

Mrs. Lyndon Johnson
June 3, 1973

AMERICA -- AN UNCOMPLETED WORK

REVISED TEXT
UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA
JUNE 3, 1973

This is a special day -- I know -- for every family represented in these ceremonies -- a day of much pride, many satisfactions, and the utmost happiness.

As I am sure you realize, this is an occasion of very special meaning for my family, too. Months ago, in the summer of last year, we circled this date on our calendar. Lyndon had about retired from what he called "the speech-making business," but when your invitation came he was immensely pleased and excited -- and we were hoping to be all together here for a joyful family time. A winter of sorrow intervened in our home and in our hearts. But now that this awaited day has at last arrived, it brings a fresh and very welcome happiness.

Before saying more, I do want to express, for my daughters and myself, our gratitude to all of you at the University of Virginia -- and to the people of Charlottesville. Last year, when we were here through anxious times, and earlier this year, after Lyndon's death, your kindnesses meant so much to us. Our memories of this campus -- and of this city -- will always be dear and cherished.

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On this occasion, I find myself cast in a rather unusual role. I seem to be here as a sort of mother-in-law to the Class of '73. That role is not at all unwelcome. At this time in my life, I share a deep empathy with the feelings which Thomas Jefferson once expressed.

After leaving public life and returning to Monticello, Mr. Jefferson wrote these words to an old friend:

The motion of my blood no longer keeps time with the tumult of the world. It leads me to seek for happiness in the lap of my family, in the society of my neighbors and books, in the wholesome occupation of my farm and my affairs, (and) in an interest or affection in every bud that opens, in every breath that blows around me . . .

In that spirit, may I say that I have no wish or intention to play again any part on the public stage. I speak today, not as an active public person, which I am not, but as an always interested private person -- engaged in savoring the adventure of being mother, grandmother and mother-in-law; in relishing the excitement of a changing world; and in drawing strength from the marvel of "every bud that opens and every breath that blows around me."

All this is a personal preface to the thoughts I want to express today -- thoughts about you and your lives.

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Over these last few weeks, I realize your higher destiny may have seemed distant. With sleepless nights and final papers, with a book in one hand and a coffee cup in the other, it has probably been hard to see beyond the next exam.

Let me put it this way. Every graduating class -- every new generation -- seems to have some characteristics that are different and distinctive. From my own close and affectionate perspective, two such characteristics distinguish the Class of '73, here and across the land.

The first is what I would describe as your special relationship with large concerns.

There was a time when university students were rather usually associated with pranks and mischief -- things like hazing escapades or stealing the rival team's mascot. Many of the interests of student years tended to be immature and frivolous. But there has been a decided change -- a change embodied in your class.

Today our student generations seem to have a new dimension. Your interests run to matters of the very largest scope and size and consequence. "Peace" and "justice" and "freedom" are not abstract concepts to you -- they are real and vital concerns. This itself is not unique. You share them with certain other generations of our

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past who have helped to write and forge some of the most stirring chapters of our story. But the accelerating challenges of history have also presented you with new causes of global dimension; such as saving this planet's ecology and improving the quality of life in an age that grows both more impersonal and more urban.

Along with this, there is a second distinctive characteristic of your class and contemporaries. That is your parallel concern with very personal and individual matters; such as ethical standards and all the wide spectrum of interrelationships between human beings.

In these realms, you are questioning as no other generation has questioned in a long time. I agree with what my husband expressed in one of his last public addresses last autumn. "We are not living in times of collapse", he said. "The old is not coming down. Rather, the troubling and torment of these days stems from the new trying to rise into place." Building on the framework of what endures from the worthy past, you are searching for new understanding and new meanings so you can establish standards that are more relevant in your own lives and times.

Some of your elders may occasionally be anxious over your questions and uneasy about some of your tentative answers. But, thanks, in large part, to the patience and tolerance of two dear

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daughters of my own, I have made my passage through the generation gap without becoming "uptight" about where this is leading.

