President's request for recommendations about building new bridges between the worlds of



education and work. The fact that no report ever issued as a result of those efforts reflects, I think, two important lessons which were learned in the process.

The first, so undramatic that a succession of Presidents has had trouble arousing the country to its importance, involves the organization of the Executive Branch of the Federal Government. The trouble those who were asked to build bridges between education and work ran into was that they couldn't find the bridges between the three departments. The bridge builders ran into the turf-protectors, and couldn't get around them.

There isn't going to be an effective national education/work policy in this country until there is a reorganization of the Federal Government which counteracts the present fact that part of the responsibility for this is in the Department of Labor, part in HEW; and although the two buildings are only four blocks apart you have to go around the world to get from one to the other.

One of the encouraging elements in this picture is that it now appears that the Congress of the United States is about to give its consent to the repeated presidential advice that the Federal Executive be reorganized along functional lines instead of according to the metes and bounds of institutional vested interests. So there is some promise on that front.

The other lesson from the initiative President Ford launched here two and a half years ago goes a good deal deeper. His remarks that day reflected what was at that time the conventional wisdom about the causes of this problem. The general thought was that if education and work have gotten out of kilter, it's the education gears that require attention. Or putting the

same thing differently: the assumption has been that there is plenty of work to be done, and that everything will work out if we can just arrange for students to be following those preparatory courses which lead to the available jobs.

What we are now coming to realize is that this problem is in only comparatively small part one of building bridges, in only comparatively small measure a matter of what courses students take. The accusing truth, which has now gotten the floor, is that the problem here, the real problem, is on the work side of this gap.

Facing it squarely, we now begin to realize that what has happened results from an historic confluence of several disparate forces which have been gathering for quite a period of time. They are of various kinds. There has been an increasing sophistication of technology which results in robots, machines, now offering employers at less than a living wage a good many of the competencies which a baccalaureate degree implies. There has been a critical dwindling of natural resources; at the same time, a rising level of national unemployment has carried it to a plateau on which there is standing room only for younger workers. It's very important that at this same time, we finally came to the tardy recognition of the equal employment rights of everybody without regard to such irrelevancies as sex and ethnicity; by no means least among these forces is the effect of the broad extension in the middle and the late 1960's of the educational franchise.

The consequence of all this is simply that there are not today and there are not going to be as long as we stay on our present course enough jobs using the education which is being



taken with that employment as its purpose. We better recognize it.

There's no point in dwelling on these facts. You not only know them, you in this class are about to face them. Nothing could be said in these 15 or 20 minutes which would in any way help you in meeting the immediate problem you now face. But I'd like to take these few minutes to discuss briefly the question of whether there is any prospect in broader range thinking and planning for doing something about this situation.

Let's recognize first, one coldly logical answer to the whole problem. As of September of this year, after eight years of preparatory planning of one kind or another, Sweden is putting higher education on a strictly rationed basis. There will be 38,000 people getting higher education in Sweden in 1977-78, and they will be allocated to seven different areas, worked out entirely on the basis of a projection of manpower needs. You've got about the same situation in Japan, although the process is different. And this has been a basic principle of educational administration in Russia and China for a very long time.

Perfectly logical. And as far as we're concerned, exactly the wrong answer, for it cuts directly across our grain and we'll have none of it.

There is another possibility. Just a week ago today, a new President sent a formal message to the Congress announcing the outline of his proposed youth employment policy. I find it a very encouraging message, not only for what is in it, but for its reflection of the fact that President Carter, like his predecessor, attaches top priority to this problem of some way

working out the present youth unemployment problem.

That proposal is directed almost entirely, however, as any federal proposal must be at this particular point in time, to the problem of the unemployment of disadvantaged youths--disadvantaged, among other things, by their not having had a college or university education. It goes on to develop a job opportunity program. It doesn't just stop with jobs, but goes on to talk about training, further education, and service of one kind or another. It breaks away from the narcotic notion that public employment is the right long-range answer to youth employment or any other unemployment problem.

