

Commencement Address
President David B. Truman
Mount Holyoke College
May 30, 1971

"The Form of Hope"

Four short years ago, when the members of the Class of 1971 first gathered in this Amphitheater, the dominant element in an inevitable mixture of feelings must surely have been hope--by you, your parents, and the Faculty of the College--hope that you had chosen well, that you would meet the challenges and frustrations that lay undefined ahead of you, that you would find here not only some means of gaining what you sought, but, perhaps more fundamentally, some ways of defining more clearly what to seek and why. The prevalent hope, I assume, was for you as individuals, as properly it should have been.

I did not share that day with you, but I am privileged to have a part in this one, a part that accident has made somewhat more conspicuous than I anticipated a few weeks ago, before your scheduled speaker was obliged to withdraw. His regrettable misfortune has brought me an unexpected pleasure.

I shall not presume to characterize your feelings today, or those of your families, and I certainly am not authorized to represent those of the Faculty. My own feelings, however--and I am not now masquerading as Mary Lyon in the Junior Show--can be described by the same word, but with somewhat different implications. My hope is not strictly for you, for what you may gain for yourselves, though I surely wish you well. Gain, as such, for you is not more than incidentally a justification for the investment that Mount Holyoke and your parents have made in you. The hope I feel is focused rather upon what you will be and do, including especially how you will do it. It is that each of you,

from the beginnings of learning and experience here, will have caught some glimpse of collective values that are much more than a sum of individual aspirations and will have gained some understanding not merely of the challenges they carry but equally of the dangers that lie in the way of simplistic and ill-considered attempts to realize those values.

Let me try to be more concrete. It is not news to you that this country faces a set of problems so acute that they threaten not only the quality of life but the cohesion of the society itself, problems so complex and so stubborn that they seem likely to be with us for a long time, perhaps for the remainder of this century. I shall take as examples three of these: first, the betrayal of our ethic of equality, which lies at the source of the disease of racism; second, the neglect of the cities, which is not only destroying the values of urban life but, far more seriously, is aggravating the hopelessness and the frustration of the victims of racism by creating prison-like slums from which the chance of escape--literally or figuratively--is not increasing or even holding steady but probably dwindling; third, the abuse of the natural environment, which includes not only pollution of the air and water and disregard of the aesthetic and psychological values in nature but also dangerous assaults on the biological balance represented by the food chains and threats to the integrity of the biosphere itself. I select these three because they seem to me to be significantly interconnected through a common element that I want to discuss today. (I omit the tragedy of the war in Indo-China, not because I am confident that it is no longer an acute problem or because it is entirely unconnected with the ones that I have chosen, but rather because the character of its connection with the other three is different from the one I wish to emphasize.)

What is this connection? It is not change induced by the rapidity of technological development. Whatever may have induced the present awareness of racism and of our tolerance of gross inequality, the problem as an objective fact is at least as old as the Republic. Clearly it has been aggravated by technological change, as have the other two, but the common connection is to be found in something older, more fundamental, and more peculiarly American. Not that all of these problems are exclusively ours. Obviously they are not. But the betrayal of our professed ethic of equality is distinctively if not uniquely an American phenomenon. Even measuring crudely by disparities in income and setting aside for the moment the factor of race, it is clear that the United States permits--the American people permit--greater inequality in the distribution of income, both before and after taxes, than do many other developed societies, such as Great Britain, Norway, and Australia. Full equality these countries do not have, and no sensible person would argue that complete equality of income in any society is possible or, given the probable consequences of attempting it, even desirable. But extreme inequality, of opportunity or of income, results in a denial of access not only to the material benefits of society but to the processes of decision making, participation in which, at least at some minimal level, is at the heart of our intended system. Such denial of access is not simply desertion of the unfortunate. It is a betrayal of ourselves and of the meaning of our common journey.

The thread that I seek, then, is not new and is distinctively American. That thread, I suggest, is the submergence of collective values by individual ones; it is the priority assigned to choice by individuals--or their partial surrogates--over choice by the collective society or its authorized and accountable

agents; it is the naive assumption that an invisible hand, one that is operative not merely in the economic market, will maximize collective values if individuals-- or their assumed corporate counterparts--are encouraged to pursue their values without major hindrance, without explicit and conscious concern for the collective consequences of everyone doing his own thing.

This common element is at least as old as the settlement of the Trans-Appalachian West. It is far older than the Homestead Act, which clearly reflected its assumptions both in conception and in operation. It is as old as the mythology of the melting pot, which at one time may have had some correspondence with reality, but it is at least as old as slavery and older than the abandonment of nominally enfranchised black citizens during Reconstruction, both of which reflect its most disastrous implications.

The current manifestations of this distinctive element in the culture are so evident that they scarcely require illustration. Most generally it appears in the almost universal assumption that expenditures through choice by individuals or by any of those corporate surrogates that we choose to think of as private persons are invariably better than, and hence to be preferred over, expenditures through collective or public channels. Ask any taxpayer, small or large. Specifically concerning the three problems that I have chosen as examples, their interconnections with the dominance of individual over collective values appear most strikingly if one pursues the consequences of our attachment to the private automobile. (Notice I said "our" attachment.) The horseless carriage with its internal combustion engine has become the classic modern example of the supremacy of individual choice, for it promised, and in considerable measure delivered, a power of individual decision over personal mobility that was utterly

without precedent. Its consequences for pollution of the environment, both the air and the junk-laden landscape, are obvious. In the cities the private automobile has almost created its own negation, as the pursuit of mobility has produced the constant threat of immobility. But our attachment to the automobile has done much more. To feed the insatiable appetite for individual mobility we have ripped our cities apart with monstrous highways. Beginning with Manhattan, which, just as it succeeded in reclaiming for public parks the air rights over the railroad tracks that rimmed the island, built a wall of concrete and moving steel between its citizens and the natural recreational resource of its surrounding rivers, we have ended with the interstate highway system, which, in terms of its effects on the cities, is the most ill-considered public works undertaking in modern history. This is, of course, a public enterprise but one that reflects in concrete the preponderance of individual values.