As I see it, the end of this can be very good. What is happening among young people today is much the same as what happened here in Virginia -- and all along this seaboard -- when Thomas Jefferson's generation was young. Mr. Jefferson and his contemporaries dared to think very large thoughts; at the same time, they cared intensely about personal and individual concerns. The end result was a new nation -- a new nation which, at one end of the scale, could embrace as its cause "the cause of all mankind," while, at the other end of the scale, it could be dedicated to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

The two go together. If we are to build anything enduring, we must always build on concern for the individual. If that concern is in our hearts, we will strive to answer those great questions which so affect the individual. I like to believe that your distinguishing characteristics reflect a renewal of America and foreshadow an energizing of its spirits and its prospects.

I envy you -- how I envy you -- your opportunity to be a part of the times ahead.

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As I offer this personal perspective, I am very much aware that you have been -- and are -- regularly exposed to some different perspectives.

You of this class -- and this generation -- have heard more than your share of talk about a doomsday destiny; about the dreadful fate that awaits this planet, about the decay and decline of this country, about the degeneracy of your own generation.

At the risk of sounding rather like a mother-in-law, let me say this to the Class of '73: I don't believe it -- and I ask you to keep an open mind.

Certainly I am by no means expert on all -- or any -- of our very complex challenges. But I fervently believe that for what the present seems to pose as unanswerable questions, the future can and will produce workable answers.

I do not believe that the poison clouds of polluted air must inevitably consume our atmosphere or that our life style must inevitably kill our waters. It is not foreordained that our forests must disappear or that our topsoil erode away or that famine must someday decimate the human race.

I believe there are answers, and I think I am looking into the faces of several hundred of those answers this morning.

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In that same vein, let me say a word about your country.

Over these recent years, you have heard and read many doubts, much dismay and no little derision about America. I would not attempt to dispute each criticism, but respecting as I do what you bring to America, let me make this point.

Our country -- your country -- is not a completed work. Over the two centuries since 1776, America has gone from beginning to beginning. It began anew with Mr. Jefferson's generation. It began anew in the years when I sat where you sit now -- for the mid-30's were a yeasty time of many changes. Today, in these times of the 1970's, you have in your hands the new clay of all that was wrought in the 1960's.

Of faults and flaws, America may have them a-plenty. But you can do something about them. Keep in mind that only in the last decade -- since you left grade school -- have we made many of our longest strides: toward national support of public education, toward assuring hospital care for older citizens, toward enlarged pursuit of knowledge through scientific and medical research. Only in this short span have we added many treasures of nature to our public trust for future generations. Only in these years have we really begun to concern ourselves with the beauty of our roadsides, the care of our environment, the quality of life for all our people.

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This is not the measure of a nation grown old or a system grown tired -- certainly it is not the measure of a people grown callous or corrupt. No, the record of our land in your lifetime is that of a principled and purposeful people who care very much about doing the very best for -- and with -- their homeland.

Don't despair of America -- rejoice in your hearts that it is yours to work with and work for the rest of your days.

That brings me, then, to this final thought.

Not all of us can -- not all of us want to -- occupy places at the center of large affairs. But it is never necessary to stand in high position to have effect upon one's times.

The world out yonder -- beyond these Grounds -- is a world receptive to and responsive to the individual. That is what you are all about. All your years of education have their meaning in what you do -- and try to do -- as an individual.

Keep your interest in large concerns. Pursue your search for stronger values and higher standards. And, remember, what America most needs is within each of us, as individuals.

A cleaner neighborhood begins with your own broom.

A more beautiful city begins with a seed in your own garden.

A more just society begins in your own heart.

A better government begins with your own vote.

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A safer world begins with your own active concern.

On the largest questions, as on the smallest, it is often true that what is everybody's business often proves to be nobody's business. For the work of making this a finer land, we cannot wait for everybody -- we must begin ourselves, as individuals.

As you go, let me pass to you the advice I read recently in the diary of a lady who knew America in earlier times. She traveled across this land in the 1870's -- by riverboat steamer, on wagon train, and on the first western railroad.

"The important thing," she said, "is to miss as little as possible and to share as much."

Certainly, for the Class of '73, that is the important thing. You will be part of such epochal times. Miss little, my friends, and multiply all the good things by sharing with those you love.

I rejoice with you for all that lies ahead. I wish for you a life charged with challenge and blessed with fulfillment.

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