I find encouragement in that message, too, because it seems to me to take us a step closer to the recognition of the importance and the probability of some kind of broad youth service program in this country.

Despite what the President said last night at the town hall meeting at Clinton, Massachusetts, which some of you, too, may have heard reported this morning, I don't think this the voluntary military service system, in its present form, is going to work -- particularly if the Government offers additional alternative employment opportunities to young people, which they will probably prefer to military service opportunities. It seems to me only a matter of a comparatively short time now until we adopt in this country some much broader form of youth service program, of which military service is only one part. I think we would have it today if we could figure out an answer to the tough problem of whether it ought to be compulsory or voluntary. As soon as that is worked out, there's going to be



added to the youth employment prospect the opportunity to engage in broader forms of service -- which a great many young people, including a good many college graduates, have indicated they would strongly favor.

Despite, however, the prospects the President's message opens up, it doesn't cover in any respect the present problem of the under-employment of college graduates. And furthermore, I don't think any law is going to reach that problem, because it goes deeper than laws in this country advisedly try to reach.

This isn't just a question of the under-employment in this country of college graduates. It's much broader than that. Let me make the point more personally. This is my second graduation ceremony this week. The first one came on Monday. There is the prospect today, which I share with you with great pleasure, of receiving a diploma, a degree. What I got on Monday was a notice of eligibility for Social Security. It was a fairly grim day. I became a member Monday of a very large class--about the same size nation-wide as the class that is represented here today. Recognizing some geriatric realities, let me point out, hoping not to be misunderstood, that six months from now there are going to be as many members of Monday's class as of yours eating their hearts out because they have fully developed talents of one kind or another which are not going to be used. The problems have a good deal in common.

It's about time that we face up squarely in this country to the fact that the only way we can maintain even a reasonable semblance of a tolerable unemployment figure, if you can call 7.5% tolerable, is by turning more and more older people out to pasture earlier and earlier for less and less good reasons,

and postponing the time that younger people start their employment.

There is a much broader group even than these two classes of ours involved here. Add all those women in this country for whom the equal employment opportunity which was guaranteed them by law in 1965 has so far proved totally illusory--because of a few simple little bars that remain in the way of it, such things as employers' natural preferment of full-time employment over part-time employment.

Then add too, all of those in this country in one business or another, in one form of occupation or another, who at mid-career come to the realization that what they're doing is using only a small part of the talents they have.

Is this all just part of the ordinary course of things, and reason only for wholesale resignation and discouragement of one kind or another? I don't think so at all.

There is a change at this point in these remarks. I've been telling you what I believe I know. The rest is only what I know I believe. Yet I don't believe it bothers you any more than it does me, when we run out of the fuel of reason, to draw on that critical reserve we have, of faith if you will, faith tested by reason, but faith fortified too by a little tough-minded idealism.

I think there is increasing reason for believing that there is a coalition constituency developing in this country which is about to provide a working majority, if it can be mustered, in support of new national policy based on a new economics. I mean an economics that puts people in the first place instead



of someplace else on down the line. I mean, in Mr. E. F. Schumacher's phrase, an "economics as if people mattered." I mean a human resources economics.

I mean an economics which would start from the recognition that with all of this talk about the limited perimeters of growth there are two parameters in this equation which get overlooked: one is that there is a limitless amount that needs to be done in this country and throughout the world; and the other is that there is a limitless human resource which wants very much to be used in developing our potential.

I mean an economics which would start from a commitment to make the fullest practicable use of the most highly developed form of whatever talents are inside people--instead of starting from a consideration of the maximally profitable use, including the mis-use, of the elements which are inside the fragilely thin crust of this planet.

Such a policy would require, I suppose, putting all major enterprises to the testing of their comparative drain, on the one hand, on dwindling natural resources, and their comparative use, on the other, of the highly developed, meaning highly educated, human resource. This would present hard questions when it comes to such matters as balancing the various social values of various forms of use of various kinds of automobiles. But the Concorde would be on its face a monstrous absurdity.

