

John Fitzgerald Kennedy (1917-1963)

Remarks at George Washington University Upon Receiving an Honorary Degree

given on May 3, 1961

Mr. President:

I want to express my appreciation to the President and to the Fellows of this University for the honor that they have bestowed upon me. My wife beat me to this honor by about 8 or 9 years. It took her 2 years to get this degree and it took me 2 minutes, but in any case we are both grateful.

- 5 I am also glad to be here because this University bears the distinguished name of the father of our country, George Washington. It is a matter of great interest that there has been an intimate relationship between the great political leaders of our country and our colleges and universities.

- This University bears the name of George Washington, which showed his understanding in his day of the necessity of a free society to produce educated men and women. John Adams and John Quincy Adams from my own State of
10 Massachusetts had an intimate relationship with Harvard University. Both of them, I believe, were members of the board of overseers. In both of their lives, Harvard and its development played a major part.

Washington and Lee shows an intimate relationship, for General Lee, the fact that he was willing to devote his life at the end of the war to educating the men and women of the South, indicated his understanding of this basic precept. Woodrow Wilson, Theodore Roosevelt--and all the rest.

- 15 I don't think that there has ever been a time when we have had greater need for those qualities which a university produces. I know that many people feel that a democracy is a divided system, that where the Communists are certain in purpose and certain in execution, we debate and talk and are unable to meet their consistency and their perseverance.

- I do not hold that view. There are many disadvantages which a free society bears with it in a cold war struggle, but I
20 believe over the long run that people do want to be free, that they desire to develop their own personalities and their own potentials, that democracy permits them to do so. And that it is the job of schools and colleges such as this to provide the men and women who will with their sense of discipline and purpose and understanding contribute to the maintenance of free societies here and around the world.

- A hundred years ago, George William Curtis of my own State asked a body of educators during the Kansas-Nebraska
25 controversy, "Would you have counted him a friend of ancient Greece who quietly discussed the theory of patriotism on that hot summer day through whose hopeless and immortal hours Leonidas and the three hundred stood at Thermopylae for liberty? Was John Milton to conjugate Greek verbs in his library when the liberty of Englishmen was imperiled?" No, quite obviously, the duty of the educated man or woman, the duty of the scholar, is to give his objective sense, his sense of liberty to the maintenance of our society at a critical time.

- 30 This is our opportunity, as well as our responsibility; and I am particularly glad to be here today when we are witnessing the swearing-in of a new President. Many years ago, as most of you know, at Harvard University somebody came around and asked for President Lowell. They said, "He's in Washington seeing Mr. Taft." I know that some other day, when they are asking for the President of your University, they will say that he is over at the White House seeing Mr. Kennedy.

- 35 They understood at Harvard, and you understood here, the relative importance of a University President and a President of the United States.

Thank you.

(617 words)

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