The private automobile and its associated priority for individual values has been an essential component of that combination of unsightly sprawl and smug isolation that is the worst side of suburbia. In turn, its effects on the cities have been not only to weaken their tax base as their responsibilities were increasing, but more seriously to offer incentives to remove from the central cities the jobs that are part of their lifeblood. And at this point appears a connection with the problem of racism. For as mobility for some is increased, the handicaps of relative immobility are also increased. As jobs move to the suburbs, which by various devices have walled themselves off from the inner-city populations, the opportunities for escaping the grinding poverty and the destructive frustration of the black ghetto or the barrio also move away. Whatever validity the melting-pot myth may have had economically depended unquestionably upon the

proximity and the accessibility of the jobs that provided the means of escaping poverty. To perpetuate this myth when its only claim to validity is disappearing, to ask why blacks, as well as Puerto Ricans and Mexican-Americans, cannot do as other ethnic minorities have done when the essential means of such accomplishment are disappearing is to add to the insult of racial or ethnic discrimination--already handicap enough--the bitter poison of hypocrisy.

The submergence of collective values by individual ones can lead us further into the problem of the abuse of the environment than my time today will permit. I need not follow that course further than to make one additional observation. Such tragedies as the threatened death of Lake Erie reflect this pattern of priorities, and such disasters as the alteration of the biological and chemical composition of the oceans, if they occur, also will reflect this pattern. If such catastrophes are to be avoided, a reversal of the traditional assumptions favoring individual choice will have to occur.

Clearly I am on dangerous ground here. Lest I be misinterpreted, let me emphasize that I am not advocating a crude doctrine of collectivism. To engage in an ideological controversy between something called "socialism" or "collectivism" and something called "capitalism" or "individual enterprise" may be psychologically satisfying, but in the world of real problems it is at best futile and at worst counterproductive. A new emphasis upon collective values is essential because the consequences of their neglect will be to aggravate those problems, to weaken or destroy the social fabric on which any genuine and extensive individual choice ultimately depends. Recently I had occasion to read a number of papers on political thought which gave some attention to Thomas Hobbes and his Leviathan. I was struck by the number of writers who, in quoting his classic characterization

of the life of man in the absence of civil society--"solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short"--omitted the first adjective. The misquotation not only spoils the rhythm of a handsome phrase but also ignores the essential point--whose validity does not depend on one's agreeing with the philosophical position of Hobbes or accepting his prescriptive inferences--that without the collective strength of civil society one has not individualism but loneliness, not freedom but inhibition of choice. The issue, therefore, is not ideological but pragmatic.

I should also insist that, in emphasizing the implications of a submergence of collectively individual values for our urgent contemporary problems, I am not asserting the cause of those problems. To do so would be to indulge in the kind of simplistic thinking that I mean particularly to argue against. The causes of those problems are complex and specific. They will not yield to simple explanations or to doctrinal prescriptions, to scapegoating or to slogans. The importance of talking about our lop-sided presumption in favor of individual values is not that doing so will reveal the causes of our difficulties but that without doing so we are not likely either to see those problems as they are, to understand their complex causes, or to identify their possible, if difficult, solutions.

This brings me back to the hope that I expressed at the outset of these remarks. Looking at what you may do and how you may go about doing it, I hope that your experience in these years will lead you not merely to recognize the problem of a constructive balance between individual choices and collective consequences but also to seek an equally important combination of discriminating judgment and effective action. That search is neither easy nor comfortable, but it is essential. One can, of course, withdraw from the search at the outset and, living as if these problems did not exist, attempt a kind of sybaritic ignorance

that pretends all is well despite the fateful thunder of storms that will not pass. Or, as one becomes aware of these problems and of their complexities, it is also easy to lapse into a kind of informed passivity, to conclude that because these matters are complex one cannot attempt to solve them or that the role of the bemused spectator is a proper one. It is even easier, as I suspect many of you have discovered already, to reject complexity and, embracing a simple-appearing explanation, to plunge into action that is as high on commitment as it is low on discriminating analysis. None of these escapes--and all of them are just that--can bring you satisfaction more than briefly, and the first--withdrawal into luxuriating ignorance--is probably no longer open to you. Each of you has seen and learned too much already for that to be a viable option, even in the short run. You closed that door at least four years ago. The other two are open and tempting and will remain so, but both invite disaster for the society, and neither is likely to result in anything but futility and remorse for the chooser. The liberated mind cannot live indefinitely removed from the world without denying its own humanity, and it cannot cease to be discriminating without denying its existence. For such a mind, you sought this campus. If you have found here even its beginnings, to abandon the search now is to betray yourself.

My hope is that you will choose none of these routes but will remain committed to the harder path that alone can be creative, the path that seeks to reconcile the humanity of disciplined thought with the imperatives of thoughtful action, the dignity of individual choice with the necessities of our collective fate.

Good luck. Keep the faith.