Such a policy would lead necessarily to a review and redefinition of which kinds of human activity should be considered compensable and properly included in the Gross National Product--although, I suppose, we would rename that the Net National

Strength. Nothing would be excluded from consideration, just because women, before our awakening, chose to do these things for free: housework and the raising of children, for example.

Such a new economics would include a re-thinking--I suppose, in the Washington vernacular, zero-based thinking--of how much of people's lives should go into work and in what units. Any assumption that the right answer is eight hours a day--between 8:00 and 5:00--five days a week, only between the ages of 25 and 65, would be re-examined. The advantages of full-time over part-time employment and the disadvantages of flexitime, lucrative speaking, would be considered in a brighter light of how much sense they make, humanly speaking.

Perhaps most centrally, there would be a deliberate, thorough review of what continues as today's basic reality only because it became yesterday's custom. I mean this division of life into three time traps--youth for education, maturity for work, and older age for the denial of the opportunity to enjoy either of these pleasures. Such an economics would start from a recognition that in many people's lives today it would make much more sense to live life just exactly the other way around: Come in at age 75 or 80--get these fifteen years or so of uselessness and meaninglessness out of the way--then enjoy the pleasures of work for thirty or forty years and then the infinite privileges and satisfactions of education for another ten or twelve. And then at the end, after five or six years of pleasant irresponsibility attended by tender loving care, the doctor would pick you up by the heels and pat you goodbye instead of hello!

An economics as if people mattered would take account of the possibility of changing entirely the present distribution



of life's activities and interests between education and work. It doesn't make sense for as many people as do now to take twelve, sixteen, years of education at one, long, uninterrupted continuous sitting and then no more of it ever again after that. It would be better for a great many people to divide up that first stage, and the trade-off would be a continuing opportunity all through life for educational renewal of one kind or another. I don't know any reason why sabbaticals should be an academic monopoly. There is as much sense for a sabbatical in any line of work as there is in teaching.

This is only the sketchiest suggestion of what a new economics might mean; I've said too little to be persuasive, and too much to be discreet. Woodrow Wilson complained once that twenty minutes in a public forum is time only to commit a compound fracture of an idea.

I simply suggest, because it is the only answer I can live with when I get there, that the answer to this question of whether we are ever going to use fully education's potential economic value depends entirely on whether we have what it takes to insist on an economics that is viable and self-sustaining, but one that "puts people in the first place instead of someplace else on down the line." I suspect, incidentally, that the issue is not one of economics at all but of politics.

Two final footnotes:

First, these remarks will seem to have assumed that the only purpose of education is to prepare for work. I don't think that; neither do you. But your Commencement speaker at the December exercises, President Robbin Fleming of the University of

Michigan, if I may use that phrase here, was characteristically thoughtful and eloquent in developing this same case in terms of education's other and superior values. I simply incorporate by reference here everything Bob Fleming said to the graduating class in December. He in turn, I think, would agree that it will be easier to find the necessary support for these other values if education also "pays off" in what remains our most obvious currency.

Finally, I know that nothing here helps in any way about the problem you are going to be waking up to tomorrow morning. I do suggest this: It is some way implicit in what has been said here about the broader situation that you are entitled, if it helps at all, to do your own figuring out of what things are interesting and worthwhile without regard to the dictates of habit and custom. You are entitled to separate out the shibboleths and the nonsense from the current fashions of success. I think you have larger reason than was perhaps apparent before to make that decision without regard to what anybody else thinks. If all the talk about the work ethic somehow seems to mock your particular circumstances, remember that the service ethic has roots which reach at least as deep into our underlying ideals.

Then if that too leads nowhere, leaving college not seeming to you at the moment worth what you paid for it, perhaps there will be at least a relaxing smile in recalling that poignantly scrawled and misspelled graffiti on the New York subway wall: "If yu think educashun is xpensiv, tri ignorans."

Thank you, and good luck.